



# Campus Daddies

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**Category:** Erotic, Romance, Adult

**Description:** My thesis project was supposed to document my life.

Not film three of my professors seducing me.

Braxton Barlowe—my father's best friend. Safe. Steady. Irresistible.

Cedric Trevino—my thesis advisor. Sharp. Dominant. Unforgiving.

Orion Knight—the campus bad boy with a past, and eyes only for me.

One scandalous weekend.

One leaked tape.

One positive pregnancy test I never saw coming.

Now the whole campus is watching.

The headlines are brutal.

And I've got a secret growing inside me.

They think I'm the one who broke the rules.

But I just broke them.

Three professors. One very bad girl.

And a baby that ties us together forever.

Just wait until Daddy finds out...

**Total Pages (Source):** 86

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 5:25 am*

1

SOFIA

I run my fingers through my son's dark chocolate hair before I bend his head back for a small kiss between his brows. "You, mister, are a mess."

He grins, small square teeth smeared with the green sauce I'd put over his eggs and toast. This child... his craving for complex flavors flabbergasts me. Not that I don't like good food, but I don't have the taste buds he does.

Who knew you could have a four-year-old food snob? I didn't. I mean, I do now because he's mine. But I never would have guessed when he was an infant.

"You done? Or are you finishing up the rest of those eggs? We've got to get moving. Remember, Mommy has school today."

"I eat it." Noah tucks in to the last few bites as I pack his favorite snack and mini tablet into his backpack. He brings me his plate, and we wash his hands and face before I tell him to go get dressed. He's pretty good about doing it on his own.

It lets me finish cleaning the kitchen and double-check my bag for the day. I triple-check that I have my thumb drive with my project proposal.

Gathering Noah up, it's only a few-minute drive to Mom and Dad's house, although Mom isn't home. She's got a serious tour of Spain, Portugal, and France this semester to push her new poetry book and do a mini mentoring session for her university

contacts.

I'm super proud of her, but she's always busy. It means Dad and I are often left together for long stretches. I don't mind. Dad is awesome. He's a great grandfather and a better babysitter.

He's bent with his arms open when he answers the door, and Noah dives into them. "I thought that since today is a special day, we would order from that new Greek place. The one with the stuffed grape leaves."

"Ooh." Noah hugs my dad's neck with a grin. And I know my father will be filling him up with new things, talking about the ethics of buying food like this from the people whose ancestors made it.

I reach in to pinch his smiling chipmunk cheeks. "Save me one to try. If you can."

Dad nods me inside. "Got a new coffee blend. I can make you a cup if you have a minute."

"Sure. Thanks, Dad."

His knowing smile lights up his blue eyes. "You meet Trevino this morning for your thesis approval, don't you?"

I suck in a deep, shaky breath. I'm anxious because I just want to get started on it. I'm already wearing my camera glasses. "Yes."

"I know you've had those on all summer, but I'm still not used to seeing you in glasses." He sets Noah in a seat at the kitchen island and puts a bowl of cut up fruit in front of him.

I laugh. That will keep him occupied for a while.

Dad starts his fancy coffee machine—something I have absolutely no idea how to use—and I pull the milk from the fridge to bring to him.

“I did take last week off. You acclimatized back.”

His shoulder knocks into mine gently. “You’re probably right.”

Dad taps and stirs a few other things and the rich scent of coffee fills the air. “Hey, honey. You free to take on a babysitting job for a friend this semester?”

“Which friend?” Dad’s too well-connected across campus for me to just say yes to that. Especially since the last time he asked, it was for Dr. Squires, and I didn’t get along with that little girl. I really tried.

But she is just like her mother, who for some reason always seems to feel like we’re competing for something.

“Braxton. You’ve seen his little girl a few times. Birdie.”

“Quiet. Liked to color.”

“Yeah. That’s her. She’s eleven now.”

“Dear God. I’m feeling old, Dad.”

“Imagine how I feel.” Dad winks at me. “He’s got a regular sitter, but he needs someone for overnights. You can bring Noah along.”

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 5:25 am*

“Okay. Sure. Tell him to text me.”

Dad laughs again, handing me a small mug. “I will. Thank you, honey.”

The first sip is a lot. “This is going to keep me up when I hit that midday lull, isn’t it?”

“It might.” He lifts his own cup to his mouth, and we bask in the sunshine coming through the window above the sink. Noah munches on his fruit and taps at his pad, and it’s a nice break before talking to my advisor.

If I leave now, I’d be far, far too early to show up at Professor Trevino’s office for our nine a.m. meeting. I begged him for the earliest meeting he would give me so that I could stop stressing about the what-ifs and start stressing about the minutiae of details that I’ve been setting up.

It’s my first appointment of the day before I run the Film Club and attend a later class. I would never be able to concentrate with this decision looming over my head. You know, too anxious to wait and too excited to get started on it.

I’m sipping the dregs of my coffee when either the caffeine or the anxiety has me fidgeting.

“Time to go,” Dad says. He really knows me too well. I wouldn’t have it any other way.

I rinse my cup out and wrap my arms around him for the best reassuring hug. His

arms squeeze me tight, rocking me for a few seconds as he plants a kiss on my temple and pats my back.

“He’ll approve it. You won’t allow for anything else.”

“Damn straight.” I slide around the counter to plant my own kiss on my own progeny and head over to campus. It’s usually a five-minute drive, but first-day traffic makes it more like ten. And parking takes another ten.

Still, I’m leaned against the wall beside Professor Trevino’s door with twenty minutes to spare. He arrives five minutes into my wait, the stark black suit jacket tight across his shoulders, a tie close to his throat over a crisp white shirt. How is he wearing all of that in the late August heat? My romper is barely keeping me cool.

The moment his Mediterranean eyes lift, they lock on mine.

I’m flashed back to being in his class freshman year and the fantasies I used to disappear into during lectures. More than just me had a major crush on him back then. I’m sure the same is still true. But beyond the shadowy good looks, his stern countenance is also rather sexy.

As much as I hear other students—still—complaining about how tough he can be, I’ve always loved his brutal honesty on my work. It’s why I asked him to be my thesis advisor. I was surprised he said yes... until we started talking about the project. Most of it has been over email.

“You’re early.” His voice is low and gruff, and I have to suppress the chill it gives me.

“I can’t help it. I’m excited.”

I savor his soft laugh as he shakes his head and opens the door. He steps into his office, but I don't move. I don't want to squelch any first thing in the morning office routines he may have. Professors have some weird quirks, so it's best to wait and be patient.

"Well, are you coming?" Does he sound amused? How odd.

Grinning, I slip into his office and sit when he gestures to one of the two sleek chairs opposite his dark wood desk. Like his clothes, everything is in stark black and white with pops of gold. It fits him well and shows off a bit of his prestige.

He lingers by a hook beside his desk, removing his jacket before he sits across from me. God, that shirt is not hiding any of the shapely muscles across his shoulders.

Get it together, Soph!

It's a good thing the glasses can't show exactly what I'm looking at because hoo, boy, would I be in trouble. Also good that it can't read my thoughts. That's where the heavy hand of editing comes in.

I'm propped at the edge of my seat, waiting for the cue to get into it. And when he waves his hand at me, I launch my spiel.

"As you know, the project I'm proposing is a POV, slice of life documentary. I'll be recording myself nearly twenty-four, seven from my point of view, plus I'll be taking secondary B-roll of me in action or the space, etcetera, to fill in the gaps."

Professor Trevino's hands steeple in front of him, slowly tapping against his wide, supple mouth. Girl, quit ogling your mentor! Back to the project.

"Mostly, I want to present something that is authentic and very me. I don't want to

shy away from things that are too personal, although editing them in a way that is true to me without being obscene is my goal.” I pull the thumb stick I prepared from my bag and offer it to him. “I made a sample to show you. I thought it would be better than explaining.”

Slowly, he takes the proffered drive from my outstretched hand and taps it gently on the black desk pad in front of him. The silence stretches as he analyzes me with his gaze. It’s a classic tactic of his. Silence.

I know better than to babble my way through it. Heh. Been there, done that. Got the monogrammed keychain.

He takes the cap off and pauses again, his stern gaze making me sit a little straighter before he lands his first blow. “How are you going to make this different from what everyone else is doing?”

2

CEDRIC

Sofia's proposal is interesting, but she's riding a fine line between content creation and art. I don't particularly care which route she prefers to take. That depends on what she wants after this, but she needs to think it through before she starts making big moves in filming this.

Usually, my question would drop someone's shoulders, turn their gaze down and away from scrutiny, have them fidgeting or fumbling with an answer, but Sofia sits tall, a small smile on her mouth.

The challenge has perked her up, and I find that I enjoy this response. She's nearly preening under my scrutiny. No one ever preens. Flourish, yes, if pressed right. But they never bloom quite this way.

It was evident when she was in my classroom freshman year. When she didn't turn into one of those giggling flirts who were easily intimidated or infatuated, I enjoyed speaking with her about films, editing techniques, and story arcs.

Her unwavering sense of self and confidence in her vision are what had me signing on as her thesis advisor to begin with.

The emails we exchanged solidified how well she'll take my mentoring over the next year.

“Watch the concept video. It’ll answer more of your questions than I can through explanations.” There’s no testiness to her voice, but it does offer up a bit of amusement.

After another few silent seconds, I tap my finger against the thumb drive before I lean back and slide it into the USB slot on my computer.

Again, Sofia is calm as she waits for me to pull the video up—the only file on the drive—and play it.

It opens with a smiling Sofia in the sun, greenery and a brick façade at her back. Soft giggling wafts into the mic from behind the camera. Her blue eyes are lit up, shining from within as she laughs.

“It’s officially summer,” she says to the camera. “And my son has turned into a little goblin.”

Her voice rises enough so that her son can obviously hear her. The view slices away from her face, spanning a long, narrow back yard where a little dark-haired boy is hopping through the grass after a bug.

The video cuts through small moments—her son crying when he got stung by a bee, the bedtime ritual and his big eyes fighting the pull of sleep, her hand brushing across his forehead as she bends to kiss his forehead.

B-roll fills in some of the spaces between, the slight sway of a swing settling, her loading up the dishwasher, folding clothes, cooking, watching a movie with her father. An irritated look from her mother, playing, her job packing up a monthly subscription box.

She faces the camera directly only a few times to decompress on whatever issues we

see that need fuller context, like a date she goes on with a young, red-headed male who smiles at her a bit too much.

It's captivating in a way I haven't seen before. She's authentic, selling herself as a person and a product through her genuineness.

She leans in almost conspiratorially to the camera, eyes twinkling with mischief. "Let me bring you in on a little secret. Men, women, etcetera, life is too short for a bad romp in bed. Too short. I don't understand why so many settle for boring sex. Ain't happening in this girl's bed. Not if I can help it."

There's a flash of a kiss. A hand on a wide chest. The frown on the red-head's mouth before the door closes in finality.

"If you can't get on the same page during a kiss, if there's no spark, you're not going to build it in bed. All of that needs to come beforehand. Anticipation. Intimacy. Trust. You know what I mean?" Her laughter is soft and delightful.

It feels like I'm sitting with her. That I'm her confidant. Her friend. I'm struggling to keep the smile off my face.

I sit back and cover my mouth at the quick nature of the storyline she creates. I get the impression of long, warm, sunny days and dark, starry nights. Campfires and toasted marshmallows. Restaurants and a variety of new foods. Her son happily munching across from her.

The familial love is also highly evident in their frequency and the light they're shown in.

Things I learn about Sofia in these packed five minutes are numerous.

She has movie nights with her dad and son.

They try a lot of new food because her son is interested in it. There are repeated flashes of him picking up things in the grocery store to smell and ask questions about. He likes to taste things he's not supposed to.

Her mother is very affectionate, passionate.

Sofia likes to read tawdry romance novels and watch rom-coms. Her belief in love comes through clearly.

She also likes to date, but it doesn't seem as though any of the men and women she's gone out with have made it past her front door.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 5:25 am*

The women's empowerment box she curates and creates content for strikes at a core belief. Her pride shines through, and so much of what she shows reinforces those ideals.

When she stands in front of the mirror and looks at herself, hair a tangled mess on top of her head, face blotchy and red, eyes puffy from crying, and a T-shirt hanging off her, Sofia leans in a little and says, "Fuck. Why does day two always hurt like hell? Treating myself to some dark chocolate and a sad movie." Her peace sign is half-hearted, and her grimace is too real.

I have to hide my silent laugh behind my hand. Most women I've been around who have been comfortable enough to talk about it—which consists of only my sister—it's always been in snarls and sarcasm.

It's followed by movies and chocolate. A bubble bath with ruby painted toes peeking out of the soapy water. A glass of wine.

Her summer is glossed in golden perfection, bland but beautiful boredom, and the realities of being a single mom.

It's the perfect short video to make a viewer fall in love with her a little bit.

When she blows a kiss at the camera and waves goodbye, I sit and stare at her smiling on the screen for a minute, contemplating the way she put this together. Her intention. Where she might go with it given the longer format of her project.

Most of it comes back to the fact that I want to see more.

I turn to Sofia in the flesh. She peers at me with those soft blue eyes, blinking innocently at me. She knows she's done a good job.

Nodding at her, I fold my hands in front of my chin, seeing if she'll crack.

Sofia maintains my eye contact without fear. How many people have you had to stare down to make them take you seriously?

"I see you've thought this through."

She grins and brightens. "Of course I did."

I enjoy that reaction in her. When it's aimed at me. Like it deepens the connection she's worked to forge during the video. Such an excellent job she's done. I bet she'll go far with this.

"Are you wearing the camera right now?"

"Mmm-hmm." She nods, taps her glasses, and looks at me meaningfully.

I lean back, taking her in. The woman before me has grown into herself since she was in my class nearly three years ago. I can see her working her way up to producing movies shortly after her graduation.

I can only laugh. "Okay. Approved."

I motion the paper forward to sign, and she hands it over easily, has it ready for me. Cheeky little thing.

Scribbling my signature across the bottom, I hold it out for her as we both stand. "Good job."

Sofia's smile is near blinding. And the jumper she has on is professional even as it shows off her long, curvy thighs, her bare arms, the smooth white skin below her collarbones.

It's tantalizing.

With a swish of her hair, she pulls her bag over her shoulder. "I won't take up any more of your time. Unless there's anything else you need from me."

The slow blink this time is not so innocent.

I should be shaking my head at her. Instead, I simply let the blast of heat settle over me and promise myself to tackle those feelings later.

3

SOFIA

Sofia Newman, you should not be flirting with your thesis advisor. I chastise myself several times on my way to the conference room to set up for the first Film Club meeting of the semester. It should be a super easy meeting.

I never flirted with him when Professor Trevino was teaching my freshman class. The excitement must have pushed me over that edge, but the way he pursed his mouth at me after my video ended...

The silence he let me stew in before he gave me his approval stirred something in me that I should really, really avoid.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 5:25 am*

A little flirting is harmless fun. As long as I don't let myself dig that hole too deep. And Isocould.

Sighing, I settle myself into my seat and pull up my project plans, filling in some story boards with ideas on how to develop different aspects of my life for the documentary. I want to push myself. To try new things. To empower myself.

I help so many women with the female empowerment box I curate and market online. It's a lot of fun, and I get to showcase how useful taking care of myself as a single mom in college can be.

But I don't know if I've ever empowered myself in the same way I push others to do so.

The decision as a whole is easy, but deciding how to step outside my comfort zone is a little more daunting than I want to admit. Still, once I get a few items on my list, my mind floods with possibilities.

It's the opposite problem. Too many ideas to whittle down. But it will have to wait until later.

Collin, a junior and future production designer, leans his carrot top into the conference room and smiles widely. "Hey, Soph. We're still on for noon, right?"

"Yes, sir, we are. You planning to take part in the club film this semester?"

His caramel eyes light up. "You bet I am. I'll be back after I nab some lunch."

I wave him off and get a few more of our old club members popping in as I set my cameras up in the corners. I'm getting two external shots since I can easily prop my tripods out of the way.

In the department's little kitchenette—meant for the professors, but they let me brew some coffee for meetings—I make a big pot and put out the mini muffins I nabbed at the store this weekend for a little treat.

As I wait for members to arrive, I contemplate my meeting this morning. Watching the dawning on Professor Trevino's face—lighting up those Mediterranean eyes—when I showed him the short video made my day. He gets it. He has to.

I swear a few times I saw him hide a laugh and a smile. I've only seen it once before when I showed him one of my favorite banned ads at the end of my class with him four years ago. My goal is to get a real laugh out of him by the end of this. Maybe even a tear.

Even though most of it will be me filming my everyday life.

Pride floats me into the preliminary meeting. A group gathers with their lunches and chatter builds as we wait for noon. I'm punctual. I start the second the clock changes to noon.

Thirteen students have shown up, at least eight of them returning from last year.

“Okay, everyone. I'd love it if we could start. We have three things to agree upon today, so let's save the stories about our summers and our new projects for after the meeting's notes. Okay?” I get a slew of nods in response.

Good.

“Excellent. First up is the movie for this month’s viewing. Remember that we will be staying after to discuss some of the elements—story, casting and characters, effects and editing, and composition. What are we thinking?” I spread my palms up to hand off the question to them.

Genres are thrown out there. Horror. Sci-Fi. Noir.

“I’m hearing more votes for Sci-Fi than anything else. Let’s steer that way. Sci-Fi recs?”

“2001: A Space Odyssey?” a new member offers.

I smile softly and tilt my head apologetically. “We watched that last year. Sorry.”

“The Martian,” Michelle says. She’s a senior, too, and I’m looking forward to her sharing after the meeting about the script she mentioned earlier.

I point. “That’s an option. Any others?”

“Interstellar.Story is crazy, but they do a lot of cool stuff with the science and philosophy of it all,” Collin says. “I’ve been dying to talk to people about this one, and no one has seen it.”

Michelle crosses her arms and shakes her short, glossy black curls off her shoulders. “Mine was a book first. The transition of book to movie would make for a great conversation.”

Collin pops up straighter and grins. “Mine’s based on a non-fiction book about the actual science behind what happens in the movie, so we can still have that conversation—only it’ll be weirder.”

Michelle laughs. “Okay. I concede.”

“Any objections?” I ask, badly suppressing my own smile at Collin’s shenanigans.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 5:25 am*

Nos murmur around the room, so I nod and mark it down. Easy.

“Let’s move on to item two. We need to start thinking about the concept/theme for this semester’s Club Short Film. Remember that we want to limit this to twenty minutes of play time with a complete story—or a complete arc.”

Cindy, a slight young woman with almond-shaped eyes, leans in. She’s a sophomore from last year’s members, too. “Michelle was talking about a short script she’s been working on. Maybe we can workshop it to see if it’s a good fit?”

Michelle winks at Cindy for the assist.

“We can definitely consider that. Any other suggestions?”

A lot of shaking heads.

“Can we hear more about it before we decide?” a new girl asks.

“Yes. Absolutely. Michelle, can you bring us your pitch and some pages for the next meeting so we can review it?”

“Heck yeah. And just so you know, it’s an ultra-modern Shakespeare retelling of King Lear.” Michelle’s delicate hands spread across the conference table’s top. The move is adorable.

“Consider our interest piqued. Okay, let’s table this until next week. Think over what you all might want to bring in for this project.”

A newcomer leans against the entryway, golden curls, a soft pattern of freckles, high cheekbones and a defined jaw. Clear blue eyes shift to take me in when I notice him. How long has he been hovering there?

“Do you want to come in and join us?” I ask.

Some of the girls perk up at the sight of him, smiling and blushing. I resist rolling my eyes but only just.

“No. I’m good where I am.” He sticks his hands in his pockets, accentuating his lean waist and broad shoulders. The man doesn’t quite smile, but his eyes glitter.

This irks me, but I pull in a slow, soft breath and release it.

“Last item on our list for today is the trip to New York City. We’ve got a few conventions coming, some new independent films expected to have screenings. What are you guys thinking?” My pen twirls as I wait.

I could easily bowl everyone over and just make the decision, but I want them all to be as happy as I am about what we do.

“Isn’t there a screening of Lancaster’s new B-rated horror supposed to come out this year?” Donna, a sweet redhead who came in with Cindy, offers.

Lancaster graduated last year, but he was an awesome VP for the club before he left.

“No, they postponed it until next semester. We can totally plan to go see it then, though.”

I wait to see if anyone else has a suggestion.

“Okay, I’ll bring you all a list of options next time. Feel free to share any of your own with me before or during the next meeting.”

The golden guy stares at me, arms crossed and filling out his shirt a bit more than before.

Ignoring him, I look around. “Any other business?”

“Can we have those cookies next week?” Ryan asks from behind his shaggy bangs.

I grin. It’s the recipe Noah insisted on trying, which meant a lot of testers to go around. “Yes. We can have the cookies next week.”

He smiles a little, and I look around one more time. “Okay. Share time.”

We go around the room and share our summer highlights and the projects we’re working on. Michelle grabs my hand. “You ready for this?”

I laugh, nodding. “Lay it on me.”

“Think Blade Runner meets Elysium. Gritty futuristic with only a few bells and whistles needed for post production.” Michelle’s eyes are bright as she flashes a grin at everyone. “Realistic AI, lots of treachery, backstabbing, and death. And I mean—spoiler—everyone important dies at the end.”

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 5:25 am*

It sounds so good.

“It’ll be interesting to see how you condense the characters and set up the world within the allotted time frame,” the golden guy says, a small smile curving his mouth. It almost seems as if he’s teasing. I cannot take him seriously.

“That’s why it’s aretelling.” Michelle nearly giggles. Oh, please no. Be smarter than this, Michelle.

I squeeze her hand, and she gives me a come on, he’s cute look.

Shaking my head, I push everyone along. Some of the newcomers are a bit braggy, but that comes with being new, huh? Young, wanting to impress.

Everyone packs up to leave, and I wait them out, knowing I will need to clean up before I leave. They’re slow going. All of the girls want to stop and flirt with the golden guy, and all of the guys want to give him a warm welcome.

Once everyone’s gone, this guy is still hovering, watching me collect muffin wrappers.

“Who are you?” I ask, and it seems to jolt him from his confident swagger. Apparently, my lack of fawning and eyelash fluttering has disarmed him.

Even so, his clear blue eyes are sparkling at me. “Orion Knight. And you’re Sofia Newman, Film Club President.”

I sigh, popping a hand on my hip. “That I am.”

He holds out his hand. “I’m your new faculty sponsor.”

I take his hand hesitantly, and when he lingers over the touch, I ignore the heat from his grip and pull mine back, shooting him a look. “Well, Professor Knight, as you can see, I’ve got this handled.”

He almost glows with acceptance of my unspoken challenge. “Afraid you won’t be getting rid of me that easily.”

4

BRAXTON

I’m just finishing breakfast with my daughter when my phone rings. Charles. It’s an easy answer.

“Hello, my friend. What can I do for you this morning?” My voice grumbles against the crumbs from my toast.

Charles laughs. “More, what I can do for you this morning, Brax. My daughter’s available as a potential babysitter. I know you’re struggling to find one for that conference in Boston you have next month.”

I lean back in my chair and smile, sipping my orange juice and sharing a pleased look with my daughter. She smiles brightly as she chews.

“If it’s your suggestion, I’d better take it. Who have you got lined up for me?”

“My daughter, Sofia, of course. She’ll need to bring Noah, but he’s so well-behaved.”

He sounds as adoring as ever. An only child and only grandchild bring the sentimentality out of the man.

“You sure she’s got the time? I thought you said she was just starting her senior year.”

“She is, and she already said she’ll take the job. I’ll send you her number. She wants you to text her.”

I laugh at the incredulity in his voice, knowing how much he hates to text. “That’s fine. My daughter is eleven. I’m used to it.”

Birdie sticks her tongue out at me, but she’s smiling and clearing her plate in her next breath.

“Dish in the washer, then go brush your teeth.”

Now, my daughter rolls her eyes at me. “I know, Dad.”

I grin into the phone. “Thanks, Charles.”

“You got it. Like to be helpful when I can. Call on me this weekend for a drink.”

“Will do.” I set the phone down and finish my meal and my morning routine, which ends in dropping my baby girl off at school. She’s been struggling with her classmates, feeling alone, and I wish I could do something to help her with it.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 5:25 am*

Birdie waves and trots into class with her canvas portfolio awkwardly balanced under her arm. I watch her until the doors close her up then make my way to the faculty parking lot outside the Fine Arts building.

In my office, I send Sofia a quick text.

This is Braxton, your father's friend. I'd like you to meet my daughter before hiring you to watch her. When are you free?

I read it over, decide I sound like the old man I am, and send it. I'm done trying to fit in with the twenty-somethings I teach. There's no keeping up with their ever-evolving language and culture.

Yeah, I totally get that. My evenings are pretty open.

Rubbing the stubble on my chin, I take a chance and ask her if she's available for dinner tonight. It's short notice, but I'd rather know sooner rather than later if I have to keep looking.

Sure, my last class lets out at five. Is that a good time?

It's perfect.

I send her my address and dive into the syllabi of my two classes today, Design 101 and Color Theory.

