

Delphi and Fallon

First Kiss

HEATHER TULLIS

First Kiss: Delphi & Fallon
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Chapter One

Delphi's back hurt, her eyes stung from staring at a computer screen for so long and her stomach growled as she threaded her way through the halls of her college dorm. Girls giggled, one walked by talking on her phone and a guy and girl leaned against one wall, making out. As if anyone else wanted to watch that.

Oh right, that was her roommate, Jenn. Delphi didn't bother to get a closer look at the guy — —there was no point, he wouldn't be around for more than a day or two anyway—he was just the flavor of the hour. They had only been in school three weeks, but it hadn't taken long to get Jenn's measure.

Not that Delphi was jealous. She had good clothes, a decent figure, and she wasn't bad looking. She even liked the way she had cut her blond hair to only shoulder —length. It was easier to do and held a touch of curl better than it did when it was longer. She could attract someone's attention. Eventually. Besides, she was here to go to school, not to socialize. She told herself this as she opened her dorm door, grateful Jenn hadn't decided to get too comfy in their room instead of the hallway. That was always awkward, as she'd learned on more than one occasion.

She dumped her backpack full of books on the bed and sorted out the things she wouldn't need to work on that night.

Then the bedroom door opened and Jenn and the new guy walked in. "Oh, hi," Jenn said. "I didn't see you come in." She barely looked at Delphi, too focused on the guy.

"I'm not surprised." Delphi snatched up her accounting book—a class that she hoped would help when she set up her own business—

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and the copy of her textbook for early American lit and stuffed them in the backpack with her laptop. The two of them would keep her more than busy and away from her room for the rest of the evening. "I'm just leaving." She shrugged her backpack on again and turned toward the door.

"We'll be busy in here for a while."

"That's fine, I have lots of homework. I'll be in the library." So much better than her dorm room—even without Jenn as a roommate. But first Delphi needed to detour for some dinner.

She opened the door and nearly walked into a couple girls talking as they walked down the hall. Chelsea... something and Cami DiCarlo. Camellia DiCarlo, to be exact. Her half—sister. Not that Cami knew about the relationship. At least, Delphi was pretty sure Cami was blissfully unaware.

That was one more thing that made her life in this dorm intolerable. She still didn't know why her father encouraged her to come here. She had been set to go to Stanford University, but, as usual, his preference had prevailed and she ended up at Cornell. Not that Cornell wasn't a great school, it just hadn't been her first choice. Who would choose freezing New York in the winter when they could live in Palo Alto, California instead? At least it wasn't in New York City, so she didn't have to risk seeing her mom every day. If it were, there would be no end to the interfering in her social life.

Once Chelsea and Cami had walked past, Delphi turned right—away from them—and headed for the outside door. Sure, it would be farther to walk to get to the cafeteria, but right now, that didn't seem like a bad trade off.

The cool fall air and walk helped her clear her mind and improve her attitude. At least a little. Still, when she reached the cafeteria, she was thinking maybe she should skip college and just get a job instead. Wedding planners didn't need a college education. Sure, her dad might not help get her started so it would be tough for a while. She

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saw a girl from her lit class scooping mashed potatoes onto trays and realized what she was thinking. Years of menial work trying to save money to start her business first? Never mind.

That was not what she wanted to do with her life. Besides, both her parents would disown her if she quit in her first semester of school instead of seeing the year out.

It didn't take long for her to choose a chicken salad and diet soda—her mom would approve. She headed for the checkout and smiled when she saw the cute blond guy she had noticed working there before. The previous couple of times he had been serving food, but now he was running the cash register. He was tall and rangy with bright blue eyes and a cleft in his chin that she found unbelievably sexy.

When she reached him in the line, he grinned at her. He had one of those grins that made every day better somehow, brightening the room and freshening the air around you.

Or maybe she just had a bit of a crush.

