It was very rarely that I ever went on vacation. In fact, I hadn’t been on vacation since I was about ten, I think, it’s hard to think back that far. Sure, being a freshman in high school it doesn’t seem that long ago, but when you’re brain is on autopilot from worrying about how you’re going to navigate the impossible world of high school, it doesn’t leave much time for going down memory lane. Hell, the last time I even remembered anything from my childhood was when my mom found an old Christmas photo from when I was about eight or nine, one of the two. It was of course, embarrassing; I was sitting there in a pile of wrapping paper, bow somehow stuck to my head, with a look on my face that clearly said I had no clue what was going on while the photo was taken. And was that a Go-Bots toy in my hand? It might have been, I can’t see the box.

But I’m getting away from myself.

Like I said before, it was rare that I ever went on vacation. It was even rarer that I went on vacation by myself, but when your folks are rich and are involved in business and don’t really want you to be bored all day at the house with nothing much to do besides sit there and watch a billion satellite channels that *somehow* don’t have anything on them worth watching, there’s going to be some unique luxuries. So they got the bright idea to send me to Orlando for the week while they were off in New York on business. Something tells me they were doing more than I was at the moment. Mom had been selling Disney World to me the entire week leading up to my trip, telling me all about the joys of the times she visited and the magical adventures she had. But I don’t think either of them had ever been on a vacation to try to forget something, which was why I agreed to the idea in the first place.

And it’s why I’m here right now, sitting in front of the pool at the Polynesian Hotel in Disney World, in the pale moonlight, trying to forget what had happened that past year. But even when you’re nursing a tasty non-alcoholic beverage — Hey, I’m only fifteen — it’s not easy to forget having a broken heart.

There aren’t a lot of things that I remember, but this is one of them. Even after ten months, the memory, and the pain it brings me, is still fresh in my mind. Sheryl Crow said the first cut is the deepest, and I’m pretty sure now that she was right. My tail swishes angrily as I remember what transpired. It was the first time I had ever truly fallen in love; Ashley Caldwell was her name, a cougar just a year older than me, I think. At that time I thought I would never seen someone more beautiful than her, when she sat down next to me in history class. I remember she was wearing the uniform of the school’s tennis team, a blue and red ensemble that fit her form perfectly. Raven-black hair that shined, blue eyes that sparkled with a light all their own staring out at the world through a pair of glasses that only seemed to make her more beautiful, and mocha-brown fur that contrasted perfectly perfectly with her hair. Everything about her seemed perfect; her proportions, her laugh, her voice, her personality, everything.

It was almost a month before I even had the courage to talk to her. My heart felt like it would literally seize and explode every time I saw her, even if it was just a two-second glance in the hall. It was almost impossible to concentrate in class when she was sitting next to me, and there were a few times that I got in trouble because I was looking at her when I should have been taking notes. I’m still surprised I passed. Anyway, when I finally did get the courage to make a move, she seemed interested. At the very least she was willing to talk to me and hang out, even introduced me to some of her friends. A couple of them, Chris Fournell and his girlfriend Maia Carelii, I still considered good friends. Heck, me and Ashley got pretty close, despite me making it fairly obvious that I liked her.

Yeah, you can probably see where this is going.

When the big moment finally arrived, when I finally got it in my head to make the big move and ask her out, I was ready. I put on my best romantic act, walked up to her, gave her rose and asked if she would like to take things to the next level. Her answer floored me, and not in a good way.

“I’m sorry, please don’t think I don’t like you, but I don’t date underclassmen.” And with that, everything collapsed.

*I don’t date underclassmen.* I still couldn’t get those damned words out of my head. They swirled about inside my mind, taunting me like those schoolyard bullies you see in every Saturday morning cartoon, the ones with the mindless slogans they keep chanting that are only funny to them and the rest of their dimwit friends. They floated about, kicking me in the stomach while I was already down from a punch to the jaw, reminding me of what I had come to conclude was my place.

It didn’t take a man with perfect 20/20 vision to see what was going on in my school. Indeed, I didn’t even have to have it said to me; I learned it just by watching the other students. Upperclassmen, juniors and seniors, were basically seen as gods, especially if they happened to play one of the three prominent ball sports (football, basketball and lacrosse… hey, it’s a private school). They were the top dogs in everything; they got invited to all the parties, they got most of the positions in clubs and organizations, and most of all, they were the kings of the dating scene. Sophomore and even freshman threw themselves at them, and most of the time the sophomores got lucky.