The first day runs smoothly. Freshman classes are pretty basic to start off with, and

Color Theory brings me a nice mix of more serious artists. I always enjoy watching their styles develop throughout the semester.

I stop at the grocery store on the way to pick up Birdie. She's quiet on the ride home, and that deep worry about her and the things I can't protect her from flares up when I usher her inside. She goes to hide in her room.

I mean, I get it. She's a pre-teen. I'm not her friend. I'm her dad. But that doesn't take the heartache away when she's upset and I can't do anything about it.

Sighing, I get to work on dinner, something easy that I know tastes good. I wouldn't want her running off because the food is bad. A rich, thick beef stew should do the trick. I don't have to overthink it.

It makes me glad I didn't pick a more complicated meal when she arrives early. Takes after her father, that one. Fifteen minutes early or you're late.

"Hey." I offer her my warmest smile when I answer the door.

Big blue eyes meet mine from behind her thick glasses. The striped navy-blue romper is embroidered with silver thread, creating delicate leaves and roses that make her creamy skin a bit pinker. And she has a lot of it on display.

"Hey." Her voice is light and friendly.

I look to the floor and step back, waving her inside. "Dinner's about done. Let me call Birdie down."

Sofia steps in past me, and I get a whiff of a sweet perfume she must have put on this morning. It's subtle, faded from the hours, but it brings me back to a time before I had so many responsibilities.

Before I got married, had a kid, and my wife abandoned us. A simpler time.

Shaking myself free of the nostalgia, I close the door and call Birdie down. I'm surprised to see more curiosity than disdain when she encounters Sofia standing there. And the smile Sofia lays on her is clear, open, and bright.

"Hey. You must be Birdie." Sofia extends her hand. "I'm Sofia."

Birdie shakes her hand, and I dip back into the kitchen.

"Oh, my gosh, are you a painter?"

That pings my radar, leaning me over the counter in wonder at how she could know that.

"How did you know?" My daughter's voice is soft with awe.

Sofia laughs. It's quiet and intimate. "The blue smudge by your elbow. It's not cracking, so it must be a premium paint. That means you take it seriously."

"I do."

"Take after your dad, huh?" She bends down like she's going to confide in her, blonde hair falling over her shoulder. "Me, too. Only my dad likes ethics and morality. You know what that is?"

"Like rules?"

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 5:25 am*

“Oh, yeah, rules. It meant I didn’t have many, but the ones I had were serious.” Sofia takes my daughter’s hand and leads her to the kitchen table in the breakfast nook, sharing a knowing look with me.

Yes, show off. You’re off to a good start. I bite back my smile, but she sees it and winks.

“Your dad said dinner will be ready soon, but afterward, would you show me what you’re working on?” She sits beside Birdie at the square table, the sun peeking through the curtains highlighting her hair with gold.

She’s a much more mature version of my former student—a fresh-faced freshman and newly-minted mom. This Sofia is a grown woman. An obviously good mom with the way she interacts with Birdie. I’m already convinced she’ll be great for Birdie in a lot of the ways I can’t be.

I turn to the pot of stew, distracting myself from the path those thoughts want to lead.

Once we each have our meal and are settled in, I simply sit back and observe. They’ve maintained a steady flow of conversation, and Birdie keeps making her excited face.

I try not to simply stare at Sofia, and I know I’m failing when she sends me a squinty smile. I lift my brows at her, impressed.

Sofia taps Birdie’s bowl. “Finish that so you can show me your room.”

She does as she's told, her dark hair falling in her face. I reach over and tuck it behind her ear. Normally, Birdie would bat my hand away. She doesn't.

Sofia turns to me. "I've been trying to up my game with product design. I work for a subscription box service, and every element needs to have a purpose and do its job. It's a lot, but it's so much fun to piece it all together. I thought you might appreciate the process."

She flips open her phone and swivels it toward me. "Sorry for phones at dinner, but it's not something a lot of my classmates really get."

I pull her phone closer and peer at the product photos she's pulled up.

The composition is appealing, an open pink and cream box with a furry white fabric draped around it. Brightly-colored beauty products are placed carefully inside the box, propped upright by pink crinkle paper. Each item seems to work together, even if I have no idea what some of them are.

I flick my eyes up to catch her gaze. Her shoulders pull back as she smirks at me. "What do you think? Did I miss anything?"

Shaking my head, I can't see anything. The only way I could think to sell them better doesn't apply to this kind of photoshoot. "Do you have any photos of the items being used?"

"Not photos, just short videos, but I suppose still images can be pulled from those."

"They can, but it would be better to control the background, the lighting, the general composition in a traditional shoot instead."

Sofia taps her lips with her fingertip. "You're probably right. Hmm. Another thing for

my to-do list.”

I can’t help my laugh. “The single parent to-do list is never-ending.”

“Boy, you’ve got that right.”

“It would be interesting to see how a subscription box would perform differently with traditional marketing photography versus short-form video versus simply showcasing your use of what’s included in long-form content. I assume you create that as well?” I spear a soft piece of meat and let it melt across my tongue as I give her the time to answer.

“I do, but not like most of what you see on social media. My long form is currently focused on my thesis project.” Her head tips to the side, blonde hair falling away from the way her neck elongates. “I do actually use some of that stuff regularly, and I could pull from my backlog of raw footage. It’s a bit more like product placement in that regard.”

“Yes. Don’t call intense attention to the item, just show it in use during something people already want to see. The subconscious does wonders with it.” I bite back my smile as my daughter groans into her bowl. “You can have control of the conversation back once you’re done with your dinner.”

Another spoonful fills her mouth, and Birdie chews meaningfully at me.

I bop her on the nose. “Precisely.”

“Don’t you think we become immune to it eventually? Every part of our lives is saturated with products and advertising.” She takes another bite, an orange carrot slipping past her lips in a way that makes me pause.

Okay, the image of her sliding other things into her mouth is not appropriate, Braxton. You are old enough to be her father. She's your best friend's daughter, for Christ's sake.

Pressing my mouth into a firm line, I nod. "Yes. You're right."

I cringe at the gravel breaking in my voice. Her brow raises.

"We do become immune. Consider it the final hit in a combo. You see the usual ads, you hear about what it does, you recognize it, and then comes someone you're watching in either a fantasy or living the kind of life you want, and you see the product again. Then, bam, you either realize how badly you want it or your restraint is broken by an impulse. And they've got you."

*Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 5:25 am*

Her head falls back, and laughter pours from her. She's so unadulterated in her joy that I can scarcely breathe. When she wipes her eyes and meets my gaze, her smile is soft and delicious. "Well, you're certainly right about that."

She winks at Birdie. "I've fallen prey to that more times than I want to admit."

My daughter's smile is huge on her face. She's almost finished with her dinner, so I peg Sofia with one more question. "What's your thesis project about?"

Sofia wiggles in her seat, straightening again. "It's a point of view documentary of my life during my senior year. A mix of artistic flair in the editing to make something not quite content and not quite serious. The perfect blend of me."

"Who's your advisor?"

"Professor Trevino."

My brows go up. I know him, of course. Many of our students and studies cross over, but he rarely takes on students for this kind of thing. Most of them are too scared of him to ask.

"I see you know him." Her amusement crinkles her features, and she turns to Birdie to explain. "He's a bit of a hard ass. But I like the pressure. It's how I thrive."

"You must have made one hell of a proposal for him to get onboard."

"I did." I swear that twinkle in her eyes is meant to tease and test me. "He and I talk

about advertisements at the end of most of our meetings. It's his geek button."

And I bet she knows just how to push it.

Birdie stands from her spot, bowl empty. "Can I show Sofia my room now?"

"You may."

Birdie turns to Sofia with the question in her eyes. Sofia holds her finger up, takes the last bite of her stew, and gathers their bowls to rinse in the sink before she lets Birdie lead her upstairs.

I clean the rest of the mess from dinner as their giggles waft down to me.

It has me closing my eyes and letting the slight pleasure take over. Two years I've been struggling to be both dad and mom to Birdie after her mom ran off. And here Sofia is, sweet, smart, strong, sure of herself. The kind of mom I wish Birdie had.

The kind of woman I miss having in my life.

I sigh, pulling myself back out of my fantasies. They're not something I can dwell in without corrupting the reality of this situation. Sofia is the perfect sitter for Birdie.

Exactly what she needs.

What we need.

It's nearly three-quarters of an hour before Sofia descends the stairs. The pride is evident on her face when she turns to where I'm leaning against the counter by the sink, still stuck in place even though everything's put away and clean.

Too many thoughts have rampaged through me to have gotten me far.

“She is brilliant.”

“I agree.” Now that I’m looking at Sofia, it’s hard to tear my gaze away again. She practically glows. Vibrant.

“You’ve done a good job with her.” The best compliment a parent can receive.

“I can’t take credit. She’s a good kid.”

The silence between us isn’t awkward, but tension trails down my spine as those thoughts I’ve been forcing away start to creep back. The way she bites her pouty lower lip doesn’t help.

I clear my throat. “Did you need a ride home?”

“No. That’s okay. Dad will be here in the next ten minutes.”

That’s right. Her dad. Your best friend. You fucking pig.

*Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 5:25 am*

“I’ll just help Birdie clean up before I go.”

Knowingly, I grab a roll of paper towels and a bag and offer them to her.

Her hands are soft and warm as she takes them from me. “Thanks.”

I’m able to keep from ogling those long legs as she climbs the stairs again, thankful that merely staying in place keeps me from it. I’d be a goner otherwise.

God, it’s been too long.

Two pairs of feet thunder down the stairs, and Birdie gives Sofia a big hug before the headlights from Charles arriving flash into the front windows.

“I’ll see you both again soon, alright?”

I open the door for Sofia, offering her my hand to shake on her way out, even though I could use a hug just as badly. “Thank you, Sofia.”

Her smile is big and genuine. “Any time. And I mean that.”

When she walks out the door and bounces down the steps, a pang hits me like the one I had when my wife did the same thing two years ago.

Birdie is such a special young lady. It's obvious that she's lonely, even with as wonderful as she is. It makes me wonder why.

Whatever it is, it's ramped up her creativity. That girl is brilliant. Lots of time to practice can shape talent into something fierce. Her paintings are stunning. The texture she constructs with the paint creates dimension in an innovative way. I'd hang her work up in my townhouse in a heartbeat.

Connecting with Birdie lights a fire under my ass. I want to imbue more creativity into my own project. Beyond simply trying new things and catching my progress, morphing my approach to the empowerment box, I want to allow myself room to tap into as much creativity and fun as I can.

I want to remind myself of what it was like to freely create without worrying about how my boss, my sponsors, or my teachers will react to it. No grades. No paycheck. Just unadulterated fun.

My list of possible outings and events for my project floods me, and it takes me less than ten minutes to compile a long, long list with potential.

I find myself sinking into the naughty thoughts that plagued me last night. I forgot how big Braxton is, a mountain of a man who didn't seem so intimidating in front of a classroom—most teachers seem larger than life when they're up front.

But at his house, with him in those fitted slacks and tight button-up shirt. How he'd rolled up the sleeves to reveal his beefy forearms. The way the thin fabric stretched across his shoulders and chest and biceps...

I'd never separated him from the teacher, from the friendship he has with my dad. But taking him out of context, without something else as a buffer... God, that man has some serious sex appeal.

Shaking myself out, I tell myself it's just my hormones. I'm on day twelve of my cycle, so no man is safe from the daydreams.

It's just unfortunate that Braxton plagued my fitful dreams last night. Nothing like making my life awkward for no reason.

Getting myself back on track, I set up my external cameras, two of them, around my table in the corner of my favorite coffee shop on campus. I'm working hard to both make this authentic and not disturb anyone.

Creativity will have to wait because I have some serious research to do for our trip to the city for Film Club.

Twenty minutes into my rabbit hole, I've come up with a few possibilities that might interest the group as a whole. A shadow crosses over me before the clink of a teacup and saucer on my table breaks my focus.

Golden curls, freckles, and a suave smile greet me as the club's faculty sponsor sits in the seat across from me. I haven't left much of the table uncovered, but he seems to have procured himself a corner for his own mug of coffee.

I narrow my eyes at him as he settles himself back in his seat. It's aggravating just how good-looking this man is. And what's worse, he knows it.

"This is quite the setup you have."

I frown and look down at the tea he put beside me. It smells sweet and floral. A bit of milk has turned it pale. I take a tentative sip and add a packet of honey from the table.

Professor Knight grins at me. It's all in his eyes, but it's still a damn grin.

## Page 12

*Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 5:25 am*

“It’s for my senior thesis project.”

Now, he’s smirking. Just begging for a swift slap across his mouth.

“Were you aiming for a cameo?” I take another sip of the tea and begrudgingly appreciate the fact that he chose one of my favorites from this place. Bet Martha helped him with that at the counter. I am a regular, after all.

“As much as my pretty face might brighten up your documentary, that’s not why I’m here.” He looks me over, once again taking in the mess I’ve got spread across the table between us.

“Why are you here, then?” I lean back in my chair, putting more space between us. I don’t like how many people are watching this interaction, even if my cameras garner us more attention than we would attract otherwise.

“I thought you might need help with Film Club business before I get bogged down with grading assignments. You know, Freshman classes and all of that introductory busy work.” He waves a hand in the air like I know exactly what he means.

I do, don’t get me wrong, but how would he know that? God, has he met my dad? Not exactly the most well-known professor on campus, but he does have a reputation.

“And how do you think you can help?”

Professor Knight shrugs, lounging nonchalantly. “I’ve got a few connections in the city. Let me know what you’re working on.”

I don't know if I want this man's help. He doesn't seem serious, so how can I expect him to actually help me instead of wasting my time?

Reluctantly, I show him my list—three film premieres, the NY Film Festival in late September/early October, some table readings, and some talks and workshops given by industry leaders. It's all relatively simple. The usual.

When he's done reading through it, his clear blue eyes lift to meet my gaze. His full grin floods me with trepidation. Especially when he holds up a finger and pulls his phone out.

The phone call he makes has me rolling my eyes, and I go back to digging through the internet for other attractions to fill out the list. We can vote on them during our next meeting.

Professor Knight's voice becomes a low murmuring to the background of my thoughts. We can probably try something adventurous this year with the group of students we have. Last year, we got a bit rambunctious. Lancaster was a wild card who made everything fun but also rode that line of breaking all the rules.

Phone lowering from his ear, Professor Knight earns my attention again as he sips his coffee and offers me a smug smirk.

“What?”

His shoulders lift, easy breezy. Teasing me.

I can feel the frown pulling at my face.

“How does a VIP experience on set of the new Dickie Hernandez movie sound?”

## ORION

Sofia's eyes widen, soften, and fill with a small amount of respect. It's an acknowledgement that flows over her features.

I like the change, although she's equally pretty when she's scowling at me. More, it's how she doesn't simply fawn over me like everyone else does. There's nothing flirty about the way she's analyzing my posture, my hands, my face, looking for a lie.

I raise my brow at her scrutiny.

"Just so you know, I am recording this. I will play that back to you if you're fibbing." She taps her glasses and needlessly gestures to the cameras.

Biting back a laugh, I know she can see it by the way her eyes narrow just slightly at me. Like she's trying to be nice in case this is for real.

It is. I know Dickie Hernandez from college.

"I'm not fibbing. My friend is sending me the paperwork as we speak." No need to say that Dickie is my friend. That might push her over the edge of disbelief.

"Forward it to me the moment you get it."

This time, the laugh does break free, and it feels good.

## Page 13

*Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 5:25 am*

Man, I like how in charge she is. How it took her one look at me and she decided I wasn't worth her time.

I want to prove her wrong. The compulsion overrides common sense, like how this is going to bite me in the ass at the end of this. Fuck knows that my past doesn't help. But there's something about prodding Sofia that I cannot resist.

My phone pings with an incoming email after twenty minutes of silence. She doesn't slump a little bit under my gaze. She's used to being watched.

Her thesis project, which she only mentioned in passing at the club meeting, is a self-documentary. Hence the setup and the glasses. I'm not ashamed by the way she's going to review this footage to see me unwavering in my attention.

Fuck, she doesn't break.

Not even at the chime on my phone. I pull up the paperwork and forward it to her without reading it first.

It's the first time she's adjusted in her seat, her foot coming up beneath her as she leans forward to examine the documents. Her bare calf flexes as her toe jiggles.

I break myself away to check the message. It's from Dickie's personal assistant, the usual information with the date and time they can have us in to visit, a list of rules, and a standard NDA. All of the boiler plate paperwork is there, and a quick review doesn't show anything out of the ordinary, so I close it up and catch Sofia with her long thumbnail between her teeth.

She's not chewing on it, maybe to keep herself from grinding her teeth. Maybe it helps her concentrate, although I'm sure she has no problem focusing. She's been freezing me out with her work for nearly a half hour now.

Another ping on my phone shows a text from Dickie. You get the paperwork?

I laugh quietly to myself, earning a glance from Sofia before she dives back into the contracts.

Yeah. Thanks. You just helped me impress a girl.

And helped me keep the win mysterious. Sofia doesn't need to know that I interned for Dickie on one of his films. The one that won him an Independent Spirit Award.

It's a credit that helped me get a job teaching at Berkeley. The same credit saved my career and got me a job here after the scandal should have ruined me.

I do owe you a good wing-manning after how you helped me out.

Nah, it was just my lack of shame that got you and Jenny together.

Jenny obviously liked Dickie and resisted flirting with him because he was the director. It overflowed from her anyway, and I stepped in to easily overly flirt on her behalf. His, too, jokingly saying he should take her out to dinner.

He did.

They were married a year later, and she promised to name her firstborn son after me. Dickie's glad their first kid was a girl.

I expect to hear all about her when you get here.

Fuck, he'll get to meet her.

Sighing, I turn off my phone and resume watching Sofia. Her lip is between her teeth, long fingernails tucking hair behind her ear.

I should probably go now that I've scored my first point, proven myself a little. But I don't want to. I could sit here all day and not waste it looking at her.

Dangerous.

For so many reasons.

There's a soft pink to her cheeks as she reads. Is that because of me? My attention? I have to wonder.

It's stupid to want to cause this kind of reaction in her. She's a student. I might not hold her grade in my hand, but as her faculty sponsor... it's a gray area. I've already crossed a clear line once. I shouldn't dabble in the gray.

But that blush...

Heat stirs inside me.

My hands ache with the want to run them through that hair, watch her gasp as I gather it in my fist...

## Page 14

*Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 5:25 am*

I suck in a slow breath. Touching her isn't an option.

No matter how badly I might want to.

The jingling of the front door bell yanks me out of my stupor. Chatter from other patrons surrounds me in noise, a reminder that other eyes are here to witness our silent standoff. I flex my fingers before I pick up my mug and drain the dregs of my cold coffee, eliminating any realistic reason for me to remain here.

So, I stand, finally gaining Sofia's attention. Her blue eyes are large behind those glasses. I want to dive into them.

"I'll see you at the next meeting. Unless you need help with anything else." My voice is too low and teasing. Rein it in.

A couple of blinks have her leaning back in her chair to properly look at me. "No."

The word is soft.

It draws a smile out of me, which only makes Sofia roll her eyes. "See you later, Professor Knight."

Ow. Wound me. Most of my students already call me Orion. The formality is a good reminder, though.

I back off, avoiding the cameras and making my way out the door. The moment I'm through, one of my 101 students catches me. Literally by the arm.

Turning smoothly out of her grasp, my hands sink into my pockets and I take a step back. This girl already screams trouble. And her giggles rake warnings down my back. Class three days a week and Film Club are already enough time to endure them.

I can't be seen fraternizing with her otherwise.

I already know how these infatuations end.

7

SOFIA

My skin is still tingling even as Professor Knight stands. Why has he been staring at me?

The paperwork looks good. Legit. Legal jargon that I've seen before in the NDAs for clients. Rules for being on set of a bigger picture. Safety releases. Everything they can put down to keep their investment safe.

It makes sense, but I still feel compelled to read it all. I don't want to miss something and get anyone in trouble. The boon of being in charge.

Knight barely reviews it. He must have seen it all before. He appears to know someone from the production to get us on set. Does that mean he has hands-on experience? What job did he do?

He's not hiding how intently he's staring at me, and it keeps me from lifting my gaze for a peek.

It makes my skin warmer, but I force myself to dig through every line of these contracts instead of engaging with him. Still, he sticks around.

When his phone pings, my gaze flicks up to catch the gold in his curls, courtesy of the low sun streaming through the window beside us. You know, great lighting for the cameras.

The small smile on his face makes him look younger. My age. I'm not fooled by whatever play he's making. I know his type.

He can't stand that I'm not falling all over him just like the others. Too many of them. He doesn't need me to add to the competition. Yet, here he is, bugging me.

I'm knee-deep in the paragraphs of legalese by the time his attention returns to me. His gaze sparks a small flame along my flesh.

After a while, he seems to startle out of his reverie, draining the last of his coffee and standing. I finally give him my full attention. The subtle, flirty goodbye isn't lost on me, but the loud, giggling call of his name as he's exiting the café snags my attention one more time.

Ugh, that obnoxious girl from Film Club has her hand on his arm, pulling him to a stop. Poor guy.

Leann stared hard at him all through the meeting, leaned the closest when talking to him, kept finding a reason to touch him. And that offensive giggle, which is echoing through the glass entrance door right now...

I roll my eyes. I know her kind. Snotty and boastful. Oversharing and making herself look good. Used to her pretty, pert ass getting her through things instead of her brains.

Just all around dislikeable.

## Page 15

*Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 5:25 am*

I can't hear what she's saying, but Professor Knight seems to disentangle himself and get away fast. I am not looking forward to dealing with her all year.

Leann enters and orders at the counter before taking a seat nearby. I finally get through the last of the contracts as her squealing giggle fills the café. She's got someone on her videochat, being very loud and public about their compliments to each other.

Glad you found someone to be obnoxious with you, Leann. Gladder it's not me.

I pack up my stuff and head out. The late dinner crowd will be filling the place anyway. Better to not be in their way.

Taking the southern path through campus, I make the trek to my dad's. It's easier than driving and trying to find a spot for my last class of the day. By the time I make it, I'm a little bit sweaty, and they're already prepping for dinner.

I grin at my son as he pops a cherry tomato in his mouth. "Are you sneaking bites, Mister?"

His bubbling laugh is the sweetest sound. I plant a kiss on his head and then one on Dad's cheek on my way to the sink to wash my hands and wipe the sweat from my face. "So, boys, what's on the menu for dinner?"

"Aren't you going to set up a camera and help us?" Dad sets a few orange slices in front of Noah to distract him.

“Only if you’re okay with that.” I do it at home and in public, but I don’t like invading my dad’s house with it unless he gives me the okay.

“Of course, honey. It’s your thesis project, after all.” He throws me a smile. Always so supportive.

“Thanks, Dad.” I make quick work of it and hover behind Noah as we cut tomatoes and cucumbers and onions for a small salad to go with the chicken Dad is breading. Noah gets his hands on everything but the chicken, even snagging a taste of the breadcrumbs before the raw meat goes into it.

“One of these days...” I squeeze his shoulders and jiggle him about playfully. “You are going to get a mouthful of something you don’t like.”

“Nah,” he says between giggles. “No, I won’t.”

I laugh with him, continuously surprised by how much joy this little man brings me on a daily basis. “Ready to grate some cheese?”

He nods eagerly. One of his favorite tasks. My son loves cheese. Even stinky blue cheese. At four. His obsession with food astounds me.

Noah holds the top, and I brace my hand over his to steady it while we both hold the cheese for grating. He makes long, smooth moves. We’ve done this more than once now, but I still get nervous with the sharp edges. Once we’re down to an inch of cheese, I relinquish the task as he stuffs a big pinch of cheese into his mouth.

I let him grab one more before I swing the plate over to Dad and gather Noah up in my grip to snuggle him into me.

“Mom.” Giggles ensue. “Mom.”

“Hmm? Is my little goblin trying to talk his way free of his love Momster?” I pretend to nibble on his neck and shoulder, snuffling like I’m going to eat him for dinner. “Mmm. Little goblin smells good. And I’m sooo hungry. No wait for dinner. Eat goblin.”

I swing him around into the living room, plop him on the couch, and blow raspberries across his tummy until Dad joins us. Now that the germy bit is done, I let my son loose to catch his breath and go to clean up the dishes while they select a meal-time movie.

To no one's surprise, Noah’s chosen *Ratatouille*. Again.

Dad comes back into the kitchen with me once Noah’s absorbed in the film.

“How’s your day been, honey?” He nods to the camera still recording us. “How’s the project coming along?”

“Well, it’s only been a few days, but I think it’s going well. I’m going out this Friday for it. Are you okay with Noah for a few hours? I made sure it would be after your research hours.” Even though he has the most flexible schedule ever, he prefers a routine, and I don’t like messing that up.

His arm comes around my shoulders as he hugs me to him. “Not a problem. We’ll probably be watching this movie again with some of those veggie sushi rolls from the market.”

I shake my head. “He must have gotten his adventurous eating from his father because I ate nothing but chicken nuggets and applesauce when I was four. I remember it clearly.”