"Hi," he greeted her and entered her purchase in the register, giving her a total. "That's a pretty good salad. At least they don't skimp on the chicken."

"I appreciate that. Lettuce doesn't last nearly long enough on its own."

He grinned. "It never does. If you ever feel like a juicy burger, I know of a great place across town. I'd even take you there if you'd like." He glanced at his screen after she ran her student card. "Delphinium? That's unique, pretty. I'm Fallon."

"It's Delphi, thanks." She picked up her tray and headed for a table in the corner. He wasn't serious when he asked her out—they never were. Guys always wanted girls like Jenn—perky, cute, and no discernment. She was *not* going to be that girl.

She sat and opened her literature book. Time to read *The Scarlet Letter*. Yippee.

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She ignored the chatter of people around her while she ate and read, struggling with the language and culture and trying not to notice Fallon looking her way periodically. He was nice to everyone, smiling and greeting them. He made several girls blush as they went through the line and the guys seemed to like him equally as well.

Though Delphi was impressed that he was so friendly, it made her less interested in taking him up on the offer of the burger. How many girls did he ask out in the course of the evening?

When she finished her salad, she had managed only a few pages of her reading assignment. It was a good thing she would be heading to the library. Working in the cafeteria was apparently not very conducive to getting much done.

She put her textbook back in her pack and threw out the garbage. Before she walked out the double glass doors, though, she glanced behind and found Fallon watching her. He winked and she looked away, smiling to herself as she crossed the lawn to the closest library.

Whether she could take him seriously or not, she decided to enjoy the banter when she could get it.



Several days later, Delphi sat curled in one of the common room chairs pretending to read for her lit class. Really, she was watching Cami from across the room. She wondered if Cami had any idea that she had a half-sister, or if she even knew her father had been unfaithful to her mom all those years earlier. Cami and Lana had grown up in a loving household with parents who treasured them and no identity issues. Or at least, that was the way it looked from where Delphi sat.

On the other hand, Delphi had been raised by a step-father whom everyone else thought was her father. He barely acknowledged her unless they were in public and her mother was far more in love with her social appearance than with either her husband or daughter. Not that Zelda Gifford didn't care about Delphi—she did. She just

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cared about Zelda more.

George DiCarlo—the father Cami was allowed to acknowledge publicly, and Delphi was not (though she blamed that mostly on Zelda)—was kind and loving. He called no less than twice per week to talk, visited every few months despite the distance between New York City and Chicago where he lived, and really seemed to care what was going on in her life.

Still, he didn't claim her publicly, and that hurt.

Why had he insisted that she live in this dorm, the one where his eldest daughter lived? Had he hoped they would become friends? Had he wanted Cami to know the truth? She didn't know.

Cami laughed and Delphi nearly jumped out of her seat and stalked over to declare to her that they were sisters.

Instead, she stuffed the book in her backpack and headed out the door. She really needed to get a handle on the bitterness. It might help her make real friends here instead of feeling like a lonely grouch all the time.

She was so tired of being alone.

She passed between a stretch of grass and one of the many parking lots on campus when she heard her name. She turned her head to see Fallon grinning at her and hustling to catch up.

"Hey, how you doing?" he asked.

"Fine." She wasn't, but she was used to putting on a social face. "Are you off work already?" She'd seen him in the cafeteria earlier when she went in for lunch. The smile he'd given her had lasted until her psychology class.

"Wednesday I only work lunch and afternoon shift because I have an evening class. I forgot the book, though, so I have to run home for it."

"You live in town?"

"Yeah, my parents are only a few miles away, so I decided I should take advantage of the free housing. Where are you from?"

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"New York City." They walked together for a few minutes while they made small talk.

"Have you thought any more about that burger?" he asked after a minute.

She smiled despite herself. How was it that a few minutes with him could completely change her attitude? "I've thought about it."

"Have you come to a decision?"

