

Dinner

By J.S. Deaton

I reached for the book, stretching on my tip toes, and managed only to get two fingers under the edge of the spine. I flipped it toward me; my brilliant plan was to catch it before it conked me on the head. It might have worked, had I not had a load of books already precariously stacked in my other arm and balanced with my chin. The math book toppled off the shelf, and hurtled itself toward me with increasing speed.

“Crap,” I mumbled.

College Calculus II struck the corner of *Principles of Communication* and sent the whole pile tumbling to the floor of the college bookstore, but not before I managed to do a very non-athletic waltz, moving awkwardly in an anti-rhythm to the gasps of startled students around me. The whole incident seemed to happen in slow motion – my blush, not so much. I was bright red within a millisecond, cringing in shame as I kept my eyes down, and stooped to gather the traitorous volumes scattered at my feet. That was such a freshman move. And I was no freshman. At that particular moment, my heart was pierced with sympathy for the lesser college primates.

“Is this yours?”

I raised my head, just a fraction, only high enough to stare at the book held just under my nose. I was afraid to look. The voice was masculine. I swore I’d heard a bit of amusement in those few words. I pushed my bangs out of my eyes and dared to look at the hand that held my least favorite book of all. Long muscular fingers, tanned by the summer sun, flexed against the weight of the thick volume.

I slowly rose to my feet. Normally I would have tossed my hair back and held my chin high, using my athleticism and confidence to put any would-be tormentors in their place. But when I stood straight, I was rendered speechless by the man who met my gaze, a crooked grin of utter amusement on his face. His brown eyes filled with laughter.

I was not used to looking up at people. At close to six feet, I met a person's gaze straight on. This man stood at least six-four, and with my current self-consciously hunched posture, I had to crane my neck to stare into his laughing eyes.

I took the book from him; well, snatched it really, and willed my red face to cease and desist. A sheen of sweat had formed on my forehead. Thank goodness I hadn't had time to have Hailey trim my bangs this morning. Maybe I could hide that from him.

"Uh, thanks." *That was brilliant, Kaycee.*

He held out his hand. "Michael."

I reached to shake it with the hand that already held a heavy but forgotten math book. In mid-handshake, I tried to shift the book to the other hand, bobbled it, and dropped it. The corner mashed the toe of his shoe. I watched in horror as his eyes watered and he grimaced. To his credit, he did not yell or jump around as I would have.

I bent to pick up the offensive book. "I am so sorry!"

The man knelt beside me and began to scoop my books into a manageable pile. My efforts to help seemed to scatter them farther away from both of us.

He grabbed both of my shaking hands, making me instantly calm with the peace radiating in his friendly eyes. "Why not let me get this for you? I can see you're having a difficult morning."

I nodded wordlessly and stood, wrapping my arms around my middle and standing there stupidly as Michael kneeled before me, gathering the wayward items.

I took a deep breath and dared to scan the room, anxious to see what kind of stir I had created. Oddly enough, no one seemed to be looking at me and the mess I'd made. The students, faculty, and store clerks all seemed to be focused on Michael. Many were grinning, some were whispering behind their hands to friends, some were outright gawking. I returned my gaze to him, just as he rose to his feet. I was struck again with his amazing height, and this time, also by the powerful build of him. He obviously worked out. And he spent a lot of time in the sun. He was dressed casually, in jeans and a navy blue shirt. It was untucked, and the top two buttons were unfastened, revealing a crisp white T-shirt that was made all the more brilliant by the sun-darkened skin at his throat. I sucked in a short breath.

He seemed to smile at some private joke.

I reached to take the books from him, but he took a step back. "I've got them. Are you ready to check out?"

I nodded, feeling a new blush begin somewhere below the collar of my *Simpson College* sweatshirt. It climbed steadily up my neck and settled around my ears.

Forgetting everything I'd ever known about how to walk or play any kind of collegiate-level sport, I stumbled to the counter and pulled my credit card from the back pocket of my jeans.

Michael put the pile of items on the counter and peeked over my shoulder at the card. "Kaycee," he murmured.

I nodded. "Yes. I'm sorry. I forgot to introduce myself. I guess I was too busy throwing books at you."

He chuckled good-naturedly. "No harm, no foul."

I was suddenly aware of how close he was standing, though he didn't seem to notice. I brushed the thought away before I managed to turn a new shade of crimson.

"Where are you headed?" he asked.

"Books to my car, and then to class."

"Would you think I was forward or helpful if I offered to carry your books?"

I chuckled, feeling more like my old self as his calm confidence washed over me, too. "Helpful. I might even spring for chivalrous."

He smiled.

