

## COURTING ON COURT

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“Jeffrey pulled my braids again.” Brittany wiped her eyes as she leaned against the arm of the couch. “And he tripped me.”

Wendy brushed loose strands of her niece’s blonde hair away from her cheeks. Why would a little boy pick on such a cute girl? She couldn’t imagine what he found to pester her about. She certainly empathized with her niece, recalling Michael the big-bully-braid-yanker from grade school—talk about a tormentor.

“I know how you feel.” Wendy sighed.

“You do?” Brittany’s eyes widened.

Wendy squeezed her niece close. “Michael, a mean bully, used to pull my braids all the time. And you know what he called me?”

“What?” Brittany asked.

“Tinkerbell.”

Brittany’s face reddened. “Jeffrey calls me *turnip*! And the teacher doesn’t even care.”

“Since your teacher won’t do anything, maybe I should call his mother.”

“Jeffrey doesn’t have a mommy.” Brittany’s gaze dropped to her feet. “She died when he was a baby.”

“Oh, my. That’s so sad.” Wendy tried to think of something more to say, but couldn’t. Maybe this bit of information explained the boy’s behavior. Poor child. “Why don’t we forget about Jeffrey and go to the park? After all, your mom and dad will be home tomorrow, so this is our last day together.”

Brittany clapped her hands, obviously forgetting about Jeffrey.

The car felt like an oven as they drove to the park, and Wendy almost wished they’d stayed inside with the air conditioning. But a day in the sun would be nice too. She’d packed her romance novel and could catch a tan in her favorite sun-dress.

“There’s the park, there’s the park!” Brittany shouted.

Wendy found a shady place for the car, and they made their way over the blacktop. Several men in mismatched T-shirts and shorts, wildly bumping and jabbing each other, worked up a sweat on the half basketball court. One lanky man leaped up and knocked the ball in Wendy’s direction. She gasped, jerked Brittany to a halt and raised a protective hand.

A tanned, athletic man charged toward them, and with an outstretched arm caught the ball. “Sorry about that.” He grinned as sandy blond hair hung over sparkling hazel eyes.

Wendy breathed again. “Thank you.”

“No problem.” His gaze swept over her, then he turned and jogged back to the others.

“Wow. He was cute,” Wendy whispered.

Brittany giggled, then pointed ahead. “The swings! Push me on the swings?” She tugged on Wendy’s arm.

“Let’s go.” They hurried to capture an available swing.

Brittany stopped in her tracks and grabbed Wendy’s hand. “Jeffrey’s here.”

“Where?” Wendy asked, kneeling down.

“Over there,” she said and pointed to a small boy making sand castles under the slide.

Was that little guy the big threat? Wendy almost laughed. She’d imagined a huge bully, one like Michael. “Let’s just pretend he isn’t here.”

Brittany pursed her lips. “Okay.” She nodded and skipped to the swing.

After playing with Brittany on the swings, the merry-go-round and the monkey bars, Wendy needed a break. “I’ll be right here reading my book,” she said, settling onto a nearby bench. Brittany hurried off to the slide where she’d found some friends. Wendy opened her book and escaped into the ancient Highlands.

Five minutes later Brittany came running back. “Jeffery pulled my hair, and when I was going down the slide he jumped up and scared me!”

“Try to ignore him. Maybe he’ll get bored and leave you alone.”

Frowning, Brittany ran off to play again. Wendy watched as Brittany skipped toward the monkey bars, but Jeffrey followed. Brittany and her friends dodged around him and hurried to the swings. But Jeffrey chased after them and threw sand.

Wendy strode up to the boy, hands on hips. “You shouldn’t throw sand.”

Jeffrey stared up at her with wide, brown eyes and swallowed visibly. He nodded.

She turned and went back to her novel. But she’d barely read one page, when she saw the boy smacking Brittany’s braids each time she swung low enough on the swing.

“Jeffrey, please leave Brittany’s braids alone,” she called.

He hid his hands behind his back and stepped away.

Later, after Brittany jumped from the swing, Wendy saw him yank on her braid, pulling her to the ground.