"Not yet." Her mom would freak if she dated a guy who worked a menial on-campus job—even if he was a student at Cornell. Delphi wasn't entirely sure if she cared what Zelda thought anymore. Fallon was nice. And really cute. Plus, he seemed to like her. "I'll keep thinking about it."

"Good. I'll try again, then. This is my stop." He nodded to the parking lot.

"I'll see you around," Delphi said.

He waved and veered toward the parking lot.

Straight toward the motorcycle parked at the edge. She stared as he walked over and retrieved a helmet from his backpack.

How was it that he suddenly got about three times sexier than before—and he definitely hadn't been bad to begin with.

He noticed her staring, then waved again before revving the engine and pulling away.

She sucked in a breath. Nice, funny, *and* he had a motorbike. It could be love. She would definitely have to give him a chance to buy her that burger.



Delphi smiled at a couple girls from accounting class as she walked into the building where the cafeteria was housed. She was starting to settle in, make friends, which had gone a long way toward making this whole being-away-at-college thing easier.

She waited for them just inside the door and they talked about the homecoming game the next week. She glanced down the row of

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food selections, but didn't see Fallon. She had caught sight of him a couple times in the past week, but he had been busy and they hadn't had time for more than hello since she'd seen him climb onto his motorcycle.

She couldn't see the checkout from here. Maybe he was working there today. She hoped.

There were a lot of places on campus to eat, but she found herself coming here more and more often in hopes that she would find him, and they would have a chance to talk.

"So are you going to the dance?" Laura asked.

"No, I have a thing with my dad." George had bought her a plane ticket to meet him in St. Louis for the weekend. They would spend a couple days together before she had to come back to school. He traveled so much for work, she tried to see him when he was available.

"Man, bad timing."

Delphi glanced at the cash register and smiled when she caught site of Fallon's blond hair. She would know the way it waved over his forehead anywhere. Her anticipation grew at seeing him, and maybe even getting a few seconds to talk to him.

If he didn't mention the burger, would she dare to bring it up? She had never actually asked a guy out before, even though they had girls'-choice dances at her school.

The line was long and by the time she got to the front, their gazes had connected a few times. She tried to act cool about it, but she felt like a thousand pieces of confetti were fluttering inside her.

"Hey, Delphi. How are things going?" He started ringing in her turkey sandwich and chocolate chip cookie.

"I've decided the one accounting class I'm taking now is enough for a lifetime, but otherwise, things are good. How about for you?"

"Good. I was wondering if maybe you're a bigger pizza fan than hamburger. I also know an amazing place with authentic New York pizza."

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Game on. "No way, you can't get the real stuff anywhere but New York." She swiped her student card to pay.

"You want to try it and find out? I'm off Friday night."

"Are we going to take your motorbike?" she asked. That would be enough reason on its own.

"Unless you strongly object."

"I don't. You've got yourself a deal." She scribbled her number on the receipt and passed it back to him. "Call me."

She could hardly contain her excitement as she all but floated to where her friends were sitting.

"He is so hot!" Laura said.

"I know. And we have a date." Somehow Delphi managed not to squeal. Giffords did NOT squeal.

But she had a date with Fallon in three days. She could hardly wait.

Chapter Two

Delphi was excited about her date with Fallon. She had been texting back and forth with him for the past three days and couldn't wait to see him tonight. Anxious, she had been messing with different styles for her hair. She tried braiding it, then curling it, and finally settled for a soft curl on the end and a couple of barrettes pulling it back from her face. She hoped the wind and/or helmet didn't mess it up completely. She'd chosen a basic red t-shirt and blue jeans along with a black leather jacket to cut the wind. She didn't usually dress down this much for a date back home, but pizza and a motorcycle said casual all the way.

She double-checked herself in the mirror and headed for the common area, too keyed up to wait for Fallon in her room.

Automatically, she scanned for Cami when she arrived, but didn't see her. She stopped to talk to a couple girls she knew—they were often getting ready in the bathroom when she was there in the morning. Delphi positioned herself to see the front door so she wouldn't miss Fallon when he walked in.