Not the freshmen.

The freshmen were almost universally pushed aside. Rejection and social alienation, except with other freshmen, was a part of life. Parties? They had to organize their own, because they never received an invite anywhere. Clubs and teams? Every once in a blue moon, a lucky one would be given maybe a treasurer or secretary gig, or maybe an assistant team captain, but that was about it, and they were barely tolerated in their positions. And dating? Unless it was another freshman girl or guy, don’t even think about it, even if the upperclassman was nice to you and was a friend. You weren’t dating material if you wore the dreaded “freshie” title.

It was clear to me that “freshman” was little more than a synonym for “loser”.

And that was what hurt the most. Not Ashley’s rejection; that hurt, but it was the *reason* for it that got to me. I can feel the heat rising in my veins as I think about it. Why? Why did being a freshman have to decide everything? It was just a word. It meant nothing other than you were in ninth grade and just starting out. Why did it have to become another way to call someone a turd? It wasn’t freaking fair! I start to grip my drink so hard I’m afraid the glass will break.

“It’s not fair, it’s just not fair.” I say under my breath. I sigh as I feel my heart start to break again, this time from the simple feeling of isolation. My class ranking was going to determine who I got to associate with no matter what, and as much as it pained me, I had to live with it. There just wasn’t a damned thing I could do about it, it was the way high school ran. Put up with it and try to live, or mope and have everyone hate you even more, that’s how it worked.

I gaze out at the pool as I think, seeing another teenager, a blond-haired cougar girl, swimming across the pool and hopping out near the diving board. A beautiful one too, her white bikini twinkling with what looked like rhinestones. Meh, no point in even looking. Probably already had a boyfriend, and the wounds from my previous encounter with lost love were still too fresh. She dried herself off and took a swig from a Coke can, managing to make eye contact with me for a brief moment. She smiles and waves at me, and I manage to put on an obviously fake smile and wave back. I can’t see her eye color, but looking at the rest of her, it was probably something stunning. No, stop, you’re not allowed to think like that until you’re a junior, remember?

I sigh and put my drink down, shaking my head as I return to my thoughts. I’m just a loser, I thought. A freshie nobody. I was one of the amorphous mass of freshies skulking about the halls, the ones the senior guys made fun of and hated with a passion. I was just another loser in an immense crowd of losers, consigned as unlikeable because of my class ranking. Good grades? Other scholastic achievements? Anything other than the fact that I wasn’t an upperclassman? None of that mattered. It might as well have been a drunken shrew getting them, but then again, the drunken shrew might at least look cute to an animal lover. I wasn’t that at all.

I was so lost in pity and staring at my knees that I didn’t even notice the reflection in the water next to mine, and I didn’t even notice that someone had sat down next to me until I heard them speaking.

“Hey there, handsome.” I about jumped out of my skin, but somehow managed to hide it well enough that they didn’t notice. I turn around to see the same cougar girl from before, this time up close.

I was right about the eyes. They were blue, like Ashley’s, but of a sort of bright ocean blue rather than sapphire. Her blonde hair I now noticed had some blue highlights in them, as though she was going for a rocker sort of look, at least that was my guess (the only kids I noticed who had highlights were the scene kids, but they were few and far between at my school). The rest of her fur was either a golden brown or cream color, with the exception of a spot above her heart where she had gotten a dolphin tattoo, and her proportions reminded me a lot of Ashley’s, though I noticed that she had a very athletic tone to her, what many back home called the “field hockey body”. I guessed she either played field hockey or lacrosse. All in all, this tom cat felt that she was very beautiful. Certainly out of my league.

“Oh, hey,” I said to her. No sense in being rude. “What brings you over here?” She smiled at me. *Wow, she is cute,* my brain managed to sneak out before I stopped it.

“You looked down and I thought you could use some company.” She said. I suddenly felt myself growing warm in the cheeks.