I watched the store clerk jam my books into a large, heavy-duty sack. She never took her eyes from Michael.

When we turned to go, I swore I saw him wink at her and put his index finger to his lips.

I frowned in confusion. "Do you know her?" I asked.

"No. But I visit campus pretty regularly. I guess you could say I'm no stranger."

Michael carried the heavy sack of books effortlessly. I was jealous. Even though I lifted weights almost every day, I would have been struggling with that load by the time I lugged them across campus. I'd have considered it my aerobic workout for today.

"Are you a new student?" he asked.

"Yes," I answered. "I've been playing volleyball in Europe."

"Really?"

I could tell he was impressed. "I blew out my knee three months ago. Came home to stay with my folks while I rehab. Thought I'd pick up a few college classes while I was here."

Michael looked in the bag. "A *few*?"

"I like school. Call me weird."

"There are a few other things I'd call you before 'weird.'"

"Such as?" I challenged.

"Klutzy. Easily embarrassed. Pretty."

I thought I was done blushing. I was wrong.

Michael picked up our conversation while I continued to stare at the sidewalk.

"So, your parents live here in town?"

"They just moved. We're from Nevada. They came to Minnesota because they got tired of the heat. That's a new one, huh? This is my first time in the state."

"How do you like it, so far?"

"If mom and dad are here, it's home."

He smiled in genuine appreciation. "It's cool to hear you say that."

"You don't think it's lame?"

Michael shook his head. "I travel a lot. It's always good to come home."

The look on his face warmed my insides. "What do you do?" I asked.

Michael pointed toward the parking lot. "Which one of these is yours?"

I scanned the cars. "Red Nova."

His grin widened and he whistled. "Yours? Or your boyfriends?"

I frowned. "Mine. My brother and I restored it."

“Sorry. I assumed. My bad.”

“No harm, no foul.” My frown relaxed into a casual grin.

We made it to the car and I opened the trunk. Michael put the heavy sack inside. Before closing it, I grabbed one of the lighter, less threatening-looking books and a spiral notepad.

“What, no laptop?” he asked.

“I actually write faster than I type. And, I seem to retain more info. It’s odd.”

“I like odd.” His brown eyes danced flirtatiously.

My eyes widened in sudden discomfort. I hadn’t dated much lately, and felt pretty rusty at the game. But from the way he was looking at me, I could see that I might have been mistaken about my skills.

“Have dinner with me,” he said.

“Huh?” I managed. *Nope. Skills shot to heck*, I chided silently.

“Tonight. Dinner. You and I.”

“Sure.” I blurted. *Skills still is serious question, Kaycee.*

Michael laughed. His crooked smile returned, along with a stunning set of dimples. “It is so refreshing to meet someone like you.” He glanced at his watch. “I’m speaking to a class in a few minutes. Walk with me?”

I nodded, unable to consider what his *someone like me* comment might have meant. I stared at the cover of the book in my hands. I was completely clueless as to what my next class was. *Oh right, Business Principle for Professionals.* “Where are you headed?” I thought my voice sounded pretty casual.

“Jefferson Hall. Business Principles for Professionals.”

“No way. That’s my class.”

“Great. Show me the way?”

In spite of my belief that he was much more familiar with the way to class than I was, I dutifully led him back across campus to one of the large, ancient classroom buildings. I noticed once more how everyone seemed to stare at him as we passed. Again with the whispering, and the giggling, and the pointing.

I was relieved to get inside the large classroom, away from the stares. Michael put his hand on the small of my back and steered me toward a seat. He leaned to whisper in my ear. “I’ll catch you after class. We’ll discuss the specifics of dinner.”

I sat down hard in the wooden chair. His warm breath on my neck sent a chill down my spine and icy goose bumps shooting upward in response. I felt slightly woozy. And my bad knee began to ache.

Michael made his way to the front of the classroom. He glanced over his shoulder and winked at me.

I sat hunched in my chair, a blank goofy stare in my eyes, and a silly grin on my face. I wasn’t certain, but a faint sigh might have escaped my lips. Several of my female classmates sent angry glares in my direction.

I heard the professor’s voice call the class to attention. It was completely unnecessary. As soon as Michael made it down front, all eyes immediately turned to him, and people scrambled to take their seats.

Professor Barker gestured grandly. “Please join me in welcoming one of our own, a Simpson College alumnus, now a baseball player for our favorite Minnesota Twins, an All-Star, and two-time Gold Glove winner, Mr. Michael Young.”

Loud applause went up from the class.

I sat perfectly still. My appreciation for baseball – a game previously unknown to me – had taken on a whole new level of interest. And more importantly, so had the word *dinner*.