They’re still my favorites when I’m feeling down.

Noah is so much like me that anything that doesn't jive with my childhood, I blame it on his father. It's an easy out.

"Mine was mashed potatoes and gravy. Maybe your mom. She grew up with more food variance than we did." I bite my lip and wait for him to launch into his usual lecture about the morality of food safety laws among the differing governing bodies, but he doesn't.

"Maybe. Oh, I was filming at the cafe on campus today, and my new Film Club faculty sponsor dropped by. He got us onto the set of the new Dickie Hernandez film." I make bug eyes at him since I know he has no flipping clue who I'm talking about.

## Page 16

*Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 5:25 am*

He takes my hint easily. “Sounds like a big deal. Who’s your sponsor?”

“Professor Orion Knight.” I roll my eyes at the name. He looks just like an Orion Knight. It’s sickening.

Dad makes a face and doesn’t meet my gaze for a full minute.

“What? What’s that face for?” It reads as disapproval. Because I have some kind of context you don’t. I hate that face.

I sigh when he shakes his head.

“I really can’t say.”

“You tell me everything, Dad. I mean, you overshare to the point of TMI to the millionth degree. Are you telling me you can’t ethically tell me something you know about my faculty sponsor?”

The dread that I’d been right about the guy sinks in a little.

“Sorry, honey.”

I nod and let him drag me back to the couch with Noah.

Dinner spreads across the coffee table, and I have to give them quick kisses goodbye to get to my last class on time.

My stomach twists on itself as my half-formed thoughts flood back in. How bad does it have to be for my dad not to tell me?

8

SOFIA

Tonight, I'm going on my first scheduled excursion for my project. I'm trying something new, and it's made me super nervous and jittery, especially since I'll be setting up for the class.

The teacher, Monroe—yes, she's blonde, yes, she has a mole by her mouth, no, she doesn't have that patented breathy voice—agreed to let me set up in the corner to crop everyone else out. I totally took that deal.

But also, when I strip down in the locker room, exposing all of the skin necessary for this has me working through some deep breaths before I walk out to the small studio and set up shop.

The pole isn't as high as I imagined it would be. Not that I think I can hoist myself up to the top of this one.

Some of the other students give me longer glances, and I offer them smiles and small waves.

One of them saddles up the pole next to mine. Her dark hair is stunningly glossy, pulled back into a long ponytail that reaches her waist. "Influencer?"

I snort a soft laugh. "No. Senior thesis project. I'm a film student."

She gives me an impressed look. "And pole dancing is a part of it?"

I tip my head from side to side. “It’s more about pushing outside of my comfort zone. Trying things that I’m pretty sure I’m going to be bad at but have always thought about. I mean if not now, when?”

That gets a brilliant smile flashed my way. My neighbor reaches forward to shake my hand. “Jordan.”

I give her hand a firm pump. “Sofia.”

“Well, Sofia, I like your style.”

One of my favorite compliments. I try not to preen. “Thank you. Are you a regular?”

“Oh, yeah. I’ve been doing this for about seven months now? Since my ex very publicly broke up with me in one of the most embarrassing ways.” Her gaze flicks to the ceiling and sends me their’s mortifying and a long storylook. “My sister suggested that I find an outlet. I tried this out, and voila. I had the first step to rebuilding my confidence.”

Okay, Jordan is absolutely a new ally for me. My trepidation at making a fool of myself fades. Monroe gets our attention at the front of the studio mirror. “Alright, Ladies. Let’s warm ourselves up.”

She leads us through long movements, bending and twisting us, waking up muscles I’m not so used to using. I get warm fast, already sweating slightly before I put my hand on the pole.

*Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 5:25 am*

Oh, this is going to be so bad.

One thing I learn about myself—I don't have the strength to hold my weight with my arms. I slide down that pole again and again and again until Monroe shows me beginners' alternatives. Most of it involves keeping one foot on the ground as support while I spin.

Wrapping a leg around the pole also helps. I can manage a single spin off the floor when I use it.

I fall so, so many times.

Jordan laughs with me every time my ass plants on the floor. By the end of it, my abs are as sore as my arms are from it. I plop back on the hardwood, which is blissfully cool, and heave air into my lungs for a long minute.

"You making it down there?" Jordan grins and plops down beside me.

"Yes. That was fun, but I am absolutely awful at it."

She gives me a gentle shrug. "Like you said, you're challenging yourself. You've already made it further than most people simply by showing up. Plus, you should have seen how many times I cracked my butt bone during my first lesson."

I laugh. "Glad I'm not the only one."

"I hope you keep at it. It only took a few lessons before I started to feel sexy again."

“You know what would make me feel really sexy right now?” I offer, giving her my best mischievous grin. “A slice of cake. Want to come?”

“Psh. Yes. Let’s go.” Jordan offers me her hand, and we both groan as I get to my feet.

It takes me an extra few minutes to take down my cameras and thank Monroe for the opportunity. “I promise not to make my failures look like yours.”

“Oh, honey. We are all works in progress. Don’t you worry about it.” She gently guides me out of the studio with a hand on my shoulder and gives Jordan a squeeze on hers before we’re let back out into the wilderness.

“So. Are you going to tell me about this ex of yours? I feel like I’ve earned some friend points after an hour of being the comic relief.” Not that I mind. I don’t take myself that seriously. At least, not about this.

Jordan sighs. “Oh, sure. Well, you see, Maddox and I were high school sweethearts. Well, middle school sweethearts, too, if you want to get technical about it.”

“I do. I do want to get technical. If you have a manual, I’ll refer to it and everything.”

That cracks another round of laughter between us.

“Okay, so we were together for six years. Only in the last few were we anything really serious. You know how it is at that age. And Maddox, he was my first, well, everything.”

I nod, understanding that all too completely, even if most of my firsts happened in a whirlwind romance during my freshman year of college. The same one that produced Noah.

“Our first year at college, we... well, you know, the usual thing happened. We went to different universities. We made different friends. We grew apart. That’s all fine and well, but when I went to visit him...” Jordan sighs, and I want to hug her for something that’s long in the past. “He had a new girlfriend on campus. When I caught them together, he made it seem like I was this crazy girl from back home that he pity fucked because no one else would. That I’d gotten this whole romance wrapped up in my mind, and I wasn’t even a good lay. You know, we’d talked about getting married. I wasn’t even the one to bring it up!”

Jordan takes a few deep breaths and visibly calms herself.

Not me, though. My hands clench with the want to smash that dude’s face in. “How dare he.”

“I know, right? I fled in tears, burned everything he’d ever given me, and he had the gall to call me up and ask me for the necklace he gave me. It was his mother’s. I refused. Even though I didn’t burn that.”

“No?” I might have. But my vindictive streak runs cold.

“No. I packed it up and sent it back to his mom—because I liked her—and included a note about what her son had done to me. In excruciating detail. And once I’d dropped that off at the post office, I signed up for the pole dancing lessons. The rest is, as we say, history.” Jordan brushes herself off like a physical reminder that the past could no longer hold onto her.

“You’re much nicer than I would have been.”

“Oh, really? Lots of juicy breakup stories from you?” She gives me that wild eye that says spill.

“No. No breakup stories. A lot of not really started stories. I might be a little bit picky.” I hold up my fingers to indicate how little. Really, I haven’t slept with anyone in a few years. It’s hard when you have a kid. “But I have sugared the gas tank of a friend’s ex back in high school.”

I see a mild respect glow in her eyes, so I lean in to give her the nail in the coffin.

*Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 5:26 am*

“It was a sixty-seven Mustang... his graduation present.” I shrug. “Shouldn’t have cheated on Shelby with that cheerleader skank after prom and it wouldn’t have been an issue.”

“Love it when women band together. Female power!” Jordan shoots her fist into the air.

We’re giggling to ourselves as we enter the small bakery on the edge of campus. And even though it’s late, they still have a slice of red velvet. Yes, please!

When we sit, Jordan asks, “So, besides pole dancing, what do you have on that list of yours to try out?”

“So many things, but the ones I’ve narrowed it down to are yoga, origami, cooking classes, pottery, crochet, and painting, which I already have an awesome eleven-year-old tutor for.” The mention of Birdie must have spontaneously manifested her father because the door chime swivels my attention to that broad chest and broader shoulders.

“Oh, my God. Mmm.” I turn to see if Jordan has finally taken her first bite of cake, but no, she’s ogling Braxton as he strides to the counter. I get it. Not only is he big and broad, but he’s handsome, too, with his short-cropped beard sprinkled with only a little bit of gray. His eyes are kind. And those tattoos down his exposed forearms give him complexity.

Bad boy, lumberjack professor? I mean, come on. I’m not blind.

When he turns to see me, he offers me a smile, pays, and heads over to our table.

“Out for a late-night snack?” I ask. “Care to join us?”

His almost silent laugh is music to my ears. “No. Birdie had a rough day, so I’m grabbing her a treat before heading home. I’m glad I caught you, though. Are you free this Sunday to babysit?”

I perk up at this. “Yes. Absolutely. So long as you don’t mind Noah coming with me.”

“I don’t mind at all. I won’t be out of the house, but I thought it might be good for Birdie to spend some more time with you. She hasn’t stopped talking about you. You made an impression.” The small curve at the corner of his mouth warms me up with pride.

“She made an impression on me, too. I would love to spend time with her.”

“Good. Thank you.” Braxton turns back to the counter when they call his name. “I’ll see you then.”

Braxton picks up the small triangular box of cake and heads for the door. He’s not quite out of it when Jordan says, “God, I’d let a man that sexy toss me over his shoulder.”

Heat creeps up my neck and into my cheeks. “Shut up. That’s my dad’s friend.”

The door finally closes behind him, but I swear I saw a hitch in his step. Oh, no, what if he heard her?

“I wish my dad had friends who were that good-looking. Mmm, mmm.”

## BRAXTON

I swallow hard as I hear Sofia's friend call me sexy, and I blush harder than I have since I was a teenager. The heat doesn't dissipate as I imagine throwing Sofia over my shoulder, carrying her up my stairs, and tossing her onto my bed.

Fuck, it's idiotic to let myself fall down that rabbit hole. Again.

Even if I've had to yank myself back from thinking about her creamy skin and what it would taste like for the last four days without reprieve.

I'm a bad friend. A really fucking bad friend. I hear her say, "Shut up. He's my dad's friend."

It's all in my head, the tension I feel when I'm around her. It has to be. Nothing can come of this attraction, especially when it's one-sided.

This sucks. I haven't really thought about another woman since Bethany left. Not like this. Not for longer than taking myself in my hand and finding some kind of relief.

No, I spend too much time being a single dad. Worrying over how Birdie might react if I went on a date. If I brought somebody home. If she witnessed me moving on in any way.

Not that I'm hung up on Bethany. I gave up on waiting for her to come home before the first year mark hit. But I'm not sure whether Birdie has.

She's the reason I haven't filed for divorce. I can, legally, for abandonment, but I don't want to do that to Birdie until she's ready.

I've settled myself by the time I make it home, sitting with Birdie on the couch until bedtime and keeping my thoughts diverted until they swarm me in bed. I let myself swim in the fantasy of Sofia's hands smoothing over my shoulders, my chest, my stomach, until she takes a hold of me. Her mouth is a sweet, hot beacon as she plants kisses along my flesh.

## Page 19

*Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 5:26 am*

It doesn't take me long to succumb to it. To her.

God, this isn't going away.

And it refuses to leave me, to lift even an ounce of its weight from clawing at my back all weekend until she's here on my doorstep. Sofia's bright smile is a flame ready to devour me.

"Hey. Come on in. Birdie is in her room."

Sofia pulls on a small arm beside her, and her son, Noah, steps out from behind her feet to look up at me. Once they're both inside, she closes the door behind her, leaving us so, so close together. The shared moment of eye contact has me stuck in place. I desperately want to touch her. Just a gentle stroke up her neck, along her jaw. To tilt her face up so I can capture her mouth with mine...

I step back and bend down to offer my hand to her son. He's got big blue eyes like hers, although his hair and complexion are darker.

"Hey, little man. I'm Braxton."

He looks up at Sofia, who nods, and back to me before giving me his hand. "I'm Noah."

"Nice to meet you, bud." His smile is so much like Sofia's, too, but a little softer and less sure of himself.

I stand, meeting Sofia's gaze again. Her eyes sparkle at me, and that tension drenches me again.

"I'll let you get to it. I'm just going to be in my office." I point to the rear of the house behind the kitchen. "If you need me for anything."

"What are you working on?" Sofia sets down her bag and ruffles Noah's hair, watching and waiting for my answer.

"Grading, mostly. I have to build my slides for the presentation as well." I sink my hands into my pockets. It's the only way to keep from touching her.

"Mmm. I don't envy you. I'd hate to be stuck behind a pile of grading, and I equally don't like giving presentations." She sighs. "Much to both of my parents' extreme dissatisfaction."

I know she's joking. Charles is the most supportive person I've ever met. "I doubt that."

Again, her grin appears in her eyes more than on her mouth. "I didn't say they aren't proud of my choices, but they hoped I would follow them into academia."

I can feel my mouth quirk. "And there's no future where you would teach people to do what you do?"

She must see that I've caught her a little bit because she's already started with my daughter, who has been setting her phone up to film her painting process. Sofia shakes her head. "I see your game, Braxton. Don't think that I don't."

Her finger points at me, and her son laughs. "Naughty finger."

That cracks a laugh out of me. She must point at him when he's naughty.

"Come on, Goblin, want to go meet Birdie?"

He nods enthusiastically, and she winks at me before she leads him upstairs.

I try not to watch those bare legs as she climbs. I fucking fail.

Forcing myself back to my office, I attack a small stack of design proposals for one of my sophomore classes. I make notes and offer questions for the next stage of their projects. It takes an hour to get through half of them.

I stand and stretch, and immediately, my mind falls to Sofia. This is quickly becoming an obsession that will get me in trouble. It pulls me out of the office, and I'm surprised to find the three of them in the kitchen.

Birdie's never shown an interest in learning how to cook, but she used to love frosting cookies and baking brownies out of a box with her mom.

She's scooping a chunk of something out of a bowl to stick in her mouth. The face she makes is pure joy.

Sofia turns to catch me leaning against the doorway behind the fridge. "I hope you don't mind. We're making chocolate chip cookies."

"I don't mind at all." God, my voice comes out raspy and gruff. Birdie tilts her head at me like she's caught it, even if she doesn't understand what it means.

Sofia waves me closer and offers me a spoon with some dough on it. I laugh as I take it. It's better than the store-bought stuff.

*Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 5:26 am*

Then, she offers Birdie an ice cream scoop and shows her how to plop dough onto a lined baking sheet.

“That’s not ours.” I nod to the contraption.

“No. I brought it from home, just like the chocolate chips, butter, and cream cheese.” Sofia blinks meaningfully at me. “Didn’t know what you had, so I wanted to make sure. Birdie and I talked about cookies last time I was here.”

I linger, liking the initiative she’s taken to connect with my daughter. How she’s perfectly at ease showing her how to fill the baking sheet. How well behaved Noah is as he waits his turn. He does sneak a taste of the baking soda, though, and his face is one of regret, but he doesn’t cry or throw a fit.

Sofia helps him to the sink to rinse his mouth out, and they giggle together.

I’m behind her, setting my spoon in the sink.

She turns to smile at me. “I’ll bring you one when they’re ready.”

Nodding, I say, “I appreciate it.”

I back away to close myself in the office again. Leaning my forehead against the door and wiping a hand down my face, I tell myself that I need to get my shit together.

Rubbing my beard, I march back to my desk and pull up my presentation. I can put words on slides at the least with my brain the way it is. It proves to be a good

distraction. Getting everything into a project before I start the formatting and design elements is always my process. Easier to fit a design around what I have rather than forcing what I have into a design.

Once I have everything input, there's a knock at my door. "Come in."

Sofia peeks in through a crack and holds up a cookie on a napkin.

I wave her forward and enjoy the way she takes stock of the room. It's simple—maple bookshelves along one wall, a U-shaped desk in the corner for me and my double monitors, the pile of papers, and some lingering projects I've kept for inspiration. My bank of filing cabinets sits along the half wall beside the window.

Her smile is put-on innocence as she presents me with the cookie. Our fingers brush, and this time, I don't fight the heat it causes.

Blue eyes darken as her pupils widen.

That tension returns. I'm not just imagining it.

Sofia bites her lip. "Dinner will be ready in a half hour. Just a heads up."

I nod. "Thank you, Sofia."

"No problem." She winks and spins in place to saunter out of my office and close the door quietly behind herself with one last glance over her shoulder.

Fuck, I'm half hard just from that much of her attention. I adjust myself and take a bite of the cookie. God, it's still warm. The chocolate is melted in the soft, gooey center.

I sit in the stupor of devouring this treat as slowly as possible before I turn back to my presentation.

True to her word, Sofia knocks again twenty-seven minutes later to tell me dinner's ready. I follow her out with only a slight hesitation.

Birdie is setting the table. I'll have to pay Sofia extra for cooking. We could have easily ordered something.

"Dad. Did you get a cookie?"

"I did."

"They are so good. Aren't they? Noah has some serious baking skills. He can scoop cookie dough so much better than I can." She sets the last plate on the table and smiles at the boy, who is climbing into a chair and beaming at her.

"I like cookies," he says.

"You like food, Goblin."

"Mmm-hmm." He nods with emphasis, and I like him. I like having both of them here and how familiar this feels.

"A man after my own heart. I also like food." I pat my stomach and catch the face Sofia pulls.

## Page 21

*Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 5:26 am*

“You, sir, are not able to get away with that like you have any extra pounds on you. Nuh-uh. Not happening around a genuine big girl. Okay?” She waves a clean spatula at me.

“I’ve been told I’m a genuine big guy, Sofia. It’s hard to argue that point.” Most of it might be muscle, and I have to cut off the thought of how badly I want to prove it to her.

She narrows her eyes at me playfully before she pivots. “Come grab your plates. I’ve dished up first servings.”

Two plates lift in her hands as Birdie squeezes by to grab her own. I take the last one, spying another half tray of Shepard’s pie on the stovetop and the bottom third of a salad on the counter.

Dinner is a delight. Sofia is quick-witted, firing flirty jabs at me, silly ones at Birdie, and motherly ones at Noah. She has all of us laughing through the meal. But the way she stares into me when she pokes at me has me on edge as we near bedtime.

Birdie gives Sofia a hug before she goes up for her nightly shower. Noah is asleep on the couch, and Sofia has everything packed away by the door as she waits for her father to come pick her up.

“I can always give you a ride home if you need it.”

“It’s okay. He’s on his way home from school, anyway. Late-night research is his favorite Sunday evening activity.” She leans against the door, and it takes all of my

strength not to crowd her.

“I know we haven’t specifically talked about the conference, but I trust you to take care of Birdie for an entire weekend. If you’ll take the job.” My hands are fists in my pockets.

“Yeah, I’d love to. Which weekend?”

“Not next weekend, but the one after that.”

“I can do that.” Her voice is suddenly softer.

Mine dips, too, when I say, “I won’t be home until late that Sunday.”

I swear she shivers a little.

Headlights flash behind her in the window panels beside the door. She doesn’t turn, maintaining eye contact for an extended beat. Her lip pulls between her teeth, and I’m so goddam tempted to pull her lip free with a kiss.

When the lights go dark, I pull away, sucking in a deep breath and pivoting to scoop Noah up from the couch. He’s light and easy to carry to Charles’s car.

I nod a hello to my friend as he rolls down the window.

“Conked out, is he?”

“Sugar crash, I do believe,” I offer with a small smile.

“He does like cookies.”

That makes all three of us chuckle as I slip him into his car seat and buckle him in. I turn back to Sofia, and the smile she gives me tightens every muscle in my body. Her hand finds my arm as she leans closer.

My body screams with the want to touch her back.

“Thank you, Braxton.”

“My pleasure, Sofia.” My words should not be this rough, this telling. I slip away from the car and turn to watch them go.

Sofia pauses at her door, looking at me for another moment before sinking into her seat and grinning at her dad.

My best friend.

God, I am so fucked.

10

CEDRIC

I’m going through some of the rough edits Sofia has made to the first two weeks of her footage. It still needs to be cut in half, refined, but the storytelling is there. I have faith in her to make it shine.

## Page 22

*Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 5:26 am*

Sofia might be one of my busiest students. It looks partially self-imposed. Drive will do that to a person. It's funny that she glosses over much of her day—the busy work of class, eating, and her job.

I might have done a little research since the last time we met. She works for a subscription box service meant to empower women. She only shows brief glimpses of it. And what I found when I looked showed me why. Sofia makes a ton of content for the business. Her trademark authenticity shines through the marketing, but some of the style choices are much different from what she shows me.

It's clear she's got a lot of material to work with, but much of it is going to get repetitive.

When I'm through, I turn my attention to Sofia, who's just sitting there, back straight, legs bouncing in anticipation, ready to take notes.

I'm tempted to make her sweat, to draw this out, to let her stew in my silence. But that's more for personal desires than it is to punish her. She's too good for that.

"I'm surprised you skipped over your meeting with Professor Knight. The small bit we see of him... it seems like an interesting exchange."

Her shoulders pull back. "I have more, but I didn't think it was pertinent to the story I'm telling."

Does she not see what I saw in that fifteen-second clip? The way he looked at her. It scrapes against the new raw spot where I've acknowledged my attraction to her.

“There’s tension in the clip that doesn’t have proper context. I’m sure there’s some back and forth you can pull in to round it out. You’re keeping backups of the footage, right?”

“Yes. Always.” Although she’s concerned about adding this for some reason.

“Why does it bother you to include more about him? It’s good that you have his getting the Film Club on a prestigious set, but as he’s going to be somewhat of a constant in your life, and thus this project, for the next year, it’s better to establish your dynamic with him more fully. It doesn’t have to be a lot, but it should be more than it is right now.”

Sofia looks down at her notebook, scribbles, sighs, and meets my gaze again. Something about her interaction with him has set her on edge.

I want to poke at it, explore her discomfort, and I let her stew in my curiosity for a full minute.

Is she uncomfortable with the man’s attention? She doesn’t balk under mine. That makes me think she can take whatever Professor Knight aims her way. Maybe it’s that he’s too obviously a flirt.

Without more footage, I can only speculate, but it’s clear that Knight is taken with her.

And he’s not the only one.

I raise my brow at her when she shifts in her seat.

“He’s annoying.” Pink swathes her cheeks when she finally supplies me with the answer.

I crack a smile at her, small but clear because she relaxes a fraction. “Play around with it. You can certainly portray him as such if you wish.”

She sucks in a deep breath, which draws my attention to where her chest strains against her top. Fuck. Sofia’s skin is soft and smooth under the morning sun highlighting her from my window.

I force myself to move on. “I like the outing with Jordan. Do you think she’ll be a main focus as you move on? It’s not something you anticipated.”

Jordan seems like the perfect match for Sofia, both brazen and confident women, but it seems like Jordan has had a little less sheltering than Sofia. I enjoyed the unfiltered conversations between the two of them, even if she all but drooled at Dr. Braxton Barlowe. And their interactions...

“It’s not, but I plan to let it develop naturally. Maybe this will turn into a story thread of friendship and community.”

“Don’t let it dilute your goals.”

“I won’t. And it’s called evolution, not dilution.” The way she twists her shoulder is almost flirty. But I peg it as the confidently coy move it’s meant to be.

The way her eyes darken, it feels like I’m looking straight into her, but can she see what’s inside me? Does she know that her faculty sponsor is attracted to her? That her father’s friend is, too?

Why does that little spark I felt the first day of the semester feel like it’s burning hotter with that knowledge? Why does it suddenly feel inappropriate to be closed in my office with her?

“Anything you’re worried about? Feel like you need to figure anything out as you move forward?” I don’t feel like I need to do much other than prod her. It makes for a short meeting, and I might be trying to stretch it out.

She’s more than capable of adapting as she goes. That’s why the edits she gives me are rough. It’s why she needs to back up all of her film. I can’t imagine the amount of electronic storage she’s bought to make this project possible.

Sofia seriously thinks over my question, her head tilted back, looking through the top panes of the window behind me. It elongates her neck, exposing her throat to me. I want to lick and bite her, wrap my hand around it to hold her still as I do dirty, filthy things to her.

I clear my throat as I come back to myself.

## Page 23

*Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 5:26 am*

Shaking her head, she meets my gaze again with a small confidence that comes from being ready to face the unknown, the joy of discovery during a creative endeavor.

“Good. I have faith in your abilities.”

That makes her glow again.

Oh, the things I could praise you for, Sofia.

“If you have a minute before you go, I came across some ads I think you’d enjoy breaking down.” Another not so subtle ploy to keep her closed up in this office with me. I nod for her to come around my desk to share my computer screen with her.

At my side, her sweet perfume has the undercurrent of something spicier. I pull up a series of ads, and gradually, her palm finds the corner of my desk, invading my space. Her warmth has a gravitational pull.

I have to lean back, cross my arms, occupy my hands with small movements to keep from reaching out to touch her.