"You keep checking the door. What's going on?" the perky redhead asked. Delphi couldn't recall her name, Marla? Maria?

"I have a date." She managed not to squeal, even though she was excited. How could she suddenly feel like a thirteen-year-old with this guy? She was eighteen, after all, she should be acting like an adult about this. Surely grown women didn't get goofy and starry-eyed with guys.

"Who with?"

"Fallon Lawrence. The cute blond guy who works in the

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cafeteria." She grinned when she saw him coming up the front stairs of the building. How could he look even hotter now? She loved the way his hair fell across his eyes and the grin he always seemed to be wearing. He also wore a leather jacket, though his looked like it had seen better days.

"Hey, you ready for the best New York pizza in existence?"

She pretended to be confused. "I didn't realize we were going to the City tonight."

"It's totally unnecessary. You'll have to let me know what you think of our humble offerings here." He clasped her hand and gave it a small tug. "You ladies will excuse us, won't you?"

He tugged her toward the door and Delphi looked back over her shoulder. Both girls were giving her signs of approval. This was so much better than leaving on a date from her mom's house.

"So, where's this supposed pizza heaven?" she asked as they walked down the stairs. It was definitely getting cool, the snap of fall chill in the air had her slouching deeper into her jacket. She would need to zip up before they got on the road.

"Only a couple miles away. What do you like on your pizza?"

"I haven't tried anything I didn't like so far. Except anchovies. Seriously, what were people thinking when they tried those?"

"So true—they're not delicious at all. So a full-on kitchen-sink pizza is okay with you, minus the anchovies?"

"You bet."

"And how do you like it here?"

They made small talk as they ambled toward his bike, which was parked near the end of the parking lot. They talked about majors and classes. He was a year older than her but because of her advanced placement classes, she was only a few credits behind him. She assumed that was the reason her father had been able to get her into the dorm, which was technically only for upperclassmen—that and a major contribution to the school. George DiCarlo always seemed to

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get what he wanted.

When they reached the bike, Fallon passed her a helmet, a little smaller than his, and helped her adjust it under her chin. "Have you ever ridden on a bike before?" He adjusted the buckle so it was out of the way.

"No. I've wanted one for a while, though."

He grinned. "I could take you bike shopping if you like. On the other hand, riding together is pretty fun." He hooked one leg over the seat. "Hop on behind me."

"A couple things to remember," he said when her feet were tucked up in a safe place. "Hold tight to me, it's no time to be shy, and lean into the curves, just follow my lead. I promise not to crash us as long as you lean with me, otherwise, it could actually crash us."

"Really?"

"Yes. You're all set." He glanced back over his shoulder at her, the visor up on his helmet.

"You bet." Delphi took him at his word and held tight to his waist as he flipped the wind guard down and started the engine. When the motorbike pulled into traffic, she clutched tighter and thrilled at the rumble of the engine and vibrations flowing through her.

Though she had intended to tip her head back and enjoy the air on her face, it was really chilly and she soon tucked her head with one cheek against his back, looking at the stores and other vehicles they passed on the way. She fought the urge to try to stay upright when he took the corner, leaning with him into the curve and felt a thrill of excitement as the bike righted itself again.

She might have to buy one of these after all. This was fun.

All too soon they arrived at the pizza place. It was a small wooden building with a large sign reading Georgio's Authentic New York Pizza.

Fallon brought them to a stop in front of the restaurant, and with help from his feet, the bike rolled into a stall.

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"How was the ride?" he asked.

"So much fun." She tipped to the right so they could see each other's faces. "When will you show me how to drive it?"

"We'll see. I don't let every girl take my bike for a spin." He swung off to the right and helped her dismount, then removed her helmet. His fingers were cold as they touched her skin and she felt a shiver and goosebumps formed on her arms, though she wasn't sure that was from the cold.

