*The Substitute*

F. BURN

Monday morning staff briefing. I hated it. I groggily sipped my coffee, motivating myself for the long day ahead. It seemed no matter how strong it was, I just couldn’t perk up. Why would anyone be happy about a two-day weekend that went by in a blur? I couldn’t stand the fresh-faced newbies, eager and not jaded by the amount of admin that accompanied teaching. Since when did teaching become more about data and producing pointless documents? And meetings. How they loved to say something in the longest and most boring way they could. For fuck’s sake, didn’t they have lives outside of work? Evidently not.

“Morning, Tasha.”

I snapped out of my bitter thoughts and turned toward my partner teacher. We had both been lumped in Year Six because apparently we were the best teachers for the job. I had requested Year Five for the last two years, but of course, senior

management knew best. What I wanted didn’t matter. It was all about what was best for the school. My well-being meant nothing.

“Morning, Mikey. How are we today?”

“Pretty damned good, after bumping into the sub this morning.” “Sub?”

“Oh my god, haven’t you seen? Look across the room, but don’t make it obvious.”

I rolled my eyes. Everyone got excited when a male made an appearance.

There was certainly too much estrogen in the place, but I humored him anyway and turned nonchalantly towards the left of the room.

My jaw dropped. He was exquisite. Tall, dark hair, chiseled features and broad shoulders. I drank him in from top to bottom, admiring his physique as he stood waiting for the meeting to start. He must have come in later, as most of us were seated somewhere in the badly designed, garish staffroom. He stood out like a model in a rubbish dump.

He slowly turned his head in my direction, and I quickly averted my eyes, wanting to appear cool and disinterested. From the corner of my eye, I could feel him looking at me. I feigned interest in the meeting that had just started.

‘We’d like to welcome Seth to our school today. He’ll be supporting in Year Six until the summer term,” the head teacher, Steven, announced.

I was taken aback, because Michael and I had been asking for teaching support to help plug the gaps in our class, and each time we had been given a convoluted story about budget cuts. Perhaps the poor results of the first assessment had been enough to convince them. And in typical senior management fashion, they hadn’t discussed hiring a support teacher with us at all. However, this was certainly a pleasant surprise. The fact that he was hot as fuck was a bonus I hadn’t even considered.

I zoned out for the rest of the meeting until Michael nudged me to return to our adjoining classes. I busied myself by preparing for the morning’s maths activity but stopped when I saw Steven walking towards my class with Seth. I just stood and stared. All my ex-boyfriends were nothing compared to this magnificent specimen of a man. As if he could read my thoughts, he locked eyes with me. They sucked me in, and his gaze pierced through me.

There was something almost predatory in his stare, something feline. There was something different about him besides looks, but I couldn’t quite put my finger on it. It was as if I could feel an electrical current thrumming in the air. I suddenly felt

an overwhelming desire to get closer to him. I wanted to know more about this mysterious man.

Then he released me by breaking the gaze. It left me feeling dirty, like I needed a shower, but strangely it felt good. I desperately tried to tidy myself up as Steven entered with Seth.

Seth immediately held out his hand and said, “Natasha, I presume? A pleasure to meet you.”

“The pleasure is all mine,” I responded, more demurely than I had intended.

I didn’t pull my hand away until Michael burst through the adjoining door and practically skipped toward us. He introduced himself with a giggle. Bloody hell, he was even worse than me, flirting shamelessly.

“I’m sure Natasha and Michael will make you feel welcome and fill you in on all the gory details.”

“Oh, we certainly will,” Michael replied a little too enthusiastically. My gosh, what must this man think of us!

Seth spent the morning just supporting in class. I’d give him his own groups of children to work with eventually, but I just wanted him to settle in and get used to things today. Plus I wanted to look at him. He flitted between both our classes with the grace and ease of a panther. I perked up each time he entered my room.

Thankfully, Michael was on duty in the playground for morning break, so that left me alone with Seth. As the children left the classroom in single file, I turned to find Seth standing right behind me. I jumped up, startled by the unexpected closeness. His pale grey eyes stared into mine and my heartbeat quickened. A member of staff had never had this kind of effect on me. I’d also never been particularly self- conscious about my looks, but he was standing so close that I was sure he could pick out every flaw on my face. I cleared my throat and took a step back.