And she’s pressing on my geek button oh, so sweetly. “So, the message of this one is that Old Spice will make you a champion on the field and in bed.”

The purse of her lips hides the smile I see shining in her baby blues.

“Essentially, yes. The humor is almost a disclaimer. It’s obviously ridiculous to think hygienic products could make one a champion, but it does have a secondary message

of what confidence can do for one's personal and professional life."

She's probably already thought of that, too, but she lets me be the one to say it. Instead, she adds, "Besides that people don't like to be around others who smell like B.O."

I finally crack, laughing at how good she is at this. How easily it comes. Not many get to see this side of me, and it's a lightning strike to my sense of self.

What I felt the last time we met has been amplified threefold. Fuck, this is the exact kind of thing I've always been looking for.

Even if I'll have to wait to pursue it.

Even if the image of her hands on my knees as she drops between them... Those blue eyes peering up at him from between her lashes... Bright pink mouth parted and waiting for my cock...

My desire nearly breaks me, but as I come back to her watching the next ad, that image plagues me.

11

SOFIA

Oh. My. God. I have to be ovulating or something with the way men have been reacting to me lately.

Or the way I've been reacting to them.

Usually, I'd say my hormones were fogging up my perception, but now, I have the

option to play things back. And going back through the footage feels voyeuristic.

It makes me feel a bit more validated that when I left Professor Trevino's office the other day with an absolute mess puddled in my panties from the tension between us, or the tingles I got from when Braxton tucked my son in the backseat of my dad's car...

What would have happened if Dad hadn't been there? If he weren't Dad's best friend? Or if Trevino weren't my advisor? If I had the freedom to take something, would they let me?

But why do the men I seem to be responding to all have Off-Limits branded on them? Why does that make me want them all the more?

Sighing, I rub at my eyes with the backs of my palms. With the glasses, the camera catches more than I do. And it's cringey to watch myself blunder, to assume one thing about a person and be shown other nuances that I missed the first time.

Like when Professor Trevino called me out on why I didn't include more about Professor Knight in my rough edit. Sure, I didn't like it. He is annoying, but Trevino caught the same thing I'd been trying to downplay, like how intently Knight watched me at the café.

And what it means that he keeps trying to get me to call him Orion. Which is not happening. I need that barrier in place even if it seems to drive him crazy, push him harder to find a way to connect with me.

I can't apologize for not being one of his fan girls who fawns all over him. That's not me.

Yet, Braxton, which is what I've always called him, has also mentioned that I can call

him Brax. Like my taking care of his daughter means we're on more even footing.

Maybe we are.

## Page 24

*Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 5:26 am*

There's something to be said about watching your life back.

Because Braxton—Brax... God, that makes me a little bit warmer inside—is the obvious safe choice. Right? Maybe?

Aside from the fact that he's Dad's friend. That I'm the babysitter. None of that seems to put a weird lean on the tension between us. It's not like I'm sixteen.

Even if he's old enough to be my dad, he's not. I'm an adult. And God, I bet he would be fun.

I shake myself out of it, close my computer, and pack up my stuff to go set up the Film Club's movie night.

Collecting the movie from the library is easy, but when I'm back in the department, Professor Knight is hovering. The grin he gives me when he spots me doesn't get by my notice this time. I'm far,fartoo aware of him now.

“Are you here to help?” My brow raises, already on defense.

“I am.” There is no need for the husk in his voice, especially here.

I roll my eyes. “You know how to set up the projector?”

His laugh is soft as he steps closer. “I do. Will it upset you if I take that on?”

My confusion must be written across my features because his smile is triumphant.

“It’s hard to know how much of my help you want.”

I blow out a breath and roll my eyes. “I’ll take your help with the projector, or I wouldn’t have asked.”

“No? I thought you might want to rub it in my face if I didn’t.” Knight isn’t offended by this in the least. Not with the way he leans against the counter that leads into the small kitchenette for the department.

“Oh, I definitely would have. But now, I simply get to put you to work.” I hand him the movie, smile, and step around him to the fridge. I stashed a few bottles of soda and juice inside, a bag of ice in the freezer. The cooler is in the supplies closet.

I also pop a few bags of popcorn to go with the chips to create a small spread. If they want anything more, they’ll need to bring it with them.

Outside at the back of the building, Knight has the projector in place, a square of white light blaring against the smooth, bare face of the building. I catch him following my movements as I put the goods I’m carrying down on the grass.

A fold out table is waiting for me, so I set it up, put out the spread, and turn back to Knight. This time, his attention is on the building—on what he’s doing.

Good.

I head back to the department and another closet full of blankets and chairs. I’m nice enough to grab two chairs so that Knight will have someplace to sit, too. He is actually being helpful, after all.

The spark of heat in his eyes when I bit my lip or fussed with my hair flashes through my mind. A reminder of the professional distance I need to maintain between us.

Back outside, Knight is chatting with a few of the students who have arrived. The early birds will pop up slowly, then they'll all be here at once. It's the way it always goes at these events. Especially since it's open to the entire campus.

A great recruitment tool, as I've discovered.

I drag my goods up by the projector at the top of the small hill and set myself a little cocoon in my foldout chair with the bulky blanket I brought from the closet.

Professor Knight spots me and slowly makes his way back to our spot. His smile is sweet and playful. "Is that for me?"

He points to the folding chair on the opposite side of the projector. I nod. When he grabs the chair and moves it beside me, he plops down, and the chair's arm bumps against mine.

At seven thirty sharp, we start the movie, calling for quiet as the beginning credits roll. I enjoyed this movie the first time I saw it. *Interstellar*.

It opens like a documentary before it devolves into deep-space action. The theories, which I am not equipped to unravel as truth or fiction, are an interesting push forward for the plot and characters.

I settle in a bit further, pulling the blanket higher over my shoulders even though it's still warm. The chill will set in before too long, and it'll get cold by the time the movie is over.

Besides, I'm hoarding my sour gummies in my lap. I brought them for me, and everyone else can bug off.

*Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 5:26 am*

“Are you going to share?” Knight prods softly, and I turn to glare at his tugging at the blanket.

“Come on. You can share the blanket. There’s enough of it.” Those blue eyes are so dark and so near.

“You know, I put your chair over there for a reason.” I break open my gummy bag to accentuate my point.

Knight just grins at me and tugs at the blanket again. “Yeah, I know, because you don’t care if I freeze to death.”

I have to fight my smile with a frown, but he can tell. Just like Noah always can.

“How did you not already know it was going to get cold?”

“Why are you trying to be so stingy with that giant blanket?”

Finally, I relinquish some of the blanket to him and munch on a gummy, savoring it. If I eat too many, I’ll make myself sick, so I have to limit myself. And I want to make them last.

After eying my small treat, he squirms for a minute before slipping out from under the blanket to dash over to the snack table. Professor Knight returns with a half-bag of popcorn, a container of juice, and peanut m&m’s.

This time, I let him see my full smile. Of course, it only makes him lean in and steal

one of the few gummies I have left. It's in his mouth before I can even protest, but my mouth falls open.

"No, sir. You did not."

He chews and looks pleased with himself, offering me the cherry juice. How does this glare not faze the man? He must have been a burden on his mother if he's so immune.

I take the bottle and turn back to the movie. It's easy to ignore him, even as we swap snacks back and forth. A few times, he leans in to whisper something about the way a scene is portrayed or shot, or how a plot device is used.

Part of me wants to elbow him to get him to shut up, but I like the small snippets of discussion. I always get in trouble for commenting too much on things at home. I get it. All of the analysis can ruin a movie for most viewers.

After the water planet, I'm growing more and more aware of Knight beside me. How his shoulder is pressed into mine. In fact, the contact spans down my entire arm. Tension is creeping in, a slow build that spreads across my chest, up my neck, and into my cheeks. Like boiling a frog, I'm submersed in heat when his pinky brushes over mine.

When I don't pull away, Knight links his fingers with mine under the blanket. His palm is rougher than I expected, but his squeeze has strength and comfort in it.

After a minute, I turn to peer at him. It doesn't take long for him to tilt into me. "Watch the movie, Sofia."

Resettling myself, I do watch the movie, aware of his hand and how he strokes the back of my thumb with his. It's somehow both silly and sweet.

I like this side of him.

But fear gets the better of me when the credits start rolling. I pull away, which earns me a small wounded look. It's a good thing, though, because here comes Leann, marching straight for Professor Knight to slay him with her giggles.

12

SOFIA

Birdie and I are full-blown in the middle of her project. She has recorded a lot of content to sift through, and she's done some really good rough edits, and I like the quirky style. It suits her. And her art.

And man, her art. Birdie has talent. Especially at eleven. I can tell she's spent a long time perfecting her craft because it's beautiful. Surreal and colorful, with strong and confident brush strokes. The texture... I would love to put her paintings up in my house.

I hug her to my side after looking over it one more time. "You are brilliant. I'm so proud of you."

Birdie's grin and matching blush endear me even more to her. We've spent a lot of time over the last two weeks together, and if I learned one thing, it's that she's special and needs a friend. I don't know how she doesn't have a horde of girls trying to be her friend.

I mean... I do. I was that girl, too, quirky and creative and always just on the outside of a group. Girls can be mean at her age.

"Let me show you some options for refining this. Okay? Making sure there's always

movement is a big one. You don't want the screen to be static unless you're trying to draw attention to it. So use that sparingly. The rest can be snipped away a little at a time until everything smooths out."

She nods, eyes bright, and we start at the beginning, snipping and cutting before I leave her to the embellishments.

Before the weekend is over, we have a few completed videos and all the means of uploading them. Now, we only need her father's approval. I won't let her post without it.

## Page 26

*Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 5:26 am*

Birdie is so good about it, though, and we've been discussing a plan for her to convince him. It's all on her now.

Noah's already asleep up on the spare bed where we've been staying while Brax has been gone. God, it's still odd to call him that, but I enjoy the way his eyes darken when I do.

And Birdie is right behind him, down for more than an hour before he texts me that he's nearly home.

I've been lounging on the couch with a glass of wine and an old movie on the television. I'm not really watching, but the background noise is nice. Turning to the sound of the door opening, I see Brax peek into the living room from the front entryway.

"Hey," he says, voice low and rumbly.

"Hi."

"Everyone asleep?" His duffle bag drops to the floor with a muted thump before he's moving toward the couch and lowering himself beside me. "Everything go alright?"

I smile. "Yes, and yes."

The way Brax sinks into the couch tells me he's had a long weekend, but it also shows off the long, languid line of his body—broad chest, flat, wide stomach, strong legs. God, he's a brickhouse of a man. And so at ease in his body.

Biting my lip, I turn back to the TV. “Did it go that badly?”

He laughs softly. “No. It went well. Just a long weekend.”

“Too many people?”

A sigh. “Yes.”

My chuckle turns his head my way, and his eyes are dark and nearly bottomless as I say, “I’m good around people. But only for a little while. Then, I need to come home and recharge. Usually by watching a movie.”

“Hence the old Western on my flatscreen?”

“Maybe. I like the background noise.” Taking another sip of my wine sits him back up. “Did you want a glass?”

“I can grab it.” Brax rubs his face with both hands, and it’s obvious he’s exhausted, so I get up to pour him one.

When he looks up at me, a powerful wave of lust zaps through me. For a few seconds, I consider crawling into his lap but think better of it and slide back into my cushion beside him.

“Thanks.”

“Yeah. No problem.”

We sit in silence, only filled in with the rumbling of horse hooves on screen. The tension that builds isn’t one of discomfort. It’s lazy and warm.

I have to distract myself. “You know, Birdie and I finished a few videos this weekend on her art. I think you’ll be impressed when you see what she’s done.”

“Finished how?

“Edited and polished, but not posted. I wouldn’t let her until she talked to you about it, but I have to say, she’s excited about what she’s accomplished. And I’m proud of her.”

A grin crawls across his face—a very fatherly one. “Yeah. Me, too. I don’t even need to see them to know I’m proud.”

He takes a long sip of his wine, draining nearly half of it.

“She’s going to talk me into letting her post them, isn’t she?”

“That’s the plan. I do suggest watching them. I know she’s only eleven, but it’s tasteful and it’s focused on her art—not her.” Not that the lack of screen time for her personally will keep the hateful comments at bay. That’s the nature of the internet, unfortunately.

“I’m afraid of the trolls crushing her spirit. You know how sensitive she is. What her school life is like.” The worry in his features is sweet.

“They’ll always be there, but the support and love she’ll get will outweigh it tenfold. She can also disable the ability to comment, but I’d wait on that. I’m sure she’s going to get so much love with what she’s created.”

## Page 27

*Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 5:26 am*

A shake of his head shows off his defeat. “She’s prepared for it all?”

“I think so. And if not, turn the comments off and call me. I’ll come over and help turn things around.” I reach out to touch his arm in reassurance.

The way he looks at me sears my insides. “You really would, wouldn’t you?”

I nod, searching for why that should surprise him.

“You know. As hard as I’ve tried, I can’t seem to fill the hole her mom left.” An immense weight seems to hunch his shoulders.

“You’re doing great with her.”

“Thanks.” He drains the last of his wine, and I sip on mine, nearly splashing it with how abruptly he sits up.

Brax takes the glass from my hand and sets it on the side table to his right before turning back to me, one big hand taking the ends of my hair between his fingers. “Am I deluding myself, or do you feel this?”

Breath freezes in my lungs. My bottom lip pinches between my teeth.

His gaze homes in on my mouth for a few long seconds before lifting to meet mine. He’s tipped forward a few inches. “This tension. Is it in my head?”

I shake my head, my near silent no all I can manage against my better judgment.

Brax sinks a hand in my hair and drops his mouth over mine, a light press, then another, before he tilts my face for better access.

I'm lost to the sensation. The hunger. My fingers curl into the collar of his shirt and pull him closer. Need surges me forward, slipping my touch up the side of his neck.

Then, I'm drowning in heat, his mouth devouring mine with his own desire.

I haven't been kissed like this in ages. Years.

When he presses me back in a little test, I willingly go, letting him lean me into the throw pillow behind me.

God, he's so big that he actually makes me feel dainty.

But his kiss, the slide of tongue and teeth, makes me feel like a goddess. I draw my knee up his side, and the groan he rewards me with turns me molten.

Those big hands explore my body, cupping my ribs and waist, squeezing my hips and lifting me against his very evident and very hard length. The knowledge that I've done that to him makes me bold, boosts my confidence.

Sinking my fingers into his hair and tightening my grip earns me another low, grumbling noise of pleasure from the back of his throat, and his mouth drops to plant kisses, lick, and suck at my neck.

His grip shifts to envelop my breast in his palm. I have to bite back the whine it elicits.

The way he grabs at me has me burning up.

Finally, I let myself spread my palms over his shoulders and arms, exploring all of that glorious muscle and strength.

I gasp softly as his mouth travels down the skin across my chest, his hand drawing the loose hem of my plunging neckline aside and his thumb finding my hard nipple through the thin fabric of my bra.

My back arches, knees tightening around his hips.

“Fuck, Soph.” I swear he sounds half-drunk. “You’re like a fucking drug.”

And his hand is under my bra, squeezing before pinching and pulling at my nipple. My whine makes him shudder. I have to bite into the base of my palm as he slowly tortures me with a few soft plucks of that hard tip.

The other side of my shirt and bra exposes my other breast, and this time, his hot mouth surrounds my flesh, sucking hard until my panties are so drenched, there's no hiding how turned on I am. I mean, my shameless little moves have me humping his rock-hard stomach, so I'm not being subtle.

When he releases my breast and hovers over me again, I feel like prey fallen under a predator's paw. I'm just waiting for him to pounce.

Brax kisses me again, hunger turned into a slow, all-consuming thing. A dangerous thing. There's not a lot I would say no to right now. So when his touch travels down the center of my body and rubs over my mound, all I can do is grind into his hand.

*Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 5:26 am*

“I want to touch you,” he says against my swollen mouth.

“You already are.”

His head shake is slow and deadly. “No. I want to slide my hand under those shorts, play with all of that delicious wetness between your thighs, and fuck you with my fingers until you come.”

Need crashes through me, making me nod before I can form the words. “Yes. Please.”

His grunt is almost a growl as he follows through with his threat, his hand slipping under my shorts to find me bare beneath, drawing his fingers through the slick of my folds, pressing on my clit as he rubs me. He doesn’t go any further until I’m writhing against his hand, silently begging him for what I need.

For what he promised me.

He teases me with it until the subtle shift of his wrist sinks a lone finger into my pussy. I’m shaking from the satisfaction of finally having part of him inside me, but it’s not enough.

The slow glide is not enough. He’s too patient, too ready to tease and test me. But I’m fire, and I need to be fully consumed.

His hot mouth murmurs in my ear, and I swear I can hear his Scottish ancestry in the soft words. A lilt not usually present in his voice is evident even as he growls.

Pulling all the way out has me half crying out with protest, but he silences me with his mouth before a second finger joins the first, swirling around my entrance before they curve into me. The stretch of his big digits burns me with pleasure.

Thank God his mouth is covering mine because he finds a spot that shuts my thoughts down and has my core clamping.

Brax doubles down, plunging into my core with purpose and eating my moans. The back of my brain screams to keep quiet, but I'm lost to the pleasure.

As he builds me up, the quiet around us sinks into my labored breaths and the wet slide of his fingers thrusting into me. I can't help myself, lifting my head to watch him plunging into me. My waistband opens in a triangle around his wrist. The tattoos there pop to life along his forearm.

It's hot as hell.

Braxton presses his thumb over my clit, a steady pressure that sinks his fingers deeper, seeking and tapping until I bury my face in his shoulder. Pleasure has my thighs trembling. And he's pushing further. Nudging.

I bite down on him to muffle my cry as I come. He groans in my ear, fingers sinking to their hilt inside me as I pulse and writhe over him. Every little movement pangs against that sensitive pleasure.

When he pulls out of me, I feel the loss of it, wanting more but sure I can't handle it right now. I lean back and look up at him, unable to keep the sight of his erection from the corner of my vision.

"Beautiful. I like the way you come."

I laugh softly, and his mouth is on mine again, slower, lazier, like he doesn't expect anything else from me. It makes me feel powerful, and I want to reciprocate.

His body goes stiff, hard, tensing as my fingers dance down the front of him. He's not wearing a belt, so it's easy for me to slip past his fly and grab ahold of him.

Brax's face dips into my neck and his groan vibrates against my throat as I stroke him slowly. His cock pulses in my hand, and I'm surprised by how on edge he is, spreading the precum from his tip down his length.

Then, his hips start moving with my hand. God, has it been as long for him as it has for me?

The noises that leak out of him tangle around my bare skin as they get dirtier and gruffer.

"Fuck. Soph..." Brax grunts against me. "I'm going to come."

I turn my face to his. His kiss is messy, a bit unhinged as I push him over that edge. Warmth spurts over my bare tits and chest until he's shaking with the effort to keep himself hovering over me.

He presses a sweet kiss over my mouth this time, hand cradling the back of my head and lingering for a moment before he pulls back. "Let me get something to clean you up."

Biting back my laugh, I nod and completely fail at suppressing my blush as his gaze roves over my cum-covered tits like I'm a delicacy.

CEDRIC

For my own sanity, I had to beg off my meeting with Sofia, but she sends me her rough cut to review.

*Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 5:26 am*

And thank fuck, I watch it at home.

Because the first viewing scandalizes me. I have to close my eyes to control my breathing before I rewind and press Play again.

Most of her week runs in a similar vein to the previous ones. She tries something new. Her classes and job are blips. But the movie night when Orion Knight links their fingers together has my pulse hammering with jealousy. How casually he touches Sofia...

But his story thread in this narrative is pretty clear, especially with the small laugh that accompanies a young female student practically charging him when the movie finishes and Sofia pulls away.

The sweet bits with Birdie build new layers of intimacy in Doctor Braxton Barlowe's house.

And fuck, she hid the identity of the romantic—let's be honest, the erotic—bits, but I know it's Barlowe there with her.

I bet she's got some absolutely torturous footage of that event, given the bits she does show. A hand sliding down her stomach. The ceiling flickering with moonlight. Her unsteady breathing and slick noises signaling exactly what's happening.

It amplifies how badly I want to touch her, to make her moan, to watch her writhe in pleasure, to fuck her.

I've never struggled this hard before. Especially not with a student.

That nasty green beast clings to my back and has me sending out a query to Barlowe to come sit in on a meeting with one of my students for her project. It's an asshole thing to do, but it's also a test.

I don't tell him who it is, but I'm sure he can guess. Still, he responds with an affirmative, and I want to see how Sofia navigates this situation. Can she keep her cool?

It's important to me for some reason.

Torturing myself, I watch the rough cuts again, dropping into a daydream of all the things I want to do to her. The one image that rebounds in my mind again and again is a version of her on her knees, that pouty mouth wrapped around my cock.

I refuse to let myself do anything about the desire that rides me hard, letting myself suffer with the inaction. I can't have her. Not right now. So there's no need to pretend.

Maybe I just like the punishment.

When it's time to meet with Sofia again, it's midweek. Three days after reviewing her footage. I'm still simmering in the discomfort of my wants and my reality.

Dr. Barlowe arrives first, shaking my hand and exchanging the usual pleasantries.

"I hope you don't mind my calling you in on this, but I have a very promising student who's flirting the line between art and branding. I thought you might offer some excellent insight."

“I’m always happy to help a student.” He nods and takes a seat, filling the chair with his bulk.

If that’s what Sofia wants, I’m not able to give it to her. But then again, I don’t think she knows what she wants. Not yet, anyway.

When she knocks and steps in, Dr. Barlowe slowly turns toward me with a new look on his face. Sofia is surprised but curious about what’s going on here. Her cheeks hold a hint of red.

“Good morning, Professor Trevino. Dr. Barlowe.”

Barlowe rumbles, “Good morning, Sofia.”

“Have a seat.” I gesture to the open chair. “Reviewing your rough cuts this week prompted me to contact Dr. Barlowe to weigh in on your project. More in the vein of telling the truth, creating a visual memoir, as it were. Or turning yourself into a product or a brand.”

Sofia sits, back straight as always, notebook appearing in her lap.

“You two already know each other, of course.” Neither of them reacts, no sweat or flinches. Sofia does tilt her head just slightly, trying to figure out what I’m doing. “The bits of your daughter in the story so far are very powerful.”

Barlowe’s brow jumps up, and he peeks at her, like he didn’t know about the project she’s working on. Surely, he’s seen her set up the cameras in his home.

Sofia turns a smile on him. “Don’t worry. I’m not putting any of her personal information in there. Just some giggles back and forth and a few inside jokes we have.”

The way he smiles is the only break in the professional. He seems profoundly glad that they have those things together.

Interesting.

*Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 5:26 am*

They're playing it cool. Did they talk about this before? How they'd act if they interacted on campus? In this kind of situation?

Not likely. They probably didn't think they'd be in a meeting like this. He's not her professor, after all. Just her dad's best friend. Her employer.

It's incredibly naughty.

That deep jealousy starts to swerve in another direction.

I spread my hands to take us back to why I actually believe Barlowe will be helpful. "I know we've talked about this before, but I want to ensure that your excursions, the hobbies where you test your creativity, skills, and strength, don't become gimmicky as the story progresses. So I want to discuss the balance of hammering home your point in challenging yourself with the personal connections you're developing this semester so far."

Sofia's shoulders wiggle almost imperceptibly. How she wakes up when posed a challenge is such a big part of her appeal. Someone who can be corrected without being a pushover.

She would work so well in my bedroom. She would suit my needs.

Finally, I see Barlowe nod, as if he understands why I've dragged him into this officially. It's a difficult line to navigate.

"Any objections to showing him your first two weeks, revised? If you have it with

you.”

“Of course, I do.” She pulls a thumb drive from her bag and offers it to me without hesitation. Sofia has to lift from her seat and bend over my desk to dip her cleavage at me.

“Always prepared.” I don’t waste time, plugging it in and turning the monitor for us all to see it.

The revised edition shows more of the flirty Professor Orion Knight, and she’s clearly annoyed with him, but the film he’s gotten her and the Film Club on set for is impressive.

The new section with the pole dancing creates an interesting repetitive pattern of her falls. She even splits the screen into three vertical frames centered on her, and they show her progress, even though it’s near nil. Her laughter gets bigger each time.

She’s added a new splice of Jordan making sexy faces at Barlowe’s back after the class. Sofia’s face goes pink as it plays, but she doesn’t squirm. Would she if I played the rough cuts from her most recent week for him?

I’m playing with fire, and I know it.

Barlowe flashes her a heated look, but it’s so quick I wouldn’t have caught it. Only I’m looking for it. It’s not the first glimmer of heat I’ve caught in Barlowe’s gaze.

Am I just as bad? It makes me want to comb through her raw film to see if I look at her like that. It feels like I might.

It’s also clear that I need to do something about it. And if I do, would it end up in her rough cuts or on the editing floor?

Birdie gets a cameo, as she said, full of giggles and inside jokes, plus a moment where Birdie is trying to teach Sofia about creating textured brush strokes. It's something she attacks with gusto, but it doesn't come out nearly as polished as Birdie's.