"I guess I'll have to keep asking until I convince you."

He deposited the helmets and took her hand. "I guess you will."

The restaurant was warm and full of customers. The scent of tomato sauce, garlic, and pepperoni punctuated the air and Delphi could already feel herself salivating. Whether or not this ended up being real New York-style pizza, it was going to be good.

The waitress, whose name tag said Janel, directed them to a booth in the back. "Can I start you with anything, Fallon?"

"Two bread sticks and I want a coke," Fallon looked to Delphi to see what she wanted.

"Lemonade, thanks." Delphi sat across from Fallon and removed her jacket. It was too warm to wear it inside. "You know each other?"

"Her dad owns the place and he and my dad are friends. We've been coming here for as long as I can remember. He might pop out to say hi later. He often does."

"Ah, so that's how you know about this place when I haven't heard anyone else talk about it." Not that she had been there long enough to know the best places in town, but the subject of pizza came up in her hall on a regular basis.

"We locals like to keep it our secret from the students. It's less crowded that way." He took her hand on the table, curling their fingers together. "Tell me about your family."

Oh how much she wanted to, but the truth of her family was something she never told anyone. She definitely didn't know him well

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enough to divulge all of the details that she was dying to talk to someone about. "You know I'm from New York City. My mom is involved in many important committees and does charitable fundraisers. Her husband works for a law firm."

"Her husband, not your dad?"

Delphi hadn't even realized she'd made the distinction. She covered with more of the truth. "My father is very busy and rarely spends time with me. He and my mom are close, but sometimes I think he'd prefer I weren't around. How about you?"

"I have a younger sister, Nancy. My mom stayed home with us when we were younger, but now she works part time. My dad works as an accountant for some company that owns companies. They do a lot of things. I was born here and have always lived here. I've been saving for college since I was twelve. Not that it was easy all the time—there aren't exactly a ton of jobs for someone that young. I always knew I wanted to be a doctor and that my parents were not going to be able to pay for school. Besides bikes, I love music, moonlit rides, and beautiful girls with windblown hair."

"And you still asked *me* out?"

"I admit, there was a small part of me that wondered how you would look a little tousled." He tucked some fly-aways behind her ear. "It turns out I like you even better this way."

"So you asked me out because you wanted to see me when my hair was messed up?" She wasn't buying that.

"No, I started watching you because you looked unhappy. I hated that. Then I saw you talking with some girl at one of the tables and you laughed. Your smile and laugh charmed me. I had to get to know you better." He never looked away from her face.

Delphi blushed. Honestly, could she take one word he said literally? No one had ever flirted with her like this before—not unless they were a total player. "Your flattery will not get you a vote for New York's best pizza."

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Janel returned. "That's okay, our pizza will do that on its own." She set the drinks in front of them, as well as a bouquet of bread sticks. "Did you decide what toppings you want?" she asked.

Fallon chuckled. "We haven't even glanced at the menu. How about a medium of my usual."

Her brows lifted and he glanced at Delphi. "Everything but the fish?" she asked.

"Sounds great."

"All right, I'll order it up."

Delphi looked at the bread sticks, which were wound around a wooden stick. "This isn't standard for New York."

"Try it, they're good." Fallon pulled one out and began dipping pieces of it in the marinara. "So what are you studying?"

"Event planning. As much as I hate to please my mom, I actually love planning and putting together parties. I'm thinking weddings, though. There are so many variations and options; themes and locations, different flowers and dresses, and the special touches that make any wedding special and unique to that couple."

"Sounds like a fun business. How long have you wanted to do that?"

She thought of the eighteenth birthday party she planned for a friend the previous year. "I pretty much decided a couple of years ago, but last spring when I helped my friend's mom plan a big shindig for her birthday, I realized this could be so much more than benefits and social functions for the elite. I know being a wedding planner is not for the weak, and it's not an easy job to get into to begin with. We'll see how it goes. I'm taking business classes now to help me understand how everything fits together."