“Well, you got the down part right.” I said. I can’t quite put my finger on it, but somehow I just feel comfortable talking to her, even though I literally didn’t even know she was here until I saw her swimming. “It’s a long story.”

“I’ve got time. I don’t have anywhere to be. My folks sent here so I wouldn’t be bored at home while they went on some business trip to Hawaii. I guess they’re afraid I’ll throw a huge party with boys.” She giggled at that. “Not that I don’t like parties, but I’d rather just have a few friends over than an orgy. Anyway, I’m Amber Rafaniello. What’s your name, cutie?”

*OK, did she just flirt with me?* “Josh Braddock.” I say. “I’m in the same boat. My folks went to New York and mom talked me into letting them send me here for a week. I’ve been here about a day and haven’t done much.” I explained.

“Ah, well Josh, I’m glad I ran into you.” She said with a grin. “It gives me something beautiful other than the scenery to look at.” She smirked at me and winked. “So tell me about yourself, Josh. Are you from around here?” *Well, if she wasn’t flirting with me before, she definitely is now.*

“No, I’m from North Carolina,” I say. “Charlotte to be precise. I go to Madison Prep.” Her eyes lit up.

“Hey, I go there too! I play on the softball team.” *Explains the athletic look.* She wrapped an arm around me, ruffling up some of my orange tabby fur. “Well isn’t this just grand! How come I’ve never seen your cute face around?” I blush again.

“Well, I kinda just go about my day and then leave,” I say. “I’m not really that well liked…”

“I find that hard to believe, hot stuff,” Amber said back. “I bet you got all the girls eating out of your hand.” I sigh.

“No, I don’t and I never will.” I blurt out. I instantly shove my fish in my mouth at my curtness. She’s taken aback by what I say. I sigh again. “It’s part of the reason I’m so bummed.” I said. With that, I start telling her the whole story. By the end, I’m fighting to hold tears back, and I turn to look at her to see that she’s obviously shocked, holding her hand over her mouth.

“OK, do you where this Ashley Caldwell goes to class? I’d like to beat some sense into her.” She growls. “Who cares if you’re a senior or a freshman? I don’t, let me tell you. I don’t think it matters a damned bit, and I’m a sophomore.” She said. She sighs. “It’s not right, and someone who seems as nice as you doesn’t deserve that.”

“You really think so?” I ask, cautiously. She nods.

“I mean it. Hey, you really do sound like someone I could grow to like. I can tell a lot about people by looking at them. My mom says I have a gift for it.” She said. She smiled. “And I’m not just trying to be flirty when I say that.” I find myself smiling, for the first time in a while, and really meaning it.

“Thanks… that really means a lot Amber.” I say. I feel something touch my hand, and then I realize it’s hers.

“Hey, I know it still hurts, and it’s probably going to for a while, but how would you like to meet me for dinner tonight?” She asked. I was definitely taken aback now.

“You’re asking me out?” I asked, not daring to hope. She nods, still rubbing my hand.

“But only if you want to.” She said. I think about it for a few seconds. A girl was asking me out. Heck, a girl was obviously attracted to me, if I could believe it. It was a bit hard to believe, but… something just told me it was right. Hard to say what it was, but it did.

“Yeah, I’d like that.” She reaches into her purse, which I didn’t realize she brought over (crazy prepared, this girl is) and takes out a pen and paper. She writes down a telephone number and other contact details and then hands it to me.

“My info,” She says. “You know, if this does turn into something serious.” She gave me a smile that plainly said “I will become something serious. “Meet me around eight at the hotel restaurant. No need to dress fancy.” I could feel something in my heart, and it definitely wasn’t pain.

“Heh, you got it.” I said, barely able to keep my sudden excitement under control. She smiles, and then leans over and kisses my cheek.

“Cya then, cutie pie.” And with that, she gathers up her stuff, and leaves. I watch her saunter away the whole time, pausing once to wave goodbye and blow me a kiss before leaving out of sight.

I didn’t know how long I sat there, grinning stupidly. I may have been five minutes, probably longer. But either way, I was happy. I was happier than I had been in a long time. This Amber Rafaniello obviously liked me, maybe even wanted to be my girlfriend. Could I dare to hope? Yeah, I could.

*Maybe high school won’t be such a nightmare after all.* I thought.

**THE END**