The rest of the video is baking with her son, Noah, and coffee time with her dad. It has progressed into a slice of life documentary.

Finally, she sits in front of the camera, which we get a glimpse of from her POV, and she talks about her hopes for this. "I guess my goal here is to prepare myself for what happens next. I'm going to graduate with my degree. At the same time, my son's going to be old enough to go to school. A lot will change, and I guess, getting used to the unknown will help me through it."

The Sofia on screen shrugs and smiles. "Okay. See you later, dorks." She leans forward and blacks out the camera with her hand as a transition.

Silence stews.

Barlowe clears his throat. "Wow, Sofia. That was nicely done."

The way she beams at him grates at my heart.

"I do have a few notes, though."

Set and ready, she nods, and he begins a discussion that takes us nearly an hour to work through. At the end of it, Sofia is full of ideas, primed and ready to get to work.

I return her flash drive to her and dismiss her.

"Thank you both. I find this really helpful." She waves at us both and nearly prances

out the door. The tightness of her jeans is not hiding the way her ass jiggles on the way out.

When the door closes behind her, Barlowe and I sit in a tense silence, staring at each other.

*Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 5:26 am*

“Wanted to make it as hard for me as it is for you?” Barlowe says, his brow lifting in accusation. Apparently, I do look at her like I want her just as badly as he does. “What would the board think of this?”

“What would her father?” I counter, “Because I’ve seen enough to know what you two are up to.”

Barlowe’s head falls back, and he presses his palms to his eyes. “Fuck.”

“Indeed.” I wait for him to level his gaze on me again. “Two things. First, I have a proposition for you. And second, I have something to show you.”

14

### ORION

The crisp late September chill is finally setting in, which helps significantly when I’m crammed onto a bus with twenty students and Sofia. They’re loud, rowdy, and much more difficult to wrangle than I previously thought.

Thank God for Sofia. She has no problem clapping her hands to silence them and telling them what to do. No nonsense, even though she does it with a smile. How much practice has she had at this?

It’s certainly not what I signed up for. I teach at a university because I don’t want to deal with groups of children. My niece and nephew are awesome, but I wouldn’t want to be surrounded by the little monsters on a day to day basis.

Like now. I forget how eighteen-year-olds are still teenagers.

It makes the ride into New York City taxing.

Most of them are a normal level of loud and obnoxious, but Leann... God, I wish that girl had stayed home. Her giggle has become a noise from my nightmares. Literally.

I sit beside Sofia, a natural shield as my seatmate, my co-captain of this excursion, and rub my temples.

Her soft laugh is sweet, and I wish it could drown out every other noise.

“I’ve got an extra set of earplugs if you need them.”

I wipe a hand down my face. “How about trading me seats so she stops brushing my arm every time she comes to check on our progress?”

Sofia is biting back a smile that pulls one of my own at the corner of my mouth. “She’s probably only coming because of you. She doesn’t seem quite so interested in what the club is actually trying to do.”

I groan and press back into my seat harder. “Don’t tell me that.”

“The truth is what the truth is. She doesn’t seem to get that what she wants is against school policy and can get her in just as much trouble as it would get you into.” Her tone is light but admonishing. If only she knew how untrue that statement is. It doesn’t coincide with my experience.

“Not necessarily. It becomes a he-said, she-said situation far too easily. I’d be the one to bear the weight of it.” And I can’t tell her that I already have.

“That’s why you should put an end to it.”

Frustrated, I’m practically growling when I say, “And how am I supposed to do that? Call her out on her crush? Show everyone that my opinion of myself is so high that I presume to think she’s trying to be inappropriate with me?”

“She is being inappropriate with you. Just because you’re her professor does not give her carte blanche to touch you. You still have autonomy over yourself. Tell her, nicely, to please not touch you. It makes you uncomfortable. That way, it’s about you and what you need instead of about what she’s doing wrong.”

I turn to her, and it amazes me how she can be so soft and sweet but also strong and independent. There’s more to her than she’s let me see so far. And fuck, I’m trying to keep it cool, but I’m so attracted to her. Every little glimpse and sliver she gives me sends me further out of control.

“You make it sound so easy.”

Her head shakes. “No. I never said it was easy, but there are... easier ways to deal with it than others. Like not dealing with it. That’s only going to blow up in your face.”

“Too much to wish for it to simply go away if I ignore it long enough?”

Her eyes close, but she smiles. “Definitely.”

I turn back in my seat, too aware of the mirror reflecting our seats back at us. But it lets me watch her, how her head tilts back and elongates her pale neck, accentuates the muscles of her throat when she swallows.

Tipping back and forth from sweet to dirty thoughts of her has my own head

spinning. I adjust in my seat when a hand comes down on my forearm and Leann's face appears far too close to mine.

*Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 5:26 am*

I jump and pull my arm from under her hand. “Leann. What are you doing up here again?”

“Just wondering if we’re going to stop for a bathroom break any time soon?” She’s not making any of the uncomfortable moves I’m used to seeing with that kind of request.

“There’s a bathroom in the back of the bus.”

Her face twists with disgust. “Ew. A rest stop, then? To stretch our legs?”

“We’ll be at our hotel in the next few hours. If we keep making stops to stretch, we’ll waste too much time,” Sofia chimes from the seat beside me, saving me—again—from Leann’s incessant need to rope me into a conversation or ask something of me.

Leann narrows her eyes at Sofia over my head, but I don’t feel Sofia stir even the slightest bit.

“Well, that’s rude. I’m paying for this trip. My comfort should be accommodated.”

“We all paid to be here. We’re not making special stops for you. If it’s bad enough, you’ll use the bathroom on board.”

It’s hard to keep my laughter inside at the blandness in Sofia’s voice.

Leann scoffs and stomps back down the aisle to her seat, complaining loudly about

how she doesn't deserve to be treated this way.

Sofia sighs, but I finally let the soft laughter escape. "Thank you for that."

"Yeah. Sure. She already presumes I'm a bitch. No skin off my nose."

"Will you be my personal buffer for the next twelve weeks?"

"Not a fucking chance."

We both laugh at this, and I finally relax a little, back to staring at her in the mirror. At one point, she opens her eyes and pegs me with a look in the mirror like I've been caught.

I'm not trying to hide, so I only grin at her.

She rolls her eyes and settles back again. Slowly, our hands end up beside each other, back to back. How easy it would be to hold her hand like this. Too bad we're in full view of the rest of the bus thanks to that damn mirror.

And if we're not, I still can't take that chance.

When our pinkies brush, electricity shoots up my arm. I toe that line, testing the limits as my pinkie hooks her for a moment and releases it.

The small touches become a slow game as we sporadically chit chat about the city and times we've visited before. Apparently, she spent a lot of time here as a child with her mother, getting to sit in with large swathes of creative adults. No wonder she's so creative and in charge. Sounds like it runs in the family.

My trips were fewer. I'd come for a film festival or two. Auditioned for a few parts

when I thought I'd be an actor. I'm really not so good at lying, but I found my knack for set design and planning elements for post-production.

That's what initially sent me running headlong into an internship I in no way deserved.

Learning that her mom is an internationally famous poet surprises me when I actually know her name—Paloma Pérez—or Paloma Newman when she married Sofia's father. I can see bits of her mother in her.

The last leg of the trip is both easier and harder than the initial bit. Leann has stopped her assaults on my person and my personal space, the people have calmed down into their own distractions, and I keep playing with the back of Sofia's fingers.

Tension zaps through us, fizzling only a little when we finally pull up to the front of the hotel.

That's only because herding everyone inside is an ordeal. And Leann is the most obstinate, grudgingly stomping after Ryan when he grabs her bag and rolls it after him. If things have gotten so bad that the other members can see through Leann's games, it is more than time for me to put a stop to her behavior.

By the end of this trip, I'll do so. Because I will not survive like this. Maybe I can tell her I'm married. Wear a fake ring. Explain that it's not her when it most certainly is.

Why do women think men will fall for this shit?

Sofia is once again in charge and saving me from this mess. She's got the room keys, is assigning them to pairs of students, and is shoing them into the waiting elevators to go and get settled. They're free to go roam and do whatever once they've dropped off their luggage. But the bus leaves at 7:30 sharp the next morning to go into the

studio.

Once everyone has started their journey up, Sofia turns to me, her cheeks pink and her eyes a little wild.

*Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 5:26 am*

“What?” My heart hammers like something’s gone seriously wrong. Is she alright?

But then, Sofia holds up one remaining set of key cards, and I realize why she looks like a deer about to be hit by a car. There’s only one room left.

I hold my hand up and go back to the clerk. “I think someone’s miscounted. We need one more room.”

The clerk doesn’t look the least bit flustered as he holds up a finger and starts tapping away at his computer. After a minute, the slight shift in the man’s stance broadcasts the bad news before he delivers it.

“It looks like you booked eleven rooms for your visit, and the rest are already full. We can bring in an extra cot to accommodate additional guests in the meantime?—”

I hold my hand up to stop him and remind myself to breathe. “No. That’s fine. Thank you.”

When I return to Sofia, she looks me over and knows before I even have to say anything. We shuffle into the elevator together. “How many rooms?”

“Just the one.”

15

SOFIA

We stand on opposite sides of the elevator, staring at each other as we fly up and up and up to the tenth floor. Usually, elevator rides make me dizzy, but that's not the reason I'm clinging to the handrail behind me.

It's the heat in Knight's eyes, how he is staring at my mouth like he was on the bus.

God, the tension is palpable after that long bus ride, the teasing play of his fingers against the back of mine with his desire as clear as day. He wanted to hold my hand.

Okay, let's be honest, he probably wants much, much more than that, but he's more than aware of how that can turn out badly for both of us.

I can't imagine how far gone we might be if not for Leann. She sucks to be around, and might be a sucky person from my perspective, but she does keep us semi-grounded in reality.

By the time the doors open on the tenth floor, my heart is pumping so hard.

Thankfully, the hallway is clear so no one has to see or can make a comment on the fact that Professor Knight and I will be sharing a room.

Together.

Alone.

Unsupervised.

I suppose it's better than having another guy and gal on this trip double up. We are the ones in charge here. We can keep this professional.

Even if he's been slowly chipping away at my first opinion of him, showing how

respectful and intense he can be. It only amplifies how attractive he is.

My heart is pumping so hard that it's difficult to breathe.

No, maybe this isn't such a good idea.

What other choice do we have?

We both hesitate. Orion jams his hand between the doors when they start to close and he's out in the hallway, holding it open for me and searching my eyes for something.

"What room?" I ask.

"1049." Knight points to the right. "That way."

I nod and start down the hall, conscious of every footstep and how it thuds or echoes in this hall. Fear over being caught—as ridiculous as that is—heightens every noise. I can scarcely breathe when we stop in front of the door and Knight reaches around me to slide the keycard into the slot.

He opens the door and gives it a push, but I walk in first.

## Page 34

*Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 5:26 am*

Immediately, my anxiety is lessened by the sight of two beds. Thank God. At least we won't have to share or fight over who gets the floor. I sigh once the door is closed behind us.

Knight drops his bag on his bed and smiles at me. "I have a meeting in thirty. You don't mind if I clean up first? Then, I'll be out of your hair for a while."

That drops the rest of my tension from my shoulders, and I roll my bag over to my bed. "Yeah. Go ahead."

Once he disappears inside, I immediately text Jordan.

OMG. I just got to the city, and I'm sharing a room with the Golden Boy. WTF. I'm trying not to freak.

She pings me back almost immediately.

Holy shit. What happened?

Only room left. He's got a meeting, but God, I have to spend two nights with him.

Are you sharing a bed, too? I'd be down for that.

I rub my eyes, knowing she would go there. She always says just what's on her mind. I do like that about her, but gah...

No! No, no, no. Not happening! He's a professor.

Oh, who cares about that?

Me. I do. Have your daydreams, but don't go trying to talk me into doing anything stupid. I have one more year to graduate.

Hey, if no one knows, there's no trouble to get in. I say let loose and have fun.

You are absolutely no help. None!

And Jordan just sends back a string of emojis that reflects what I'm thinking. She's absolutely bonkers. I love having her as my friend.

By the time I've got her switched to other topics, like the guy in her sociology class she's crushing on, Knight is out of the bathroom, hair freshly washed, clothes changed. He looks fresh and well... hot.

Meeting his gaze when I should be avoiding his eyes only makes him smile at me.

"All yours."

"Thanks. I'm going to order in. You'll be eating while you're out, right?"

"I will be. Yes." And the way his gaze lingers on me for a beat longer has my skin heating up.

I grab my pajamas and slip past him to the bathroom for some real privacy. "Have fun at your meeting. And don't worry. I won't wait up."

Winking before I close the door behind me doesn't block his laughter.

The shower relaxes me, and I love the feeling of being clean before going to bed. But

my stomach rumbles before I get there. Room service has outrageous prices, but still, I get a burger and onion rings.

They're juicy and delicious, and I'm in the perfect food coma by the time I crawl into bed. The TV is on low—the American Movie Classics channel—and I nestle in to doze. Unfortunately, I don't fall asleep right away.

And an hour later, I'm still mostly aware when Knight returns. He tries to stay quiet and doesn't even turn on the light when he comes in. I pretend to be asleep because I simply don't want the awkward exchange.

A little shuffling later, and I hear him get into bed, the TV left on without question.

Okay. Points for being considerate.

Funnily enough, once he's settled in bed, I seem to fall straight to sleep. I don't have time to unpack that knowledge, but my dreams center around Knight—all strange and tense with an abnormal amount of hand holding.

In the morning, a brand-new tension is mounting. I packed for a shared room, but one with a girl who wouldn't care about my short shorts or lack of bra. Because your girl refuses to sleep in one of those contraptions, as lovely and helpful as they can be during the day. Just no.

## Page 35

*Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 5:26 am*

But when I sit up in bed, I can feel the cool air on every inch of my exposed legs. My nipples tighten under my loose T-shirt from the thought of Knight's attention on them. I stretch and try to ignore the lingering insecurities from putting this on last night.

Until Knight clears his throat.

I finally look over at him, and he's trying really hard to look anywhere but at me. And when he does, he tries to keep his gaze on my legs.

Then, I watch him fail and dart his eyes away again.

Sighing, I get up fully and dig out fresh clothes. The whole time, I can't escape the feeling of him watching me until I'm closed behind the bathroom door.

I shudder out a breath and lean against the door to catch my breath before I change and brush my teeth.

Knight is on his feet when I come out, looking me over with a flash of disappointed relief.

I smile at him. "Did a peek behind the curtain scare you into silence?"

His pajama pants hang loose on his hips, his own T-shirt lifting when he runs a hand through his hair to reveal a peek of his golden skin below his navel. God, even that glimpse strikes lust through me.

Dangerous. Extremely dangerous territory.

“Notscareme.”

Rolling my eyes, I shake my head and grab my purse. “Get dressed. I’ll meet you downstairs to wrangle the group over breakfast.”

“Are you scared of walking down with me?” He’s turned in the bathroom entrance to watch me edge toward the exit.

“Of being caught in the same room with you? Maybe a little. I don’t need rumors starting about us because of this arrangement.”

His expression sobers. Knight nods, and I escape, closing the door firmly behind me as I scan the hallway for others in my party. No one is out here. Good.

If Leann catches a whiff of this, all hell will break loose. I can just feel it. That girl is a fucking menace. And I just cannot deal with her or the attitude and accusations she’ll start flinging like it fuels her life.

When Knight meets me down at the continental breakfast, most of our people are already here. He sits across from me. “You ran off real fast.”

I raise my brow at him. “Were we supposed to come down hand in hand like some newly wed couple?”

He laughs. It’s full and beautiful and earns us Leann’s squinty glare.

“Careful or you’ll make your girlfriend jealous.”

Stiffening, he focuses intently on his plate. “Don’t even joke about that.”

“How can I not? It’s so obvious.”

The rest of breakfast is smooth, even gathering them back on the bus for the short ride over to the studio, and we’re let in without a fuss.

Thank you, thank you, thank you, I pray to whatever God is listening.

Once we disembark, we’re met by the First Assistant Director, and she gives us a rundown of the rules, which boil down to staying quiet while on set, not to move unless she tells us to, to stay out of Dickie Hernandez’s way, and the most important...

“When we call for quiet on set, it means absolute silence. Not a peep. Not a cough. Not a sneeze. Not a fart. If you make noise, you will be removed. Got it?” The First AD props her slender hand on her equally slender hip and looks every one of us in the face with those piercing eyes.

“My name is Lucy. If you have any questions during this experience, you ask me. Okay?” A perfectly shaped brow lifts at all of us before she waves for us to follow.

We’re let into one of the many standard-looking buildings along the black top, and it’s much darker inside than I expected. We move as a group without much need for herding until we’re stretched out behind all of the craziness.

A full scene is set up on the far wall, dark browns and oranges highlighting the brick façade of a fake building—window included. God, the mastery of the elements is astounding. It’s hard not to be in awe of every little detail they’ve thought of to make the set appear realistic.

Staying in the formation they’ve put us in, we watch as the scene is reset. Tables and chairs are set upright, glasses replaced, and a plethora of other details accounted for

before the actors return.

## Page 36

*Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 5:26 am*

Suddenly, the director is heading our way. Dickie Hernandez has a confident stride. He's tall with a dark complexion, but he's also a goofy kind of handsome. Especially when he smiles and slaps Knight's hand before pulling him into a hug.

"Glad your group made it." His smile grows when he looks past Knight to me, where he pauses before looking over everyone else. "Welcome to my set. I like to help students learn, but remember to stay out of the way and to stay quiet. There will be time later for questions, so write them down and wait until you're told you can talk. I know it sounds tyrannical, but it's an important lesson that you need to learn early if you want a career in the biz."

He gives Knight another clap on the shoulder, shaking him jovially, and goes on about his business.

I lift a brow at Knight. What the fuck? But I only get a cocky grin in return.

Yeah, the friend he knows is the director! I'm not sure what to do with the flutter that accompanies that thought. Because he could have told me, and I would have been duly impressed. And he didn't.

How come?

Luckily, I'm torn from that train of thought by Lucy calling, "Final touches."

Someone else responds, "Finals are done."

Lucy nods. "Camera ready?"

“Ready.”

“Quiet on set.”

We plunge into silence. It’s almost unnerving, but it accentuates the surreal nature of being on set for my first time. I practically hold my breath.

“Roll sound.”

“Sound is speeding.”

“Five bravo, take one. Mark.” The clapperboard snaps shut to mark the scene.

“Set.”

A short pause follows with, “Action!”

And the actors move, and I’m in awe at how efficient the process is. Nothing like the filming of our club film last year, *When Pigs Fly*. Although we had a ton of fun. This feels more serious, but no less fun in the creative sense.

Everyone is brilliant. And the scene is done in four takes before they make small changes for a new scene in the same space. Lucy calls, “Lunch.”

We’re ushered to craft services where we each grab a plate and hover by the wall, out of the way, to eat. Leann, now free to talk, is loud and obnoxious, asking the actors what else they’ve been in like they want to explain themselves to her.

Lucy hushes her before I have to step in to do it. Thank God. I would bite that bullet for Knight. He already has enough problems with navigating her behavior.

Of course, Leann's response is not a positive one, nor is it a passive one, which anyone here would have taken without issue, but what does she do? She rolls her eyes and goes to pout next to one of her friends, complaining about all the money she spent to be here and how boring it is. No one seems to care.

I suck in a slow breath and turn to Lucy, mouthing *I'm sorry* to her, which she takes with a sharp nod.

It's only the precursor, though, because between takes, she's playing videos on her phone and whispering to her friends. In a normal setting, it wouldn't be so disruptive, but we've been told multiple times to keep quiet.

Leann just doesn't seem capable.

Trepidation shoves my stomach into my lungs as I watch the director talk quietly with his assistant. Lucy straightens and marches over to our group, speaking softly with Knight on the other end of our group—nearly as far from Leann as he can manage.

His sigh is big enough that I can see it from here. And he's rubbing his chin and jaw as he talks with her.

When Lucy breaks off, Knight walks to me, and I know exactly what's going down when Leann's grating giggle pierces the quiet space.

"They're kicking her off set," Knight says softly the moment he's close enough.

Of course they are. I would have a long time ago.

## Page 37

*Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 5:26 am*

“Are you serious? You can’t do that. I paid to be here.” Leann’s voice echoes, and I see everyone cringe away. Her face turns crimson, even in the low light, as she stomps her foot.

“You didn’t pay to be on set. You paid your way here. You have no authority and no rights on this set. You signed the paperwork. And since you can’t follow the rules, you can’t stay.” Lucy is so no-nonsense that I might be developing a small girl crush. “Security will escort you back to your bus to wait, or a ride can be called for you on your own dime. Either way, you’re not staying and disrupting this set any longer.”

Leann’s enraged screech has the crew clapping as she’s forced out.

Dickie Hernandez is beside Knight when I turn back. “That the one you warned me about?”

“Yeah.” For once, he actually looks embarrassed and more than uneasy.

“Good riddance.”

I step forward and catch his eye. “Hey. Hi. I hate to be this person, but will she be able to come back tomorrow? If she’s learned her lesson?”

The director makes a face. “Do you think she has? Or will by then?”

“No. Probably not, but it’s my job to advocate for her.” And I really hate that it’s my job because this is the first real impression Dickie Hernandez is going to have of me.

When he smiles and drapes an arm around my shoulder, my knees nearly buckle. “You must be Sofia. I heard a lot about you last night over dinner.”

My brow shoots up as I turn to Knight. He only shrugs. All of that golden boy shine is still bright in the dim room. Or maybe the set lighting behind him is enhancing it.

“I am. So you were Professor Knight’s meeting that he ran off to the moment we arrived.” I return Dickie’s smile.

“Oh, he’s kept me a secret, has he? Don’t worry, love, he’s told me more than enough about you to tip the scales. And because you sound and appear like a mature, capable woman, I will let you make that decision after you’ve talked with the girl. If she’s capable of keeping her mouth shut and hands off her phone while on set, she can return.”

“Thank you.”

He gives my shoulders a squeeze. “Make sure you bring her with you next time we have dinner. I have a feeling the conversation will be all the more lively with her there.”

Knight practically glows. “Oh, it certainly will be.”

After he goes back to his director’s chair, order is returned on set, and the rest of our time goes by in a blur.

When we return to the hotel, we both have to endure Leann bemoaning her situation and making herself out to be the victim, complaining about the other things she could have spent this money on and this time doing.

“Well, we’ve convinced them to let you back tomorrow for the morning shoot if you

can follow the rules and keep quiet.”

It barely soothes her, but eventually, after far too much effort, she agrees and goes to her room to sulk.

Finally, we return to our hotel room, and once the door closes, tension drenches the air as I meet Knight’s eyes. We’re alone here for the rest of the night.

16

## ORION

This is not smart, but it seems like an inevitability. It’s clear that Sofia feels it, too. Tension vibrates across my entire body because we’re alone in this room together for the entire night. I don’t have to run out anywhere. She’s not already in bed.

“Should we order dinner in?” I ask. “Or I can go grab something.”

Sofia bites her lip. “Chinese? I know a good place nearby.”

Of course she does. She’s fucking brilliant and observant. Cultured.

“Sounds good.”

She places the order, but I beg off her giving me any money. I can cover it. It might make this feel a little bit more like a date, but I’m already tiptoeing past boundaries that should be kept in place.

But I want Sofia. She knows it. Tonight is going to push me past my restraints, especially when I return with two bags of rice, noodles, and so many options to find her bent over, drying her hair with her towel.

*Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 5:26 am*

She's back in those short shorts and the billowy T-shirt. When she straightens, I can see the outlines of her breasts against the loose fabric and the tightening of her nipples.

I suck in a hard breath and blow it out slowly, moving to the table. I am fucked.

Her hair tangles over her shoulder, and her face is bright pink from the shower. I like how she looks freshly scrubbed. She slides into one of the chairs, her bare legs drawn up around her as she grabs one of the cartons I've laid out.

"This is a nice end to an intense day." She uses the cheap chopsticks with ease, and I'm a little jealous as I stab my noodles with a fork.

It's a struggle to keep my gaze off her, to not stare at the new pieces of her I'm seeing.

"You are such a plebian." Her voice is harsh, but she's fighting a smile.

"We didn't all grow up with your worldly parents, Sofia."

"Don't be fooled. I know I'm lucky." She blinks at me. "What about your parents?"

I shrug. "Been married forty years. Mom's a nurse. Dad's a truck driver. I grew up in a pretty normal middle-class household."

"Don't knock normal. Sometimes, I wish that's what I had." She balances a scoop of fried rice in her chopsticks, and I'm truly baffled when she doesn't make a mess.

“Really?”

“My parents are awesome. Don’t get me wrong. But sometimes, it would have been nice to have my mom home for more than half the year. I got to travel to see her, but she missed a lot.” Her gaze dips, and I swear this is the first bit of insecurity I’ve ever seen in her.

What types of things did she miss? It’s on the tip of my tongue, but I can already imagine the small, mundane things she didn’t get to witness. The advice a teenage girl would need from her mom. Big stuff, too, like first kisses and boyfriends.