They sat in silence for a moment while she marveled in the warm, garlicky bread sticks. She would definitely need the gum in her pocket when the food was gone, but it was so worth it.

Fallon shot her a considering look. "Tell me about one place

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where you'd love to visit. Somewhere you've never been but have always dreamed about."

Her dad's home in Chicago—wouldn't it be amusing to show up on his doorstep and have Cami open the door at Christmas time? But that wasn't happening, so she considered a more appropriate answer. "Mount Rushmore."

He looked surprised. "Really? All of the places in the world that you could go, and you want to go to Rushmore?"

"My parents aren't exactly national monument kind of people—at least not *our* nation's monuments. I've traveled to a lot of countries and seen the Eiffel Tower, the Arc de Triomphe, and a bunch of other places, but I haven't been to any of the flyover states." St. Louis the next weekend would be a start. Maybe she and her dad should plan to cover a few more of them next spring, when things warmed up again. Dakota in November did not sound fun to her.

"You surprise me. I, on the other hand, have seen Mount Rushmore, but I would love to visit a tropical location or go to another country. It's probably not on the docket between now and graduation, though."

"The joys of being a poor college student." She smiled as if she knew what it was like, but she didn't, except from listening to others talk. She admired his hard work and determination, though—it was far more impressive than her own.

"That's okay, I'm working for something better."

They shared tidbits about their lives as they waited for their pizza and when it came out, Delphi had to admit it was a dang good pie, and definitely New York style, even if it still felt a smidgeon short of a pizza place she knew in the city.

"No way," Fallon said when she told him. "I think you're just saying that because you don't want to admit this is the best pizza you've ever tasted."

"Second best. It is fantastic," she said before taking another bite,

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reveling in the burst of tomato, spices, and pepperoni on her tongue.

"I'll have to try that place then."

She cocked her head. "Maybe I'll take you sometime."

If a voice in the back of her head said she was getting ahead of herself, she wasn't going to listen. She hadn't been this relaxed and comfortable since arriving at school. Surely that meant something.

"Imagine meeting you here," a male voice said.

Delphi looked over at a middle-aged couple. The woman had brown, curly hair and the man was tall and rangy with features very much like Fallon's.

"Mom, Dad, what are you doing here?"

Delphi wondered for a moment if it was a setup, but Fallon actually appeared confused.

"We decided to pick up some pizza. You didn't mention you had a date tonight." The woman offered her hand to Delphi. "I'm Penny and this is Kirk. You must be Delphi."

She hadn't known that he had a date, but she knew his date's name? Delphi did her best to roll with the fact that he's obviously talked about her. "Yes. He's told me so much about you, Mrs. Lawrence."

"I'm not sure if that's a complement or not." Penny chuckled. "We didn't want to cramp your style or anything, but we thought we'd stop in and say hello. You're every bit as pretty as Fallon described." She winked and with a wave, Kirk led her off.

Fallon's ears had gone pink. "Sorry, Janel's dad must have called them. I didn't intend to do the meet-the-parents thing on the first date."

"No problem, they seem nice." At least they hadn't hung around to pepper her with questions. "Do they introduce themselves to all of your dates the first time you go out? Is that why you didn't mention our date?"

"It wasn't because I was ashamed of you or anything. Obviously

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I've mentioned you a time or two."

That's what she was holding onto, because otherwise, knowing that he had kept the date a secret might have made her question what he thought of her—of them. She definitely did not want to be anyone's dirty secret—she'd had more than enough of that over the years, thank you very much. She decided to tease him instead. "Just once or twice?"

"Maybe more," he admitted. "You interest me. Plus, I don't think I've ever gone out with anyone quite as beautiful as you are."

She did laugh at that one. Really, how gullible did he think she was? "You are silver tongued."