“Would you like a drink? Coffee or tea?” I managed to ask.

“No, thanks. I don’t drink tea or coffee. I prefer my drinks stronger,” he hinted with a conspiratorial wink of his eye.

I chuckled and replied, “Is that so? Well, we normally go out for a drink on Fridays after school, so you’re welcome to join us.”

“That’s very nice of you. I might just do that.”

I decided to ignore my need for caffeine, just so I could savor the next fifteen minutes left of break alone with Mr Arden.

We sat at my computer desk, and I showed him the week’s plans. He was lucky that I had actually completed the plans because I usually never had it done on time, but with a looming Ofsted inspection inching ever closer, senior management had been cracking down on planning in recent weeks. It was probably the reason why they had finally provided extra support, unless they really thought Michael and I were simply shit teachers.

When I laid the plans on the table, Seth brought his chair closer to mine, so close that our knees were almost touching. I couldn’t help but run my eyes along his

well-shaped muscular thighs. I could see the muscles tense as he shifted his long legs. He shrugged out of his blazer and leaned forward, looking at me expectantly. I almost forgot why we were sitting there, and it took me a moment to find my words. I was so distracted by the closeness of his body.

“Um… so, these are the plans. I guess we could start looking at maths. I must warn you, though, this class is really low in maths. You could either work with the middle group or the lower group. Sometimes the higher group need a challenge too. How do you feel about taking a group out tomorrow?”

“That sounds great. Whatever way you think I would be best utilized. I don’t mind supporting in class either.” I couldn’t help but envision him naked when he said the word “utilized”. There were many ways he would be best utilized.

Taking a deep breath, I tried to pretend my thoughts were purely professional. “Well, I’m sure you don’t want to just sit around listening to me droning on. You probably have your own skills and plans to bring to the table.”

“I don’t have any problems listening to you drone on and on,” he replied, almost flirtatiously. For a moment I wondered if he’d read my thoughts. A man as

fine as him wouldn’t be interested in a woman like me, would he? I urged myself to continue speaking.

“I think, for this week, we’ll have you supporting in class, so you can get to know the children and get an idea of their strengths and areas for development. It’s pretty self-evident, to be honest. You’ll probably spot the lower achievers and end up gravitating toward them. Obviously, you will split your time between my class and Michael’s class. I’ve got more children on the special needs register that aren’t getting enough support, so you might be in my class more often. There might be some other interventions needed as well, like speech and language. You see, normally, we would have had a teaching assistant doing some of those interventions, but due to staff

restructuring, they’re covering classes rather than supporting. That’s why I’m so grateful that you’re here.” I realized I was rambling on and needed to stop to breathe before I embarrassed myself even further.

He waited for a second, as if he expected me to say more. Then he replied, “Well, I’m glad to be here, Natasha. I want to help in any way that I can. Anything you need, please just tell me.” A quiver went up my spine when he said my name. Why did everything he say sound sexual to me?

“Thank you, Seth. That means a lot. I think we’ll get along really well*.” I think we’ll get along well*? Why did I say that?

“Oh, I hope so,” he practically purred. For once, I was at a loss for words. He went silent for a moment, waiting. He wasn’t afraid to make eye contact for longer

than necessary, and it didn’t seem to make him feel awkward as it would most people. I felt the heat rise to my face, and I was worried that he could see my embarrassment and that he would figure out that I found him extremely attractive.

When I said nothing, he smiled, and I automatically smiled back. I saw that he had unusually long canine teeth, which somehow made him look even sexier. His eyes appeared different, as if they reflected the light. I blinked, assuming it was a trick of light, and when I looked again, his eyes appeared as a pale shade of grey like before. I wasn’t sure what had got into me – I’d seen attractive men before. Why was this one making me respond like this? The truth was that it had been a long time since a man had piqued my interest. After a few failed relationships and one marriage, I had pretty much given up on men.

However, all the late nights with Michael at the local pub were a blast. My parents had started to think he was my boyfriend because of the number of times I mentioned his name, until I’d told them that he was, in fact, attracted to men.