Is that why she’s so self-reliant? So hesitant to ask for help? To trust?

Is that why she seems to overwhelm me so easily? All of that overly organized and controlled, messy chaos?

Am I just a sucker for a woman I shouldn’t want?

We sit in silence for a bit, a movie on in the background. I’ve noticed she likes to have background noise, something she can be distracted by when she needs a moment with her thoughts.

The lack of conversation doesn’t get heavy. We’re past that now, given our long silences on the bus ride here.

When we make a dent in the food, Sofia leans back in her chair, the underside of her leg teasing me with all of that flesh, and I can’t help myself. Reaching forward, I grab her by the toes and tug her foot into my hand.

She startles but doesn’t pull away, watching me warily as I set her foot in my lap and turn back to the television.

Her head falls back as she sinks lower. “How likely do you think it is that Leann will get herself kicked off set again?”

I laugh softly. “I’m eighty-nine percent sure she’ll get herself kicked off the set again.”

Sofia giggles with me. “I don’t know what either of us has done to deserve her, but something good had better be coming our way for having to deal with that girl.”

My hand creeps up her ankle to her calf, squeezing lightly. Her eyelids flutter to half mast, and I feel my control slipping. When I squeeze her again, she lets out a soft huff of breath. I bet she could do with a massage. Some proper taking care of.

It’s not something I have permission to give her. The want to give and take more makes me put her foot down and stand.

She turns to look a question at me.

“I’m going to shower. We should get to bed. Another long day tomorrow.”

Her nod turns her back to the tv, and she pulls her leg back to herself as I retreat.

The shower cleans my skin and hair, but my thoughts only grow dirtier. Every part of me is battling with the possibilities in the room outside that door. The inevitabilities with Sofia that mean confessing things to her that might make her reject me.

I still have to tell her.

*Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 5:26 am*

If I can consider having what I want with her, Sofia must know how immensely I fucked up. And the scandal that's followed me here.

Ready to confess, I dress in my pajama pants and half consider not putting a shirt on, but that wouldn't be fair. Not that her bare legs or the swing of her braless chest make things any easier on me.

She pops into the bathroom to brush her teeth, and I hover, needing to get this off my chest.

When she turns back to me, Sofia startles. My hand catches hers, and relief blasts through me when she doesn't pull away. She doesn't resist my leading her back to the edge of my bed, where I sit and stroke her palm and fingertips.

“What's wrong?” Fucking astute.

It's difficult to look up into her eyes, but I do it. “Do you know anything about why I transferred here?”

Sofia shakes her head, slowly reaching out to push my hair off my forehead. Her touch rings through me. I nearly redirect and pull her down for a kiss, but she's looking at me like she wants to know me, and it's the first time in a long, long time that someone has seen me like Sofia does.

“I was almost fired for an inappropriate relationship with one of my students.”

I expect her to step away in disgust, but her touch smooths through my hair again,

down around my ear.

“Tell me what happened.”

I close my eyes and take a deep breath. Her knee comes up beside my hip, inching her closer. My hands automatically brace the backs of her legs. So much smooth skin, hot under my touch.

Does she even know how tempting she is?

“Marielle used to come out to my favorite bar on occasion. I’d seen her there before she was one of my students. And she wasn’t some eighteen-year-old, either. She was in her forties, going back to school to change her career. It was nice to have an adult perspective in a freshman class.”

The mixed feelings swirl in my chest. I’m still not sure what to feel about the entire situation.

“I’m sure it was.” Not a reprimand. Sofia strokes the sensitive skin behind my ear.

I almost want to purr and sink my face into her stomach. “She came out to the bar one night while she was in my class. I did my best to keep it professional, but I was already half drunk by the time she sat next to me...”

Sofia’s grip in my hair tightens as if she knows the way my story goes. She probably knows the deal already, but remembering how Marielle slid her hand over my knee and up my thigh, the heat of it as I stood and stepped away. But she met me back at the bathrooms. Before I knew what she was doing, she had my fly open and sank to her knees.

I gave up the fight by the time she had me in her mouth.

“It’s hard to say she seduced me, but that’s what it felt like. She set me up, taking advantage of how much I drank, then she used it against me when she didn’t earn an A on her final project.” The stand off in my office, which started in hushed tones, turned into all-out screeching accusations that garnered too much attention.

Sofia sighs, dipping her nose to the top of my head and surrounding me in her scent—something soft and sweet and solely Sofia.

“No wonder you’re skittish around Leann.”

That rips a laugh out of me. “Yeah.”

She tips my head back. “I’m sorry that happened to you.”

As bad as I felt about it at the time, I’m coming to terms with the fact that it put me in Sofia’s path. Reaching up, I trace the soft curve of her chin and jaw.

Reading my mind, she dips lower and brushes her mouth across mine. My grip on her tightens.

Our mouths separate the barest inch, giving me the space to say her name. It’s a question, a plea, and a declaration.

I lift to kiss her again, solidly and a bit frenzied. She sinks into me, colliding more solidly against my chest. I feel her everywhere, warm and soft and mesmerizing. The soft noise in the back of her throat spurs me on. I’m squeezing her curves, lifting her other knee so that she’s straddling me.

Fuck, I’m hard already. I never respond this way. This fast. This goddamn hard.

Her mouth opens under the pressure of my own, and I sweep in, tasting her more

fully, showing her my intentions.

I'm desperate for her.

*Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 5:26 am*

Gathering her in my arms, I lift us both and drag her under me on the bed and show her exactly how she affects me.

Sofia's thighs squeeze my hips, her feet locking behind my waist as I lean into her. The low moan vibrating across my tongue has my hips swiveling. My own groan has me propping myself on my hands to watch her chest heave under me. Her lips are perfectly pink and swollen from my mouth.

I dip to brush my nose against hers, almost teasing. "You're a fucking goddess."

Her laugh is breathy, and her hands explore my chest and back through the thin T-shirt. I really wish I hadn't put it on now, craving her skin against mine.

I lift up, tearing my shirt off over my head before leaning back over her. The feel of her gaze down my body, followed by the trail of her fingertips and palms, has me shivering.

When I dip to kiss her again, my hands search for the soft skin of her waist under her shirt. I feel like a damned teenager, unsure of how much of her I can have. I want everything. Every piece. Every inch.

Kisses trailing down her neck and shoulder have her arching back to give me better access.

And her nails... I groan against her skin as those sharp talons drag themselves down my back.

“I want to feel your mouth everywhere.” Her hoarse whisper turns me into a beast, needy and wonton.

Lifting her shirt higher, I sink lower, spreading my mouth along her soft stomach, inching higher and higher until she huffs, pushes me back, and pulls her shirt off herself.

My mouth waters, and I descend on her breasts with my mouth and hands the moment her back hits the duvet. God, her needy noises surround me with all of the daydreams I’ve been consumed by these last few weeks.

Sofia latches her legs around my hips again, grinding us together. Her hand is tight in my hair as I lavish attention to her pinkening skin. Sucking and nibbling one nipple tears a needy whine from her mouth before she yanks me back by my hair.

“Tell me you have condoms.”

I groan in defeat. “I don’t, but there’s plenty else I can do to satisfy you.”

“Have you been tested?”

I pause, taking the moment seriously. “Yes.”

She nods. “I’m on the pill. And damn it, Orion, I want you.”

Her hips roll to accentuate her point.

My lids flutter as I press against her small movements. “Are you sure?”

“Yes.” Her voice practically hisses.

It takes two quick tugs to pull her shorts free and drop my pajama pants, and I'm on top of her again, sliding between those gloriously long, bare legs. A breath shudders out of me as I press us together, the long curve of my hard cock cupped by her hot folds.

Shifting under me drags me through her folds deliciously, and after a few slow, tender thrusts, I rear back to take her properly.

Sofia's gasp as I slide into her wet, hot pussy has me trembling. Fuck, I don't want this to end. I'm finally home.

17

SOFIA

The satisfying burn and stretch of Orion filling me up has me panting. God, are we doing this? Yes. Yes, we are. And it feels so good.

Once he's seated fully inside, he pauses, brushing the hair from my face as he looks down at me with a sweet mix of emotions in his eyes. His arms bracket my shoulders as he sets a slow pace. The friction has me biting my lip.

His nostrils flare in response. "You okay?"

I nod, smoothing my hands up his side, which makes him shiver. That breaks a grin out across my face.

"I have a feeling I'm not the one in control here. Am I?" A soft tease, even as his hips start to churn a dark, warm pleasure in my middle.

## Page 41

*Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 5:26 am*

“Did you want to be?” My nails scrape over his lower back, and I’m rewarded with a low groan.

“As long as I can have you, it doesn’t matter who’s in charge.”

I laugh, which has me clamping down on him. We both moan, prodding quicker movements, sharper thrusts until he’s got a steady pace and I’m just holding on.

Orion kisses along my neck, giving me light bites that keep me semi-grounded. Because the shape of his cock means he’s naturally able to hit a spot deep inside me that has me purring.

He grumbles in my ear, “I like your nails.”

I don’t need any other direction, scoring them down the full length of his back and letting them bite into his round ass as he buries himself as deep as he can, nudging the very ends of me with the head of his cock until my toes start to curl.

“Oh, God.” I gasp against his shoulder as I hold him to me, grinding us together until my core starts to flutter.

My grip doesn’t hold him in place for long. Big swings of his hips have him thrusting into me like mad.

I’m on the brink, wavering, wanting this to last longer, but it’s been so damn long since I’ve taken a cock like this.

Because I swore Orion and I would never get here. That I'd never let him in.

But now, I can't imagine how I've held this off for so long.

Those perfect blue eyes shine against his golden skin and hair, watching me, ensuring that he's taking care of me as I slowly lose sense of myself.

Pleasure detonates in my core, bucking me up against him with a sharp cry that I cut off with the butt of my palm. I bite down, riding out the waves as Orion slows.

I whimper as my body settles under his stroking hands.

His mouth is against my ear. "I'm nowhere near done with you yet. I hope you don't mind."

My laughter is a bit unhinged, but do I mind? Oh, not in the least.

I answer him with a kiss before he takes that as his cue to continue having his way with me. I'm flipped onto my stomach, hips pulled up and knees spread before he plunges back into me. My groan is lost in the bedding beneath me. Smart move.

He fucks me like a man on a mission, wiping every cobweb from my pussy and then some.

I'm drowning in the pleasure of multiple orgasms by the time his hips smack my ass with short, hard taps. Orion's breath comes in heavy waves, and the lingering aftershocks have me consciously tightening around him.

His garbled cry sends him off rhythm until he's pressed so tightly against me, I swear he's trying to crawl inside my pussy.

I let the pleasure pulse through me as he lowers himself over my back, planting sweet kisses along my shoulders.

“Fucking brilliant.” His words are reverent.

I have to admit, this is better than I imagined it would be with Orion. And maybe that’s the trust he finally showed me. I don’t want to be another mistake for him. I don’t want to break him down until he’s only a soulless flirt and nothing more.

Because he’s shown me otherwise, hasn’t he?

I’d underestimated him from the start.

And now...

Now, I’m rather attached, rather protective of him and us and this.

Orion slips away from me for only a minute, coming back with a warm, wet washcloth to clean me up before he slides behind me and covers us both with the strewn about covers. I fall asleep quickly, with his hand on my breast and belly, keeping me tight against his slick, hard body.

I wake up first, my face tucked against Orion’s chest. My fingers draw small shapes against the small smattering of hair between his pecs. He doesn’t have a lot, but I can’t get over how so much of him is golden.

Crawling over him to get out of bed jostles him awake, but there’s no helping it. He catches large handfuls of my curves on the way, smiling up at me in a way I can’t help but reciprocate.

*Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 5:26 am*

I bat his hands away as I walk into the bathroom to take a quick shower and brush my teeth. He's waiting at the door when I come out, jeans on without his shirt. All of that skin is so distracting, but his touch is even more so.

He tucks a stray piece of hair behind my ear and really looks at me, like he can see the awkward version of myself that I keep hidden away most of the time. It's the insecure part—the one I've had to beat into submission for most of my life.

“You okay, Sofia?”

I nod, gripping my towel as the only barrier between us.

He frowns a little. “Are you sure?”

Taking a deep breath, I nod again. “Just a little unprepared for this part, I guess.”

“You? Unprepared for something? I must have really caught you by surprise, then.”  
He nuzzles my neck. “I thought I'd been pretty clear about my intentions from the get go.”

That has me laughing a little. “Yes. You were transparent.”

“But you're still going to run away on me, aren't you?” The vibration of his low voice against my damp skin is too much for me.

I place my hand on his chest and slip past him. “Right this second? Probably. Yes.”

A little of the happiness glowing in his eyes dims, and I turn to get dressed, packing away my things as he watches me. I'd had most of it all set to go last night. Like he said, I do like to be prepared, and we have to check out before we go to the studio this morning.

God, and what if someone heard us last night? What if they'll be able to tell what happened when they see us?

Orion is behind me again as I place my things by the door, trapping me against it. "Hey. Wait."

I suck in a shaky breath, then another, before I turn in his arms and look into those clear blue eyes.

He searches me for a moment before he kisses me again. It's slow and sweet and full of emotion that I'm not quite ready for. "I don't want this to end once we're home."

He doesn't? I open my mouth, but words fail me. I can't voice all of the problems that could cause for him, especially with his past. It will paint this in such a negative light, even if he's not my professor.

"I know. But just..." Those nimble fingers smooth through my hair, and the move has so much care in it that I break a little bit inside. "Just think about it."

He's still so near, so warm and comfortable and right. I kiss him, letting my attraction to him drive me. As dangerous as this is, I will think about it, and I try to make sure he knows.

Orion doesn't look so worried when I pull back, simply nodding as I press myself against the door.

I point at him. “Behave yourself.”

His laugh eases some of the tension in my shoulders before I shoo him back and take a peek out the peephole. When I see that it’s clear, I grab my things and slip out, going down early to help everyone set up their luggage to be packed into the bus and hand in their room keys.

Breakfast and the half-day on set are a blur. It’s difficult to act normal around everyone else. Orion keeps drawing my gaze, and he’s not so subtle about staring at me.

Leann is sour but quiet, glaring at me, Orion, and the director. She’s even quiet on the ride home, which bothers me more than it should. I want to believe she’s learned a little humility, but I have a bad feeling this isn’t the case.

When we arrive back at the university, I oversee the luggage being taken off the bus and wish each of them a good night before I grab my own.

I even smile at Leann as I hand over her bags. “Have a good night, Leann.”

She huffs and rolls her eyes. “Yeah. Whatever.”

And then, the girl is stomping off to a waiting car. I’m relieved when she’s finally gone. It’s hard to nail down, but I have an inkling that she’s going to be causing trouble before long.

Orion lingers on the sidewalk with me, and once everyone’s gone, he steps nearer. “Can I give you a ride home?”

I smile at him, glad to be back on mostly normal footing. “No. I’ve got one.”

As if on cue, Dad's car pulls into the spot beside the bus.

“I’ll see you tomorrow, though.”

When I turn to the car, Dad waves, and I wave back before planting my hands on my hips at the sight of Noah in his booster seat.

“Aren’t you supposed to be in bed?” I ask as my son clambers out of the car and runs to me. I drop down and open my arms to him for the sweetest hug. We don’t spend nights away from each other if we can help it. Mostly for my own sanity. “Oh, did you miss me?”

He nods into my shoulder as I pick him up, carrying him around the back of the car as I put my luggage in the trunk. I turn to see Orion watching us, his hands in his pockets and head slightly tilted to take all of this in.

What must he think now?

18

CEDRIC

Sofia’s weekend in the city is the perfect excuse to invite her over to discuss her project and how to showcase her experience without breaking the contract she signed. She’s already expressed her want to be open and honest and how this might get complicated.

Nothing like a nice discussion on morality over a private dinner with my student to exacerbate the growing tension between us. It’s not at all a smart idea.

I'm just not sure I care anymore.

My sleeves are rolled up from making dinner, which is in the oven and almost ready to plate when there's a knock at my door.

I wipe my hands clean and open the door to Sofia. She's in a pretty, simple black dress that makes her look so sophisticated and elegant. Sexy. The smile on her red lips, though...

Blood thrums hard in my ears.

Am I an idiot for thinking the way she's dressed up for me means I have a smidgen of hope? And those damn glasses. How much of my thoughts can she see on replay?

Stepping back, I invite her inside with a wave, reaching down to unroll my sleeves and put myself back together. "Please. Come in."

"Don't button back up because of me." Entering my house brings her sweet scent with her, sinking the talons of need into my chest.

I stop as her gaze drops to my forearms, such a common detail in romantic genres that I can't help but feed my own narrative. "Would you like something to drink? Dinner is almost ready."

Those teasing eyes focus on mine. "You cooked?"

An almost smile teases my mouth as I nod, escorting her to my chrome and black kitchen. It's sleek and masculine, yet somehow, she fits in it.

Sofia turns toward the oven, eyes closed as she breathes it in. Ginger, garlic, maple, thyme, and pecans. "What is that?"

“One of my favorites. I have a white to go with it, but I also have water and tea.” I certainly don’t want to pressure her to drink, but she’s old enough and can decide for herself.

“White is fine. Thank you.” She’s moving again, circling the island in my kitchen, fingertips trailing around the edge of the counter with her slow steps. There’s no shyness in the way she takes in the details of my place—how much of it she can see.

The kitchen, dining room, and living room area is one big, open space. Dark woods and pops of white decorate the space. It’s minimal. Clean. Easy. Which almost makes me laugh because I am not an easy man to deal with.

Sofia doesn’t wander far, circling back into the same wedge of space as me.

I have two glasses and pour us both some wine. Her soft thank you as I hand her one tugs at me.

We both take a slow sip without breaking eye contact, and trouble is catching up much faster than I anticipated.

Disarming myself, I turn to the oven to pull out the chicken, too aware of her gaze on me as I do so. The control I must employ has my muscles tight, heat pumping through me. Because I have a feeling she’s going to give me everything I ask for. I just have to let her ask.

I find that I enjoy the way she watches me make up our plates. Maple pecan chicken, the mustard serving sauce, steamed broccoli, and creamy potatoes. Sofia closes her eyes to pull in another deep breath.

She looks right in my eyes when she opens them again, and I feel raw under her gaze. “That looks fancy.”

I nod her over to the table. She grabs the glasses and the wine and follows me over.  
Her soft laughter as I pull the seat out for her needles that control again.

## Page 44

*Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 5:26 am*

No hesitation from her. She's cutting herself a piece to try and freely moaning through her bite as I sit beside her.

The craving to sink my hand into her smooth blonde hair and arch her head back to find other ways to make her moan...

"How are you not married if you can cook like this?"

I shake my head and take my own bite. "Taking no prisoners tonight, are you?"

"You are notoriously single, Mr. Trevino. You must know that. All of the girls gossip about you." She casually takes another bite as if that isn't a bomb she just dropped between us.

"Do they?"

Sofia overly exaggerates her lash flutter. It's enough to crack a smile at the corner of my mouth. "They all want to be Mrs. Trevino. Don't you know?"

Huffing softly, I shake my head again. "I appreciate the compliment, but tell me what kind of footage you got this weekend. I reviewed the contract, and there are some serious parameters to consider as you edit."

"Yeah. It's a good thing I'm not releasing this until after their movie is out. It avoids a lot of the red tape on what I can show. Although, honestly, I think the other stuff around the set with my group will provide enough drama that I doubt I need to include anything that would break the NDA." Sofia takes another elegant bite.

Who taught her to move like that? It must be the time she's spent with her mother in Europe. The culture she's been exposed to.

Why is it so goddamned attractive?

"Elaborate. I don't assume you've already been through the footage or started a rough cut."

"No. I haven't, but the time was eventful. One of the girls in the club got kicked off set." Sofia leans in conspiratorially. "She was drilling one of the lead actors about other things he's been in."

My brows lift on their own. That's a rookie move. Completely outside of normal social etiquette, and to do it on set is a major faux pas. "I bet that will be entertaining in review."

"It was entertaining at the time, too, but yes, I think I will enjoy editing that into the storyline."

"This is the girl who disrupts every meeting and fawns all over Professor Knight, isn't it?"

Sofia blushes. I slam down the urge to pepper her with questions on what that's about. Her footage has shown his keen interest in her and her slow acceptance of it. Has he crossed that line with her this weekend?

Do I have a chance at making something happen between us tonight?

"Yes. Leann. She's a bit of a problem, but there's not much I can do about her attendance. I did fight for her to get let back on set for the next morning, and she wasn't given the chance to misbehave again." The look she gives me is what can only

be deemed as a mom look, like her child should know better.

“I look forward to seeing how you present it.” I take another sip of wine and watch her eat. It’s strange. I’ve never felt anything about feeding someone before, but I’m proud that she likes what I made for her.

That she’s letting me take care of her in this small way.

“Was there anything else that happened during your trip?”

By the way she tosses her hair back and sits up straighter, I know I’ve hit on that sensitive spot. Then her body language shifts, and she looks at me like a sly minx. “I guess you’ll have to wait and see.”

I let out a slow breath and watch as Sofia takes in my features.

She bites her lip, and fuck, I want to sink my teeth into her.

“What kinds of things have you noticed when you review your footage that you didn’t see at the time?”

After a few stunned blinks, she looks down at her plate, over at mine, and back to hers before she sets her fork down. I reach out to take her wrist, making her jump, but she doesn’t pull away.

“Eat.” I’m not sure how she spikes my dominance this way. It takes a few beats for her to nod and me to retract my hand.

Forcing myself to steady my movements, I take another bite. I don’t want to make her feel self-conscious.

She slowly eats again, too, sipping her wine. I know she hasn't forgotten my question, so I wait for her to answer me. The tactic works every time.

*Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 5:26 am*

“I’ve noticed a few relationships might not be quite what I thought at first.” Her voice is soft, subtle, submissive.

God, the image of tying her wrists together, holding her in place as I explore the things she likes done to her has heat expanding through me. My skin tightens with anticipation.

If she can give over her trust to me... Fuck, I’ll ensure that she feels good, make it so she wants to come back for more.

“How do you mean?” I take another bite to keep her moving, to be sure she doesn’t get stuck in the fear driving her right now.

Sofia swirls her fork in the mashed potatoes, using them to stall her answer. She half laughs, half sighs. “It sounds conceited when I say it in my head.”

“Tell me.” The command isn’t a harsh one. Nothing more than I would say in my office, but we’re not in my office. It lands differently.

A new blush creeps across her cheeks, over her throat as she swallows. “That some of the... men in my life... look at me differently than I thought before.”

“Differently how?” Usually, silence is my go-to, but I want her to say it.

Her shoulders wiggle uncomfortably before she peers up at the ceiling, as if praying for strength. “Like... they might be attracted to me.”

I maintain my stare until she meets my gaze. “Has that altered your perspective in any way? Are you picking up on more of those subtleties around you?”

Have you noticed the way you breathe fire into me? Into your father’s friend? Into that golden boy professor?

Can you see my all-consuming desire to dominate your body and demand your pleasure when I look at you?

“Yes and no.” She swirls her wine again, finishing it.

“Would you like some more?”

Sofia shakes her head. Her plate is mostly cleared. Mine is by half, and I don’t think I can wait much longer. Leaning back, I give her my undivided attention. Most have a strong reaction to it. Usually, it’s not a positive one.

But after a minute, Sofia turns toward me, staring back, those camera glasses picking up everything I’m feeling.

“Is this making you uncomfortable?”

Another shake of her head. I’m not used to seeing her so submissive. So quiet and demure. It’s like she knows what I want from her, and she’s trying to give it to me in her own way.

“What do you see when you review our meetings?” It’s a bold question, the one that will give me my next move—wrap this up and escort her out or push her to discover her every little fantasy I know I can provide.

Her gaze drops to my mouth. “Sometimes, I’m not quite sure.”

I stand abruptly, taking her plate and my own into the kitchen. Her gaze follows me, concern etched across her features. Her coyness is self-preservation. But I want her to trust me enough to be honest.

Spotting her bag on the end of my couch, I stop nearby and peer down at it, finally making my decision. I turn back to her and command, "Come here."

I point between my feet.

After only a second of hesitation, she's on her feet, sauntering toward me. The space between us disappears, but I don't touch her yet. I let her simmer in the tension that's swallowing me up.

My resistance is strained, cracked, broken. I tuck her hair away from her face, sliding my finger around the back of her ear as she shivers. Then, I tip her chin up and slowly descend to take the kiss I've been craving these last few weeks.

Her mouth parts automatically, a siren call to the darker parts of myself.

I sweep in and take what I want, feeling her grow pliable against me as I tug her closer. My arm snakes around her waist, holding her tightly. Let her feel the way my cock grows hard between us.

Her hands lift to run over my arms and shoulders, and I delve deeper into her. When her grip tightens at the open collar of my shirt, her hips wiggle against mine, and I must take control.

Sinking my fingers into her hair, I hold her fast, restraining her movements as I give her one last taste of my tongue before I pull my mouth back from hers. Her breath has her breasts heaving against my chest. The sight has me nearly growling.

“Tell me what you want, Sofia.”