"No, I'm not it's just you... I still can hardly believe you agreed to go out with me. And now I've probably made you think I'm a loser and you'll never go out with me again."

Janel brought drinks to the table. "Dad wants to come out and meet your date, but he's swamped."

"That's okay, you no doubt noticed my parents did the meeting for him." Fallon still looked embarrassed.

Delphi covered his hand on the table, but asked Janel. "How long have you known him?"

"Forever. Honestly, I don't remember *not* knowing him."

"Is he a player? Does he have a new girl here twice a week or something? He seems a little too smooth to be real."

Janel snorted. "Not hardly. If he were, do you really think Dad would waste his time calling Kirk?"

She had a point.

"Besides, he's not smooth. If it seems like he is, it must be hormones confusing you."

"Could you wrap up the end of this so I can stick it in the compartment of my bike?" Fallon asked, gesturing to the leftover pizza.

"No problem." She took what was left and moved away.

Delphi considered Janel's opinions a pretty good

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recommendation.

"Did I pass?" he asked.

She curled their fingers together on the table again. "It is a little harder for her to say bad things with you sitting in front of me, but yeah, I'd say flying colors."

"Good. Would you like to go for another ride before I take you back to the dorms?"

"Yeah, I'd like that."

Delphi had no idea where they were going when she got onto the bike after paying and getting the leftovers. She put her arms around his waist, reveling in his lanky, active frame, and snuggled up behind him. They zoomed down busy streets and quiet avenues, past schools and when they came to a stop, she looked over Fallon's shoulder to see a church and graveyard in front of her.

"You brought me to a graveyard?"

He laughed. "Don't worry, we're not going in. Look to your left." He turned on the bike and she looked to the side.

They weren't exactly at an overlook of the city, but they had enough height to see a lot of the lights twinkling below.

"Wow. That's so beautiful." She stayed where she was, her jacket zipped against the chill, and her hand cradled in his. "It amazes me sometimes, looking at a city like that. It's so beautiful like this in the dark, but in the light, not so much."

"Yeah, there are definitely parts of this world I like better at night. Especially with some distance."

"Do you bring all of your girlfriends up here?" she asked after a long moment of peace.

"No. I've only brought one other girl up here, and since that was my sister, you're safe. It's quiet. The church is maintained, but not exactly a hub and the headstones... I know this probably seems weird to most people, but I really love the cemetery."

She stared at him. "What do you mean? It's a sign of loss and

grief."

"It's also a reminder of life and vitality. It's where people go to remember their loved ones. It makes me sad, but it also reminds me that these people lived and breathed and loved and worked and even though none of them were perfect, people remembered them. It makes me sad to see headstones that are so old you can't read the names on them anymore—that means there's no one around who remembers and cares about them anymore, and that's the biggest shame. Being in a graveyard makes me hope I'll live the kind of life that will make people want to remember me with love and joy as well as sadness. We're here to find happiness, right?"

Delphi was touched. She'd never thought of a cemetery in that way before. Maybe next time she made a duty trip to her grandmother's grave, she could ask her mom to tell her more, so she could remember Nana more clearly.

"Sorry, this probably seems totally weird to you. I thought of taking you to my old elementary school to swing, but the cops might chase us off at this time of night."

She noticed the way his eyes reflected the streetlight down the street. "You want to try anyway? I haven't had a good swing in years."

Fifteen minutes later they were on the playground at his old school and he was telling her all of the naughty things he did in second grade while he gave her a push.

Delphi flew through the air, remembering why she loved this so much as a kid, even if she did have to keep her toes up or tucked tight under her so they didn't drag on the ground.

"It sounds like your teachers must have been saints."

"Mom was really glad when I grew out of the naughtiness." He stood back and watched her pump her way higher.

"Are you mad at your parents for showing up tonight?" Delphi thought she would be if it had been her parents, but they wouldn't have been so casual.

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"That depends—they didn't scare you off, did they?"

"Nope."