Wendy's sympathies for the motherless child waned. She stomped over to him. "Where's your father?"

The boy slumped. "Over there," he said, pointing a trembling finger at the basketball players.

"Both of you, come with me."

She marched with both children toward the intense players, dreading interrupting their game. Maybe she should have just bought the kids some ice-cream at the nearby stand. That might have smoothed things over, for a while at least. But this teasing had been going on for a week, and since their teacher hadn't done anything, she would. She stopped at the edge of the court, hoping for courage to face Jeffrey's father. So many new experiences came with playing mother for a week.

As she watched the men play, she wondered which one might be the boy's father. Most likely one of the pale indoor-types with just a hint of gut, but hopefully not one of the tanned muscular-types, so large and intimidating.

She cleared her throat. "Which one of you is Jeffrey's father?"

They played one more shot and stopped the game, then all eyes turned on her.

The man she'd encountered earlier strode toward her, basketball on his hip. His sleeveless shirt emphasized his broad shoulders as he wiped the sweat from his brow.

"It's the one you said was cute," Brittany said a little too loudly, tugging on her arm.

Heat crept from Wendy's neck to her cheeks.

"What's the problem?" he asked, hazel eyes narrowed.

She swallowed as the man stared down at her and forced herself to recall Brittany's tears. The memory sparked helpful embers of courage.

"Jeffrey has been pestering my niece all week. And since the teacher at school won't do anything about it, I thought maybe you would. Every day Brittany has come home crying, and even today your son can't keep his hands to himself." She straightened to her full height but still had to arch her neck to meet his gaze.

"Mike, give us the ball!" one of the men shouted from the court.

"I'll just be a minute," Mike called over his shoulder.

"Yeah, right." The men paced. "He's not coming back."

"Jeffrey, is that true?" his father asked, his voice deep and firm.

The little boy nodded.

Mike glanced at Brittany hiding behind Wendy's skirt, then at Wendy. A familiar memory that she couldn't quite place tugged at the corner of her mind as his eyes traced her mouth, cheeks and hair.

He knelt down before Jeffrey. "No more picking on the girls." He raised a brow.

"All right?"

"Okay."

"Say you're sorry," Mike said, then nodded toward Brittany.

The boy mumbled an apology as Brittany came out of hiding.

"Say it like you mean it."

"I'm sorry," Jeffrey said.

Brittany smiled.

“Good. Now, go play.” Mike gave him a pat, and the boy ran toward the playground.

After a whole week of agitation, this wasn’t enough for Wendy. She sent Brittany off and followed the man as he began to leave.

“I hope you plan on talking to him again.”

He turned to face her. She nearly collided with his chest and stumbled back.

A flash of amusement played in his eyes. “He only teases your niece because he thinks she’s cute.”

“Oh?” she said, her senses heightened by his closeness.

“Boys do that.” He shrugged and raised a brow. “I used to.”

She stared at the familiar quirk of his mouth, the familiar crooked nose, the familiar hazel eyes.

Michael.

The one who used to make her life so miserable stood right in front of her—he’d sure grown up. Her cheeks warmed, certain he recognized her. She suddenly felt like the heroine in her romance novel, facing a roguish Scottish chieftain.

“But don’t worry, I’ll talk to him later.”

“I appreciate that,” she said, swallowing. She’d been reading too many books.

He motioned with his chin toward Brittany. “She looks like you, especially those blond braids.” He smirked, the same way he used to when he’d tease her. “Are you still the shy, modest girl you used to be back in grade school?”

“Yes,” she said, bristling and feeling all too vulnerable in her sun dress as he stood over her, rough and sweaty.

The hard lines of his face softened.

“Come on, give us the ball!” One of the men grumbled in agitation.

“Can I buy you some ice-cream?” Mike shifted his stance and grinned. “The kids can have some too.”

She bit her lip, still hesitant.

“I can’t promise I won’t tease you.” He winked.

At that she smiled, then nodded.

He chucked the ball over his shoulder.

As they turned away from the court, she heard someone say, “Told you he wasn’t coming back.”

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