## Page 46

*Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 5:26 am*

Softly panting, she looks into me for a few seconds before she licks her lips. “I want to suck your cock.”

With those red, red lips. Fuck, it taps into the unending fantasy on replay in my thoughts. “Then, get on your knees.”

I loosen my hold around her waist but not the one in her hair as she sinks to the floor. She’s forced to look up at me, and she waits for instruction like a good girl.

“Take me out.”

God, she doesn’t hesitate this time, reaching up to unlatch my belt and fly. My stiff cock breaks free the moment she has the zipper down. I loosen my grip on her hair so that she can see me more fully. See what she’s about to take in her mouth.

Her soft moan eats at me, and she looks her fill. My hand in her hair doesn’t let her lean forward to take what she wants. The anticipation winds me tighter.

When her gaze flicks up to mine again, it makes me throb with need. And those fucking glasses. I want to see this from her perspective.

Sofia smiles up at me like she can read my mind. “This is an excellent view.”

Sucking in a slow breath, my voice is low and guttural. I trace my thumb over her bottom lip. “Not as good as this one.”

“I have another pair in my purse.”

My nostrils flare. Did she plan this? Has she known what I want from her this whole time?

Of course she has.

“Stay here. Don’t move.”

Sofia giggles lightly and stays put as I retreat to her purse. “Front pocket.”

They’re easy to find, and I return to her with them on. The way she’s sitting back on her heels, her hands placidly in her lap, reinforces how natural, how perfect she is for this.

I’m so fucking hungry for this. For her.

Even though doing this with her will end badly—it has to—I can’t deny myself.

My cock bobs inches from her face, but I don’t reach for her this time. “Suck me off.”

Her eyes hood, and she reaches for me gently, stroking my length with a few exploratory pumps. When I’m about to chastise her for taking too long, her mouth opens and surrounds the head of my cock.

I let out a long-suffering breath of relief. The sight of my shaft disappearing between her lips has every muscle in my body taut.

It takes a minute before she’s able to swallow me down, but the process is erotic. Her tongue swirls and cups me, and when she retreats, she sucks. Hard, like she’s ready to drain me dry.

I twitch against the roof of her mouth, and she shoves all of me down again, her

throat constricting as she swallows again and again until she has to pull back to breathe.

When my fingers brush over her cheek, her eyes open, and she looks up at me. I hope to all hell that these camera glasses are catching every detail of this because I want to watch this back. I want her to see how beautiful she is when I'm stretching her mouth open. How tears form in the corners of her eyes.

I can't wait to make a complete mess out of her.

19

SOFIA

Have I dreamt about this? Yes. Yes, I have.

Did I ever think it would happen? Not in a million years. Not even with the subtle looks I've caught when reviewing the footage. Trevino isn't as obvious as Orion or Brax. But the slow morphing of his behavior tonight says my instincts were right.

And just as I imagined, his cock is the perfect shape to suck deep into my throat.

When I peek at him, the pleasure and desire on his face make me so wet. Heat floods me. God, I want to make this man lose all control. It's a feat I'm more than willing to work for.

*Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 5:26 am*

After a few languid thrusts, I pull back to suck hard, teasing the bundle of nerves under his head with my tongue and teeth. Not a lot of teeth, but enough to make his hips jerk ever so slightly.

His ragged breaths have me pulling back more to stroke him with my hand.

I lay my tongue flat against the underside of him, telling him without words that I want him to use me. I can see it in him, the way he wants to control and dominate. I want that, too. I've only ever had a taste, but the power he has over me in so many ways makes this all the sweeter.

"What are you asking me for with those big, innocent eyes, Sofia?"

My mouth closes around the tip of him with a slow, sucking kiss that makes him blow air through his clenched teeth.

Then, his hand is in my hair again, yanking me back and forcing me to look him in the eye. "Tell me."

I have to take a second to catch my breath. My nipples are hard and aching against my bodice, my core swollen against my soaked panties. "I want you to fuck my face."

The low growl emanating from him only makes me quiver with unspoken promises.

His thumb strokes my cheek before his hold on me is more solid, more controlling. "If you want me to stop, tap my thigh or hip. Understand?"

“Yes.”

“Do it to confirm.”

I tap the sliver of skin exposed across his hip. Three small taps.

“Good girl. Now open up.”

My mouth barely parts before he’s shoving himself back inside. “Look at me. Don’t break eye contact.”

I hum in response around his invading cock. And fuck, he thrusts into me with long, hard strokes. It takes a minute for me to properly relax, and he pushes deeper, holding me at an angle that makes it so much easier.

I want to grab at him to anchor myself, but I don’t want him to misconstrue my touch as asking him to stop.

Tears stream down my cheeks as I watch the rough, stern features screw up with pleasure, with the effort to take without hurting me. God, it’s the sexiest thing I’ve ever experienced. Because he knows what he’s doing.

When he seems to rail against his own restraints, I can’t help but squirm.

“Are you going to take my cum?” Oh, fuck, his voice is commanding.

I suck in a breath and hum again.

Trevino finds a new pace, a new angle that’s not so deep but still hits the back of my throat. The sound it creates makes me press my thighs together. I’ve always loved the noises that come with good sex.

And his little grunts as I watch the pleasure unravel him above me have me moaning around him.

When his cock starts to pulse against my tongue, he pulls out enough not to choke me with it, and it's easy to swallow down.

The only sound is our heavy breathing as his grip on me slowly loosens. And I'm surprised by the renewed desire in his Mediterranean eyes.

“On your feet.”

My entire body shivers at the command, and he has to help me up, bracing my body with his.

“Are you okay?”

“Yes. God, yes.”

His cheek brushes mine as he leans in. “It's my turn.”

I can't keep in the needy noise that causes, and I clutch at his shoulders with the weakness my desire causes.

“First, I need you to do something for me, Sofia.”

My nod comes fast and clumsy.

“I need you to ask me for it.”

“Please—”

“No. I want you to say, ‘Cedric, I want you to eat my pretty pussy until I come.’ Can you do that?” His hand remains firm at my back, his mouth teasing my earlobe. “Say that for me.”

I struggle with my breath. “Please eat my pussy until I come.”

His grip tightens. “No, Sofia. Not until you repeat what I instructed you to say back to me.”

My entire body is shaking as I try again. “Cedric, I want you to eat my pretty pussy until I come.”

He murmurs against my neck. “Good girl. I’m going to reward you for that.”

And he turns me, guiding me up a sleek set of stairs and into a room that looks much more lived in than the first floor. But I don’t have the time to look around. Cedric’s mouth is on mine as he guides me back into his bed.

“How are you with restraints?”

I stiffen, and he retreats enough for me to properly look at him.

“It’s not a trick question, Sofia.”

“I’ve never...”

His stroke of my cheek is gentle, supportive. “Are you willing to try them?”

I bite my lip and consider it. The way Cedric acts has me trusting him. “If I tell you to stop?—”

“I’ll stop. Immediately. No questions asked.”

After another breath, I nod. “Okay.”

His smile, although small, is like a lash to my heart. God, I want nothing more than to make him happy. Cedric plants another kiss on me, slow and sensual, and then he’s on his feet, pulling bindings out from a drawer and returning with some silk ropes in his hand.

“We’ll start slow,” he promises, having me feel them before he loops them carefully around my wrists. The hold is tight but doesn’t hurt. “Yank against them, let me know if they pinch or hurt anywhere.”

I do as he says, and it’s just restriction. God, I feel like I’m completely at his mercy, and a new wave of heat hits me between my thighs.

“You okay?”

“Yes.” My voice is so much more breath than sound. Who knew this would be so damn hot?

“Good. I’m going to attach you to my headboard now.”

When I nod, he pulls my arms over my head and latches me to a hidden hook in the dark wood of his headboard. Once I’m in place, Cedric’s hands smooth over me, down my arms, around my breasts, over my belly.

He looks like a starving man staring at a feast.

Then, my skirt is bunching in his grip as he hikes the fabric up over my hips, and his palm comes down to stroke me over my panties.

“I can feel how badly you want this.” His touch teases, and I can already tell that he’s going to torment me like this.

He rubs the tip of his finger along my center in sweeping circles until my hips rise with every small stroke. Whimpering finally spurs him on, and I’m thankful for the way he hooks my panties in his grip and inches them down my thighs.

Strong hands slowly spread my knees, and I can feel his breath against my arousal. Another whimper escapes me, but his mouth simply spreads kisses along my inner thighs and hips.

## Page 49

*Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 5:26 am*

It's too long before his hot tongue sinks between my folds in an invasive lick. Not nearly invasive enough, but he plants a sucking kiss over my clit. It wrenches a soft cry from me, popping my head up to watch Cedric smother my core with his mouth.

My thesis advisor is eating out my pussy. Those tanned hands of his are dark against my pale skin.

His Mediterranean eyes flash up to meet my gaze, and he looks like a damn predator.

God, and he eats me so slowly, staring into me like he knows he's going to push me off the edge of the world.

But he doesn't.

Cedric builds and builds and builds me up, and I'm aching when he pulls away and blows a soft, cold stream of air over my slick folds. It stalls me, and I huff a breath, dropping my head back to his mattress.

After half a minute, he lowers his mouth back over me. The climb takes half the time, but he pauses again, massaging the insides of my thighs and just looking at my pussy.

And again I'm close when he stops.

Now, I'm not afraid to whimper, to beg without saying the words, lifting myself toward him as he retreats. I'm a shaking mess, quivering with need. From being denied.

The fourth time, I break down. “Please, Cedric. Please.”

He murmurs against my hip. “Please what?”

Exasperated, I let out a soft cry. “Please let me come.”

“I’m not stopping you, Sofia.”

I scoff and wriggle. Relief can’t be found this way. “Please make me come, Cedric.”

“Ah. That would be more apt. Don’t worry, Sofia, I do plan to make you come. Harder than you ever imagined you could.” But he lingers for another handful of seconds before his mouth finds that slide and rhythm that have me soaring so quickly.

I’m teetering, on the edge, and I pray he won’t pull back this time.

Blissfully, he doesn’t, and my orgasm is powerful, tearing through me and wrenching my muscles as I twist under him.

Yet, his mouth is stuck to my core, sucking my clit as his fingers sink into me. God, the pleasure is almost painful, but it builds again, so, so quickly, and my eyes pop open in disbelief as I come again.

The wailing moan escaping me sounds like that of a wounded animal.

Cedric persists, hands gripping me tightly as I sob.

“I can’t. I can’t.”

“You can.” He’s so damn determined.

Everything's too much. My hands squeeze into fists, bracing me against the binds around my hands, pulling me taut under the pressure of his restraints, and I'm on the brink of falling completely apart when he rips his mouth from me.

I watch blearily as he unleashes his hard cock again, hand under one knee to keep me spread as he rubs himself over my swollen sex.

"I can give you another with my mouth and fingers, or I can fuck you. Tell me which you'd prefer. Now. Before the decision is made for you."

Like that's even a question. "Fuck me."

The tap, tap, tap of his cock against my clit makes me whine.

Then, fuck, his cock is pushing into me, and as wet and warmed up as I am, the burning pressure of him stretching me open has my head flying up to watch. I can just make out the sight of him disappearing inside me.

This is the most erotic experience of my life, both of us still mostly clothed as he pumps himself in demanding thrusts.

I clamp down around him, breathless as I'm shuttled back into pleasure overload. I'm coming. Hard. It's too much.

“No more. No more.”

His cock is relentless, slamming into me at a fast, hard pace.

“Cedric. Please.”

He slows but doesn't stop. “You remember what to do to make me stop?”

I nod, and he smiles. Another small one, but it cuts through me in a way I can't quite put into words.

Hands sliding up my hips and waist, he carefully rolls my dress up over my breasts, then my shoulders, and lets it gather around my elbows. His gaze is like a touch, tracing my hardening nipples and my hourglass shape.

Both of my breasts fit in his hands as he kneads me softly, hips moving at a steady, slow beat. Cedric pinches my nipples, tugging and teasing until he finds what I like.

It floods me with wet heat again, and his hips pick up pace in response.

Once he has me whimpering with need again, he releases my poor, abused nipples and holds my knees together, making me tighten around him.

I'm folded in a few positions before he's hovering over me, one hand beneath my ass and the other lying over my tied wrists. He's got me completely trapped, utterly at his mercy.

What ends me is the frenzy in his eyes, the intensity when he comes. Everything else about him is in control, but I can see the chaos in how he looks at me.

I don't ever want to be looked at another way.

20

BRAXTON

Sofia has been over regularly to visit Birdie. She insists that I stop paying her, so I make her dinner. It's a strange in-between place we're sitting in since we crossed that line to sex. A memory I play on repeat, improving on it, progressing it.

But after I saw the rough cut she did and how she kept what we did in there—even the barest hint of it... Fuck, it drove me mad.

Almost as mad as seeing that new film professor flirting with her, and the way Cedric responded to her in our meeting. It's building and building inside me.

I've become obsessed.

Yet, since I saw her in her advisor's office, we haven't had the time to unpack it. To either shut it down or proceed with what we've started.

I want more of her—of her touch, of her skin, of her mouth and her smiles, of her staying late or maybe over. If I allow myself, I'll tumble down the rungs of a relationship with her before she takes the first step.

She's upstairs with my daughter. I can hear their giggles through the floor. My happiness is a kind of anguish. I just want to know what my boundaries are.

When she comes downstairs, Sofia pauses in the kitchen where I've been lurking.

"Hey," she says, looking me over.

"Hey. You two are done?" My voice is gruffer than I intend.

I get a smile from her, though. "Yeah. You get all your work done tonight?"

"I did." Clearing my throat is loud and sounds aggressive. The downfall to being a big man. "Would you like to stay for a drink? Do you need a ride home?"

Sofia sets her bag down in one of the kitchen chairs and closes much of the space between us. "I can stay for a drink. I haven't texted Dad yet."

Is that an opening she's offering me? It feels like one.

I grab her a glass and pour her a finger of whiskey, refilling my own with two. She playfully clinks our glasses together before taking a sip. I'm much slower, stuck watching her and packing away every morsel I can grab.

"What?" she asks.

“What?”

“You’re smiling.”

For some reason, that makes me laugh. It does nothing to dampen the tension. I shrug. “Sometimes, you’re so full of life that I feel imbued with it.”

Her laughter is a caress. I down my whiskey and set the glass aside.

“Did I overstep last time?” It’s an abrupt question, but I need to know the answer.

Her glass clinks on the counter, too, and I follow the movement. “No. Not at all.”

Prodded forward, I step into her space, trapping her against the counter and brushing our noses together. “Then this is okay?”

Incredible how right it feels. How such a small bit of contact can both settle and invigorate me.

Sofia tips up, pressing her mouth against mine in a soft, tentative sweep.

Fuck, yes. The relief sways my body into hers, a light pressure that makes me glad my palms are firmly planted on the counter behind her hips. I want to enjoy this sweet, slow kiss, the way she so easily twists me up with the simplest touch.

When her mouth opens and our tongues touch, tentative and slow dissolve. Sofia’s hands crawl up me, pulling at my shirt. My hunger defeats my common sense. Hands

circling her hips, I lift her to the edge of the counter and step between her thighs.

Her grip on me changes, her legs coming around my waist in a silent invitation that sends me reeling. Rocking us together elicits a small moan in the back of her throat. God, I remember that sound.

I slide my touch up her back, delighting in her shiver. When my fingers tangle in the ends of her hair, I tug her head back and drop kisses along her neck.

Nails dig into my shoulders. I'm so fucking hard that it hurts. Would she let me carry her upstairs to my bedroom? Is that too presumptuous?

I nibble on her earlobe and whisper her name against her damp skin.

"Brax." Her voice is so soft that the baser parts of me thaw, ready to want things that I haven't in such a long time. "I think the smart move here is to take me somewhere with more privacy."

She's right. The shower has just shut off, which means Birdie will be stepping out of it any minute. "Hold on."

Her hold on me tightens as I lift her in my grasp and do exactly what I hoped to. I carry her up to my room. The door snaps shut, and I push her against it, reveling in how much of her is pressed against all of me.

Sofia, as sexy as she always is, touches me sweetly, caressing the side of my face and smirking at me.

"Did you like that show of masculine strength, Sofia?"

That cracks a bigger smile across her face. "I did. This one, too. I'm not petite."

“You’re the perfect armful.” I grumble it under her ear, right where I know it catches her breath, and it does, curling her nails into my shoulders again. “I love that noise you make that’s almost silent.”

Nipping her has her gasp and arch to expose her throat to me. I feast on her exposed flesh until she’s wriggling in my hold.

I turn and march us to my bed, letting her bounce gently beneath me. Those pretty blue eyes peer up at me, darkening as her pupils blow wide. Her blonde hair spreads across my dark comforter, and I can’t resist running my fingers through it.

She shines as she laughs without making a noise, fingers splaying across my cheek before she lifts to kiss me again.

I must still have the skills I had as a lad because she wiggles, arches, squeezes her knees around me. Before long, we’re dry humping each other, our bodies fitting together perfectly.

Cradling the back of her head, I’m nibbling my way down her exposed chest. “I want you naked, under me.”

“Well, we’re halfway there. What’s holding you back?” The need in her voice builds my confidence.

“I don’t want to presume,” I murmur against her breastbone.

“Here’s your permission. Show me what you’ve got.”

*Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 5:26 am*

My head dips to her chest as I let out a hard laugh. She giggles with me, more so when I rear back and strip her shirt off her. A thin pink slip of a bra holds in her ample bosom, and I test the bounds with my hands, kneading her gently.

I'll strip that off her after I get these jeans off her. They're tight, but a few sharp tugs have me gathering the fabric in my hands and tossing them over the corner of the bed.

Her panties match, and I can just make out the small dark patch of her trimmed pussy beneath. I bend to press my mouth over her covered mound, kissing and laving the tender spot at the apex of her sex.

A shaky moan has my muscles tightening. I want to be inside her when she comes this time.

I rear back over her, and I must look wild with the way her eyes widen. Then, her hands are pushing my shirt up under my arms so that I have to aid her in removing it. I eagerly do so, soaking in the way her touch smooths over my torso.

It only takes a minute to shed the rest of our clothes, and I'm nestled between her thighs. Her palms spread across my chest and shoulders as her bare legs squeeze around me. The heat of her core as she cups me against her folds has me quaking with my need to claim her.

With a few rotations of my hips, I'm in place to glide inside her, and the tilt of her hips has me pushing in. Fuck. She's tight. Wet. I want all of her. Every inch.

We glide together, bodies in sync, working to have me fill her up completely. It takes

a few thrusts to seat myself, and when I pause, I feel her clamp down on me.

Sofia seems to revel in the groan I drop against her neck. Her hand splays across the back of my head. I suppose she likes all the little things I do with my mouth.

Slowly, we rock against each other again, building a rhythm that's steady and so fucking good. I could make this hard and quick, but I want to enjoy every little nuance and pleasure point I can find. I'm not going to do that by going too fast.

What I will allow myself is to lift above her, sharpening the angle and sending me deeper as I watch her mouth gape from noiseless pleasure. Every thrust sends her breasts bouncing, her hips rocking, and her grip finds my forearms as she holds onto me.

Fuck, her head lifts to watch where we're joined. She did last time, too, and it turns me on to know she enjoys the view.

Then, I remember her glasses, and I touch them gently.

Her gaze lifts to mine, searching. "Do you mind?"

I shake my head. "No, Soph. I don't mind, but I wouldn't say no to getting my hands on some of that footage. It might keep me going between tastes of you."

The sly look she gives me says she agrees. She lifts her shoulders to kiss me, hard and hungry, until I've almost forgotten the absolute turn-on of having every moment of this captured on video. Of her watching the footage back.

When her mouth falls from mine, I brace on my palms, and the right angle and the right force have her mouth open in pleasure, the wet slap of my hips against her thighs echoing between us.

Fuck, Sofia is so goddamn sexy.

I reach down for her knee and shift the angle of her hips. The low groan she gives me tells me I've found what I'm looking for. Her body coils tight, and I'm relentless, not pounding but giving her enough force that her eyes roll back.

Yes. Fucking yes, Soph. Come for me.

She whines like I've been whispering those words to her like a prayer. And maybe I have been.

Her orgasm hits her hard, making her rigid and then fluid until I slow to a soft rocking.

"So fucking beautiful when you come."

Her whimper prompts a pout, which I kiss away.

"It's one of my new favorite things."

Laughter squeezes her around me, and I groan.

"God, you're still so hard."

"That's right, love. I'm not done with you yet."

The naughty grin lighting up her features has me glowing inside, too. I'm completely enamored with her. And there's nothing that can change that.

SOFIA

Jordan and I go to a local pottery class. This, I'm much better at than the pole dancing or the knitting videos we tried to learn from a few weeks ago. Something about just getting my hands onto something and using my instincts to create art feels natural.

It's close enough to my editing work that I feel somewhat confident. Not that confidence makes me produce anything someone would buy—other than maybe my mother. But it's fun, and I get to take out some of my anxiety and burnout on the lump of clay.

Not that I don't have other ways of working out my frustrations, but time and opportunity seem to be at play here.

Jordan knocks her shoulder into mine, and my wobbling vase falls completely on the wheel. We both laugh.

“You have to share details about the lumberjack. I know you've been over there a lot. Please tell me more has happened.” Her dark eyes are begging me for something juicy.

I'm glad she's speaking in code out in public. Anyone who may have seen me with Braxton, Orion, or Cedric might catch on eventually, but stories are about the details, so I simply won't give the telling ones here. “Something more has happened.”

I wiggle in my seat and smash my clay back into a lump to begin again.

She gasps in mock shock. “Did he throw you over his shoulder and take you to bed?”

“Not over his shoulder, but he did manage to carry me up the stairs.” My eyes widen at the implication. I’m not a delicate flower. It takes real power to carry me up those eight steps. Braxton did it without any outward strain.

Her eyes go wide and sultry. “Oh, did he...”

I bite my lip to hide my grin. He was sexy and romantic and more than eager to enjoy every part of me. So completely different, but no less intense than Cedric or Orion. God, the three of them get past my boundaries in different ways.

I’ve never been so relaxed and satisfied.

“Oh, my God, you are holding back on me.” Jordan leans in. “I know about Golden Boy, but the Task Master... I’ve seen the footage and how he looks at you.”

My friend mimes swinging a whip, providing the sound effect, too.

I can feel my face burning hot, and Jordan pumps a dirty fist in the air, splattering someone next to her.

“Oh, I’m so sorry.” The easy way she disarms conflict makes me jealous. I’m usually too stern or too silly. “I’ve just learned that my new best friend is exploringallof her options, and I’m pumped. You know?”

The middle-aged woman laughs. “Do it while you’re young before life gets in the way.”

I’m ducking my head a little. I’ve only slept with two guys before I somehow stumbled into a trio. I worry the inside of my cheek over the fact that I’m not really in

a relationship with any of them. No one has mentioned exclusivity, but somehow, the speed with which we've each fallen together makes me feel... off.

Not exactly like I'm wrong, but like I should be more honest with them.

"Oh, no, what is that face all about?"

I lift my gaze to meet Jordan's. Most of her silliness has bled away, and I sigh. "Just had a serious thought is all. You know, about being a respectful adult."

"Mmm." She digs her thumb into her lump of clay and makes the wheel spin. "Respect is important, but also, don't throw a bomb into the fun while it's still just fun. I mean, I know for some, sex can't just be fun. From our talks, I think you're on the fence with that. Let it come up naturally so that everything else has room to build."

My shoulders slump, the tension releasing. She's right, of course. If I jump on this now—tell them about each other—I'll just ruin everything. They all enjoy my company for sure, and vice versa, but I'm not ready to rule anyone out yet.

I build a new vase between my hands. "I think you're right."

Jordan grins, back in fun mode. "Of course I'm right. Besides, we have so many details to cover before you're allowed to get sappy on me."

Mood lightening, I lower my voice and give her every juicy, non-incriminating detail possible. It draws in the older ladies around us, and we devolve into the dirtiest and silliest and somehow most serious conversation I've ever had with a group of strangers.

We don't feel so much like strangers by the time Jordan and I leave the place. Our

shoulders keep bumping into each other as we walk and giggle our way back to campus. But I swear, the moment my feet hit the sidewalk at the edge of campus grounds—the one by my favorite café—an alarm must go off on Orion's phone because he's striding toward me with a purpose, slow and confident.

Jordan grabs my arm with a tight squeeze. "I guess I'll see you later."

And she's backing away, waving her goodbyes before I can even respond.

## Page 54

*Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 5:26 am*

Orion intercepts me as I turn back to send her a look for abandoning me. She just gives me the all-knowing, Go Get Himeyes.

Sighing, I really can't complain, not when I see the earnest emotion swimming in Orion's clear blue gaze.

"Hey." His voice is low and soft and far, far too intimate. We haven't found time to be alone, although he's snuck a few minutes of hand holding here and there, one small kiss.

He's been pretty respectful by letting me think about this whole thing.

"Hey," I say, swaying a little as he simply looks me over.

"Did you need a ride somewhere? Or can I walk with you?"