"Then, no, I'm not mad at them. If I wanted to keep you away from them indefinitely, trust me when I say I wouldn't have taken you to Georgio's."

"So the reason Janel doesn't know about your twice-weekly new girlfriends is because you usually take them somewhere else?"

"You honestly think I have time and money to take girls for dinner twice a week?"

"Nah, I see you at work too much for that." She stopped pumping her legs and let the swing start to slow down.

"I'm sure this is far from the fanciest date you've been on in... ever, but I've had a good time." He stood to the side of her, his hands in his jacket pockets, watching her rush past him, back and forth.

"So have I." Delphi dragged her toes to slow the swing some more. She was having fun, but she wanted to see him face to face, and not zooming past. "Honestly, I've been having a really hard time with everything changing when I came here. And then Cami—" She cut herself off and gripped the swing chains tighter. Stupid.

"Cami?"

"Sorry, not my story to tell. Let's just say that it's been more difficult than I expected to be here, but you've been really great." She came to a stop and looked up at him.

"Please don't say something to put us in the friend zone."

She laughed. "Oh, no. Not even a little bit." She couldn't imagine relegating him to just a friend. He was far too interesting.

"Good." He sat in the swing next to hers and they grabbed hold of each other's chains, slowly drifting back and forth. "I definitely don't want to be your friend."

Delphi's breath hitched as he brushed his fingers against her cheek. Suddenly things had moved from light and fun to something considerably more interesting. "How come I feel like I've known you

forever?"

"I don't know. Maybe for the same reason I couldn't let it go after you turned me down the first time I asked you out."

"Technically I didn't turn you down," she said.

"No, you just ignored the question."

"I figured you asked out every-other girl who came through your line."

"No, definitely not. I watch for you every time I work. Things seem brighter when you walk into that noisy, crowded cafeteria." His hand traveled around the back of her neck, softly gliding against her skin. Their knees bumped, then shifted to the side so they could be a little closer.

"I don't know what to think when you say things like that to me. Most guys who say that kind of thing are just flattering me. But with you it feels different." Her voice had grown soft, as if speaking in a regular voice would mar the moment.

"I don't need to give undeserved complements." His voice mirrored hers.

She hardly knew if she dared trust anything he said, but she wanted to, so she gave herself permission to see what happened, to jump in with both feet and risk getting hurt.

When he leaned closer to her, his gaze intent on her lips, she shifted in. She couldn't remember ever wanting a kiss more than she did in that moment.

When his lips closed over hers, she decided not to question, not to worry or wonder, just to let herself be part of the sweet perfection that sang in her blood. Maybe it wouldn't last forever, but she would take what she could get.

Her hands grabbed onto his t-shirt beneath his open jacket, seeking his warmth as the kiss went on for a long, long moment while their swings moved back and forth lightly with the wind.

When he pulled away, he tipped his forehead against hers. "Want

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to come to dinner with my family Sunday night?"

A tremor passed through her that this was too fast, so crazy, but so right and perfect at the same time. She whispered her yes against his lips as she kissed him again.

About this Story

Ever since I wrote *Wild Hearts*, I've wanted to explore Delphi and Fallon's story more, but because of how things ended with them, I didn't. I know Nicholas Sparks makes a mint from his romantic tragedies, but I look for a happy ending. Still, they had a great love story, so I was thrilled to have a chance to write their beginning.

Delphi was in a tough situation, and this relationship helped her through what would otherwise have been a nearly intolerable year without ruining things for Cami, and her relationship with Fallon gave her strength to be her own person, to make decisions for herself and to learn that she could be loved for who she was, even though her parents put strings and conditions on their approval. As much as any relationship, this one shaped who she would become. I hope you enjoyed it!

Coming Soon: Lana and Blake

We knew from the first time they saw each other at the hotel that there was more to their story. Find out how they met!



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And of course, a big thanks to everyone who is reading this, I hope you enjoy the story!