Just then, the bell went, signaling the end of break. I got up to help collect the children from the playground, when Seth stood up, put his hand gently on my shoulder and said, “No, it’s okay. Don’t worry, I’ll get them. You focus on preparing for the lesson.”

“Okay, thank you.” The warmth of his hand lingered on my arm. I was enjoying the perks of having a support teacher. Not only that, he had a lovely manner about him. He had a sense of humor, yet he was very charming and polite. When I

spoke, he looked me in the eyes, and he waited for me to finish without interrupting. He made me feel as if I was worth listening to. It was strange, considering that we’d just met that day. He also seemed experienced. I just hoped that he wasn’t too good to be true.

As the class came back into the room, I saw that Michael and Seth were talking to each other and that Michael was giggling yet again. I felt a pang of jealousy because I didn’t want to share Seth. As selfish as it sounded, I wanted to be the person that he bonded with most in the school. I didn’t want him to make loads of friends who he’d like more than me. I didn’t want him to join any of the cliques that had formed in the school. I wanted to be his confidant, his mentor, his friend, and maybe even more. Something dangerous was lingering in the air, and my adventurous side was responding. My inner voice seemed to say, *Life is short. Jump in with everything you’ve got. Don’t hesitate*.

As the children settled in their seats, I told my mind to quieten down. I didn’t have time for schoolgirl fantasies, which I should have outgrown by now.

My arm still tingled where he had touched it, and it lingered even after he’d gone to Michael’s class. Part of me wanted him to support in class while I taught so that I could look at him throughout the day, but then the other part of me knew that I would not be able to focus on teaching children if he was constantly in the same room as me.

I hoped that we would spend lunchtime together too, but Seth said that he needed to go out for a walk and that he would be back soon. Whilst he was gone, Michael joined me for lunch, and instead of going into the staffroom like we normally did, we stayed in our classroom just so we could gossip about Seth.

“Tasha, this guy is hot. I couldn’t stop looking at his tight arse. I’d do him any day. Do you think he’s into guys or both?”

“Mikey, you are so –”

“Oh, come on, you can’t say that you weren’t looking. So, tell me, what do you think?”

“Okay, I think he’s gorgeous. But don’t they always say, ‘Don’t mix business with pleasure’?”

“Yeah, they also say, ‘Don’t shit where you work’. I couldn’t give a toss. If I have a chance, I’m going for it.”

Deciding to humor him a bit, I responded, “I reckon we wait till Friday when we go for a drink.”

“Oh, I get it. He gets a little bit drunk and then we drill him for information. That sounds like a plan. Tasha, I’m so glad that we’re on the same wavelength here.”

“Well, I guess we need something to motivate us, don’t we? We’ve had to deal with all this crap recently, and now we’ve got something that will actually make us want to come to work, so…” I joked.

“Just imagine, Tasha – us comparing notes on his penis size.” Chuckling, I said, “You make me laugh. You’re such –”

“And I’m proud. Maybe you should have a little fun.” I felt a little hurt that he was implying that I wasn’t having any “fun”, but who was I kidding? He was right.

“Yeah, maybe it is time for me to make a change. Maybe I should be a bit more free-spirited and take some risks.”

On that last word, Seth entered the room and immediately we changed the subject. “So, about this afternoon,” Michael said coolly.

“It’s all in the plan. All in the plan.”

Michael chuckled softly to himself, looked up and said, “Hey, Seth. Ready for the afternoon?”

After an interesting day at work, I got home feeling a little bit sexually frustrated. I was tempted to call Josh – an ex who would be well up for some no- strings-attached sex. I decided against it. I didn’t want to be pathetic and desperate. And on second thought, I wasn’t all that excited about him. I needed to be alone with my fantasies of Seth. My handy little friend would be busy tonight.

I looked in a mirror before going to bed. Light brown skin, long curly hair with natural, reddish highlights and amber eyes had always made me appear racially ambiguous. A DNA test had once revealed a very mixed background. Was I attractive enough to get someone like Seth?

I was pushing forty, but my body was a lot slimmer nowadays, and people said I looked young for my age. Now was the time to take advantage of that before I got too old to attract a younger man. I assumed he was in his thirties. The thought of getting closer to him and the thrill of taking a risk turned me on.

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