The attention makes me blush, but I nod. "Sure. Come on."

Thank God for Jordan. My hang-ups have all but melted away as we walk in silence. We're on campus, so he doesn't try to touch me. I get it. But I'm more than aware of how close he is. Of how he watches me in ways that don't seem obvious.

"Were you out for a girls' night or something for your project?" Orion breaks the steady silence, and his pinky brushes mine. We're back to these games, and I can't say I'm upset about it.

I like how easygoing he is. How he can be young with me, even if he's more serious

than I gave him credit for previously.

“Both? The project dictated the activities, and it’s a girls’ night because Jordan is fun to be around.”

“Good.” It’s almost a good-humored chuckle disguised as a word.

I grin and don’t tell him that we were talking about him, but the tension between us is clear enough that I don’t have to.

Peeking at him catches his gaze, and I lose myself for a few steps before I have to watch where I’m going.

We seem to be meandering toward where I usually park, where Orion likely has his car. But he steers me toward the building instead of the lot. I don’t ask a single question. I could, and it would derail this forward momentum, but I don’t want to.

He’s pulled his keys out and lets me into a large, shared office. It’s packed with books and notebooks, props and cubbies of equipment. It’s otherwise empty.

The moment the door snaps closed, my back meets it, and Orion is nearly pressed against me. His hands bracket my head, and he looks like he’s debating whether or not to touch me.

My bag falls from my fingertips with a soft thump, and I smooth my palms up his back. He crumples into me, the entire line of our bodies meeting before his mouth lowers to mine. His kiss is intense but slow, like he’s not in a rush. Like he has all the time in the world to enjoy this moment.

So I make myself pump the brakes a little, running my hands over the tight muscles of his back and shoulders. It keeps us pressed together, surging in shallow waves as I

grow hot. Orion tugs my knee up over his hip, and fuck, I can feel how hard he is—how affected.

I sink a hand into his soft golden waves, and our mouths break apart. We both pant for air, for control, for the awareness to remember where we are.

“If I thought that walk would end this way, I’d have steered you to my apartment instead. Much comfier furniture for this kind of thing.”

I laugh. It’s so easy for him, and I like how much he can make me laugh.

“How far of a walk is it to your apartment?” I trace my nail down the back of his ear, and he shivers, pressing his hips into mine a little harder.

“Twenty minutes.” The words are huskier than before. “Three-minute drive, though.”

I glance to the side where an analog clock hangs. It’s nearly eight.

My nail makes a trail down the underside of his perfectly cut jaw, and his head tilts back as his eyes flutter closed. I want to keep kissing him. But not here.

“I have another hour before I need to be home. We’d better drive.”

Orion searches my eyes for a second before he steps back and picks up my bag. We scamper to his car, and once it’s in motion, I reach across the small barrier between us and run my hand over his knee, making a slow glide up his thigh.

He lets out a sharp breath and his knuckles turn white against the steering wheel.

I’m in my element now, watching him sweat. I don’t stop my hand as I creep toward his erection. I smooth my palm over him and squeeze.

*Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 5:26 am*

Orion gives me a garbled moan, part shock and more pleasure. His mouth hangs partially open as I fondle and tease his length.

When I unzip him, he drops one hand from the steering wheel to give me space. Such a smart move. It gives me better access to pull him out and properly stroke him.

His hand tangles in my hair as we come to a stop sign, and he pulls me into a short but intimate kiss. I grin when he pulls back to keep driving, a wild look blooming in his features.

I want to push him even farther. Decision made, I lean down, braced over the small armrest between us, and spread my tongue across the head of his cock.

Orion's hand tightens in my hair. "Oh, fuck."

Mmm. He sounds reverent as I suck him fully into my mouth. I lose myself to the taste of him, the pressure of his hand in my hair, the string of swear words falling from Orion.

The car jerks to a stop, and his hips start to lift under my suction, seeking his pleasure.

We must be at his apartment, but I don't stop, too drunk on the noises he makes—most of them quiet and stifled—until he holds me still, pulling himself free and lifting me for a devastatingly hot kiss.

Orion's on the brink, but he's careful as he pulls my bottom lip into his mouth.

“Come with me inside.”

22

SOFIA

I have never had such a busy social life before. I’ve always had blinders on, focusing on my son and my degree and my passion. I’ve always had a big project going on.

Pretty sure I get that from Mom.

But Dad seems to have an ever-revolving cache of research to complete.

In any case, it’s been a lot of fun to have more people, but I’m losing sleep. The exhaustion is catching up with me during the day.

Over the last couple of weeks, I’ve kept things as discreet as possible. Still, there’s this feeling of being watched, which I can’t ignore the irony of. It’s getting to me. A few times since the club returned from the city, I’ve had Dr. Squires hovering around, her attention like a cold touch.

She was one of my freshman professors, and we got along most of the time, but I always got the impression that she thought I was competing with her for some reason.

Not one of my favorite classes. Squires and I just didn’t agree on what made a good film. That sucked. Also, the babysitting incident.

Whatever. It steered me away from her in my future classes, and we’ve never had any extra interaction, but now...

She follows me around the lab like I’m suspicious.

Which might be why I'm not so surprised when she hails me in the hallway by Cedric's door with a wave of the hand and a snooty, "Sofia."

"Good morning, Dr. Squires."

"Yes, yes. Good morning. You know, it's funny, Sofia, I've been hearing whispers about you." What I'm sure is mock concern lifts her henna-dyed brows high on her forehead. She delicately uses a dark-painted nail to pull her honey-orange hair from her forehead.

"I wouldn't put much stock in gossip," I say because really, how else am I supposed to respond to this?

"Yes, well, at first, I dismissed them, but then some... very compelling evidence came my way." She taps her pointy chin with that fingernail. "I wonder what the dean would think if this got out?"

Is she purposely being vague? I blink at her. If she's waiting for me to confess, she's going to be waiting for a long time.

"What your father might think." Her dark green eyes narrow at me, taking stock of my person, my admittedly creative outfit—I like color, sue me—and coming to some kind of judgment.

My weight shifts my stance. "I'm sorry, are you accusing me of something? I'd love for you to clarify that—on record."

Her lips purse as she finally looks me in the eyes. She has no idea what I'm talking about, but she won't say as much.

*Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 5:26 am*

“You know, students talk, and some of the steamy stories I’ve heard about the men in your life...” Squires waves her hand like she’s dissipating the steam. “Well, I’d hate for the wrong person to hear them, wouldn’t you?”

Her tone strives for concern, but it’s a bit flat. There’s a gleam in her eyes that reminds me of a spider waiting for their prey to fly into their trap. It’s a poorly laid one, like she has no choice but to escalate the rumors if I don’t explain my personal life to her.

“I’m sorry, you’re trying to accuse me of what... sleeping my way to success? That’s a bold claim, especially without proof. Without so much as a name...” I let out a soft, indignant laugh, because let’s face it, I’m growing offended. “Wouldn’t want to see your reputation suffer if people think you’re spreading false claims.”

Dr. Squires barely blinks back at me, and I wish I could say I didn’t see this coming. The old professor from three years ago stands before me, sure that we’re competing over something I can’t see.

However, if this is some kind of game, I don’t plan on losing.

Her gaze drifts to Cedric’s door for a second before her brows furrow. “See, I thought you might respond with more serious concern. You’ve worked hard to build your reputation in this program, and I fear your work won’t be taken seriously when everyone knows how you got certain... opportunities.”

“Oh, no, you caught me. I guess I’ll have to quit school and live in shame forever. Tragic.”

What fucking opportunities does she think I've gotten? I'm Film Club's president. I'm working on a project with an eleven-year-old artist. I'm filming my senior thesis project. I go to class and have fun with my friend and stay home with my son.

I can't imagine why Squires feels like she needs to insert herself in my business.

Unless she's had her eye on one of the men and I've gotten in her way?

If that's true, it's certainly not my fault.

The fact that I'm getting absolutely no special treatment, the fact that only Cedric is in charge of my grade in a pass-fail capacity, means little. Yet, each one of them could get in trouble for simply being a teacher at the university since I'm a student.

And that really sucks.

I should really brace each of them for the possibilities. And for the fact that there's three of them.

My back teeth grind together, and I try to look bored. Not freaking out over here.

Squires leans in, a smug smile curling at the edge of her lips.

"You might think you're untouchable, Sofia, but secrets have a funny way of getting out. And when they do... Well, I just hope you're ready for the fallout."

Dr. Squires straightens, smoothing her blouse like she hasn't just threatened me.

What exactly does she want from me? What is her purpose here?

Crossing my arms, I do not understand her. Or other women who act like her. I shrug,

lacking any other response to her threat. She'll either do it or she won't. I have no control over her actions.

I do have this recorded, though. It doesn't look good for her.

Not that it looks great for me.

"Enjoy the rest of your semester." Then she walks away—calm, confident, and far too pleased with herself.

I can only prepare for what she might say.

23

ORION

I pause at the end of the hall when I see Constance Squires leaning in toward Sofia in a leering manner. Anger and dread flare in the pit of my stomach as her features transform into an acrid smile. I'm stuck in place, knowing I can't step in between whatever is going on in case it's about me.

I struggle to not follow her around the lab or stick around too long after Film Club. To not watch her all the time.

Perhaps I'm failing miserably at being subtle. I'm sure to flirt with others in the office, making it a type of my personality so that no one has any idea who I'm actually interested in, but that might be backfiring, too.

Dr. Squires stomps away, and I approach slowly, catching Sofia by the arm as the other professor disappears in the stairwell. Soph starts and spins toward me, her eyes wide. My hand trails down to hers, grasping her fingers for a few seconds before she

pulls away.

*Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 5:26 am*

The way she looks around has my gut clenching further in distress. Their encounter did have something to do with me.

Still, I can't help but ask, "What's wrong?"

Her shoulders pull back, and she stands tall. "Nothing. Don't worry about it."

No. Don't do that. Tell me. I search her gaze and step closer. "I kind of feel like I need to worry about it."

Her eyes close briefly. "Not here."

Fuck. Someone's suspicious of us and our secret relationship. The way she presses her lips together is a clear sign that she's trying to protect me.

Thank God she has the control because I want to wrap her up and hold her until that tension is gone.

"We should go set up for the short film." Sofia pushes her hair out of her face and takes a deep breath.

"Yeah. That's the reason I'm looking for you." Because she's always early, and she wasn't there when I went to pick up the stuff to take to the film location.

Sofia nods, so I lead. We have a lot to do to prep for filming before anyone else gets there. But she's so quiet behind me.

Not the comfortable kind.

Film Club has grown tense over the last few weeks as they've workshopped the script from Michelle.

Leann has been giving everyone more attitude, questioning every decision Sofia makes, to the point that Sofia has had to shut her down.

"Why do you get to make the final decisions? Everyone just blindly follows you."

"Because I'm the club president."

"I thought this was a democracy. I didn't vote for you."

"That's because we have the vote at the end of the year."

But she's shut down again in the middle of formulating her next comment. "I can't baby you for the entire hour. Either you're here to be a productive member of the team or you're wasting all of our time. So choose."

Leann gives her a calculated look but stays.

It's made Sofia so much more serious on campus, so I try not to push. I know she relaxes when she's at my apartment, so it can't be me. Right?

Setup goes quickly, mostly smoothly.

That same weird tension is growing as Leann powders Sue's face to be on camera.

They're just blocking this out on camera to determine the best shots. It's a learning experience, after all, and the younger students shadow the older ones.

Sofia is amazing, taking charge when there are questions or disagreements and standing back when they seem to be figuring it out themselves.

Usually, I would be happy that a student like Leann has learned to back off, but since she's stopped obnoxiously flirting with me, she's started sending me death glares instead. And that doesn't bode well, either.

The fact that the attitude shift happened directly after the trip to New York City is what has me on edge. I can deal with a student hating me for half a semester. A whole semester, even, if the other option is whatever she thought was going on before.

But the worry is, does she know about what happened between Sofia and me while we shared a room? Does she even know that we shared a hotel room? Does anyone? Sofia was so careful coming and going.

It's not something that can be changed now, at any rate, but the worry only tightens around my ribs the longer I think about it.

Leaning against a far wall to observe and stay out of the way, I earn another glare. The teacher in me stares back, challenging her with her own emotions. Are you being a mature adult right now? I ask without a word. It's the best response I've got.

I'm hoping to God that the animosity—although obviously jealousy—is about how solid of a team Soph and I have become during club meetings. Really, I try to stay out of most of it, but this girl has made this project far more difficult and trying than it needs to be.

*Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 5:26 am*

That has to be it. Because I'm always aware of Leann when she's around. I'm always careful around her. But students talk.

I don't think I've been too obvious.

But apparently, whatever I've done has been enough to garner suspicion.

Staying out of the way works for me today, but there's still tension with every stomp and huff and look from Leann.

I'm not the only one to earn her ire, either. Sofia takes the brunt of it, but the other students are shooting her looks and rolling their eyes at her behavior, her general attitude.

They were more open with her when she was just self-centered and high-energy. Now, no one seems to want to give her any leniency.

Ryan meanders my way during one of the breaks in shooting. "Is there any way to kick that chick out of the club? She's annoying as fuck."

I shake my head at him. "Sorry. Not unless she does something more than having a bad attitude."

Ryan groans. "No one wants her here, though. I don't know why she's sticking around."

He's right. She doesn't seem to want to be here any more than the other students want

her here. I have a bad feeling that I know why.

Worry roots deeper.

I leave during a break to grab lunch for the club. Hopefully, my absence will help defuse some of the strain on the group.

But when I return, I see Leann and Sofia talking low, too near each other. Too separate from the rest of the group.

Sofia is taller, towering over Leann with her hands on her hips.

Leann is red in the face, her hands balled into fists like she might throw a punch.

Shit. Shit. Shit.

I hastily set the boxes and bags on a nearby table and start toward them, but Collin steps in my way, shaking his head. He looks serious, and I know Sofia can handle herself. She's the one in charge.

I'll probably muck it up if I get involved, but my instincts scream to intervene. Taking a deep breath, I stay back with the other students, all of whom are standing there silently, looking at their phones, giving the scene their backs, trying to let Sofia take care of the problem.

How many of them have talked to her about Leann?

Is her inability to do anything formal about it why Ryan came to me today?

Sofia is trying to keep the volume down. They're already making enough of a scene, and she's trying to minimize it.

Leann hisses something under her breath, her cheeks so red and her eyes glowing with fury.

I can't hear it, but Sofia's response is clear enough for me to catch.

"Jealousy doesn't look good on you, Leann."

Well, fuck.

24

SOFIA

Fuck. I'm late.

I'm late. I'm late. I'm late.

And I'm running for Cedric's office. Literally running. I don't run. Not unless it's a life or death situation.

*Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 5:26 am*

But Noah had a messy morning. An emotional one. It's not normal, which made it all the messier. My poor boy. He's not sure what to do with all of his big emotions sometimes.

We had gotten a special treat earlier in the week that went bad before he could finish it, and he let loose those crocodile tears. I break when I see him cry like that.

It took us both a while to calm down.

Now, it's ten after nine, and I am late. I'm puffing out of breath when I slide in front of Cedric's closed door.

Weird. He usually leaves it open unless he's in a meeting.

I suck in a few more breaths to try and even it out before I knock tentatively.

"Come in." His voice is soft and muffled as he calls me inside.

Opening the door sends me into a bit of a tailspin, already fragile from my morning.

Brax and Orion are standing around Cedric's desk, and the look all three of them are giving me has me closing the door behind me and leaning back against it to brace myself.

"What's going on?"

I just decided yesterday that I needed to talk to all three of them about Dr. Squires'

confrontation and Leann's outburst. Orion knows the basics since he walked in on the tail end of both, but I didn't prepare for this enough.

And now that I'm faced with it, I'm freezing.

Slowly, I meet each one of their gazes in the silence that spreads. Heat pumps deeper into me as they look at me.

Cedric already knew, mostly, about the other two based on the rough cut videos I submit every week. I leave traces of them in there.

But it's obvious that they are all aware of each other now. Of what I've been doing with each of them. Of how very selfish I've been.

When Jordan and I talked about keeping them to myself so that I didn't push any of them away, I'm not sure this situation came to either of our minds as a possibility.

Cedric leans back in his chair, hands bridged together in front of him. "Gentlemen. Take a seat."

They do, taking the two empty seats across from his desk as Cedric watches me. His gaze is a solid touch along my body as I try not to shake. From anticipation or fear, I'm not really sure.

His head tilts to the side as he examines me. This is the version of him I experienced that first night at his house. Not that he hasn't been intense and dominant since, but maybe I've grown used to it.

"Come here, Sofia." He pushes his chair back and gestures to the spot between him and his desk.

Our gazes are locked, and he's challenging me to own up to my own choices. I push off the door and walk slowly around the desk to stand in front of him.

Brax and Orion's gazes are solid along my back. It's an effort to keep my breathing even.

Cedric's Mediterranean eyes hold mine for a long beat, and I think I know where this is going. Not that we have a routine—how someone like Cedric could have a routine in bed, I'm not sure—we do have a few things we both really, really enjoy with each other.

“On your knees.”

I pull in a slow breath as I sink down between his thighs, my hands braced against his lap. His cock is hard and straining against the front of his slacks, but I don't touch him yet. Not until he tells me to.

That stern look softens a fraction as he traces a finger across my forehead, tucking the loose strands away from my face before he tilts my chin up. Cedric runs his thumb over my bottom lip, and I let my mouth part at his touch.

His thumb dips between my lips to press along my tongue. Nostrils flare. He approves.

With his other hand, he undoes his belt and unzips his slacks. When he pulls himself free, I'm drowning in need and nerves. Even though I know he will take care of me.

“Open.”

I do as he instructs, opening my mouth wide enough for him to fit.

“Don’t move.”

A shiver ripples through me, but I brace my hands on my thighs and wait for his next move.

Cedric sinks a hand in my hair, using my bun as a handle to pull me forward. The head of his cock runs around my lips before he sets himself against my tongue.

God, why is this so hot?

When he pulls me slowly down his length, my pulse thunders in my ears, but it’s not loud enough to hear the strangled breathing behind me, the low groan as all three of them watch Cedric work his way down my throat.

“Open your eyes. Stay here with me.” Cedric’s voice is nearly a growl.

My eyes open at his command, staring straight into his Mediterranean ones. He holds my gaze as he thrusts me over himself. Tears gather, ready to leave streaks down my face. But the way he looks at me has me overheating.

Like a sex god, he looks ready to devour me and make me enjoy every single moment of it.

I never thought I’d like this so much, but I do. I give in to it, and Cedric moans in approval. And it feels too soon when he pulls me back. I’m panting, mouth open and waiting for more, but his thumb circles my lips.

“On your feet.”

When I wobble, Cedric braces me, turning me around and leaning me back against his chest as I face the other two men in my life. What will they think of me after that display?

Their gazes are hot, filled with desires I can't quite read but want to unearth in full.

Cedric smooths my hair back and whispers in my ear, “Bend over and brace yourself.”

Shivering, I do as I'm told, bending over his desk, braced on my forearms as Cedric rubs my lower back and ass. It's the one day I don't wear something with easy access.

“Mouth open, Sofia. Let one of them take you now.”

He must make a gesture behind my back because Braxton stands and towers over me. He's so big. So much man. I want every inch of him.

I present my open mouth to him, straining my neck to look up at him.

His thumb runs under my lip as he looks down at me. “You okay?”

I nod. It's small but clear enough because his voice rumbles with need. Maintaining eye contact while he frees himself has me breathing a little faster.

Cedric is a steady presence at my back, hands running in slow, soothing circles over my hips.

The desire to glance at Orion is strong—just to see how he's reacting—but now isn't the time. It's about Braxton. His brown eyes darken as he pulls his cock out into his

hand.

My tongue curls in anticipation, and the moment his head makes contact, I close around him, sucking, working to draw more of him into my mouth. His breath seems to devolve into a low growl as his fingers slip into the hair at the back of my head, supportive and firm.

Braxton is not a demanding lover. He's a giving one.

Today, I want to give. Give back to all three of them for how I've fumbled in navigating this.

It's not like I won't get everything I give back. Not with how the three of them operate.

Once Braxton has a slow but steady rhythm, Cedric's attention shifts between my thighs, stroking along my core over my tight jeans, rubbing me just where I want him. But there's too much in the way for it to do more than make me ache.

I moan around Braxton's cock and feel his grip tighten before loosening again. He doesn't move me over him the way Cedric did. He flexes his hips, the muscles only hinting at his overall strength.

As dark as his gaze gets, he looks down at me like I'm a gift. And I want to be that for him.

It's hard to keep my attention fully on him, though, with the way Cedric is rubbing me. Then his hands slide along the front of me, expertly undoing the fly of my jeans and working them down my hips and ass until he has them tangled around my knees.

His hands knead my bare cheeks with a low murmur of pleasure before I feel his cock

rubbing along the thin line of my thong. I moan again, wanting what he's teasing me with.

## Page 61

*Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 5:26 am*

Cedric makes me wait another minute, and I'm so damn wet that when he tugs my thong to the side and slides his cock inside me, I'm slick enough to take all of him in one thrust. He grinds against me with a soft noise.

"Fuck." Braxton swears, angling me a little lower to properly thrust down my throat. It's not wild, but I can feel the small changes in him.

I've never been taken by two men at once—let alone three—but I want to make every one of them feel good. To make them come. To give them the permission to take whatever they need from me.

Cedric is near motionless behind me, seated deep in my pussy as Braxton thrusts a little harder. But after a minute, I feel his retreat before he pulls away.

He takes a few deep breaths and steps back, knuckles white as he grips himself. I whimper with the loss.

"You still have one more to take before the real fun begins, Sofia." Cedric's grip in my hair turns me toward Orion.

He squeezes his erection through his slacks, pupils blown as he peers at me from his seat.

I lick my lips at him, and it shoots him to his feet.

When I suck him into my mouth, his moan grinds between his teeth.

And finally, Cedric moves behind me, a slow thrust that has my knees shaking. So much hotter than I could even fathom.

I'm so turned on that it won't take much to make me come, and Cedric seems to know that, keeping me just far enough away from that edge that I can concentrate on sucking Orion's cock.

Orion is the noisier of the three, although it's obvious he's tamping it down because of where we are. He doesn't take me hard, letting me suck and swirl until his thighs shake. Only then does his grip on me tighten.

By some unspoken agreement, he doesn't finish in my mouth either. Taking a step back, he spreads my spit over his cock with a few quick strokes before slowing.

Cedric slides an arm across my shoulders and hauls me back against his chest, the angle of his cock pressing on a sensitive spot in my core that has me biting back a small cry. His big hand braces across my throat—not squeezing but creating just enough pressure to quiet me.

His thrusts elongate, grow harder, taking me the way I need to come. And as he's proven time and again, he can keep me coming.

My body grows loose, fluid as he leverages me back into him, the slap of his hips against my ass almost as loud as his breath in my ear.

“Are you going to be a good girl and come for me?”

“Mmm.” I can barely get the sound out. “Mmm-hmm.”

“Now.”

Core clamping down, fluttering around his cock, my body rushes to obey him. My mouth falls open as my orgasm hits, eyes drifting closed as he persists in his hard thrusts until I'm boneless.

25

CEDRIC

Sofia is a dream come true. Just as I knew she would, she takes the three of us like a pro. I'm sure she never thought of herself as submissive, but she submits control of her body to me like I've always craved.

Fucking perfect.

I soak in the way she feels, squeezing my cock as she comes at my command. Planting soft kisses along her shoulder, I slowly work the straps of her top and bra down her arms. The slow strip has her shivering in my grasp, but when I have her shirt pooled around her waist and her bra folded down to release her breasts, she moans at the handful I grab.

"Are you ready for what comes next?" I keep my voice low, disguising the unsteadiness of it as I rub my nose along that sensitive spot under her jaw.

She whimpers a soft yes.

"Good. Hands flat on the desk. Don't move until I tell you."

Bless her, she does exactly as instructed, palms flat on my workspace, her breasts swinging between her elbows as Barlowe and Knight take in the sight of her.

I start thrusting, heavy and hard, sending her tits bouncing with the movement. I pull

her hips back to arch her a little further. Her core grips me, and she feels so damn good.

## Page 62

*Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 5:26 am*

Hand in her hair again, I keep her where I want her and fuck that perfect pussy of hers until I feel my own pleasure crest. Sucking in a slow breath, it's time to move her on to what I have planned for her.

I have faith that she'll be able to take it, especially given how aware I am of what she likes. Pulling out has her whimpering at me again.

Oh, yes, my sweet girl, I know how much you like getting fucked.

I don't retreat far, spreading her cheeks and pressing the head of my cock against her ass. Her breathing comes quicker.

"Shh. Relax. Let me in."

Sofia nods, shoulders slumping as she keeps herself in place, and I push past that tight ring of muscle, pressing into her with one slow plunge.

Her strangled cry has her tightening around me again, but I'm already in, so I just stroke my hands from her shoulders to her hips, giving her a moment to adjust before I move earnestly. Once I have her loosened up again, I lean in and nip her ear.

"We're going to shift positions. You ready?"

She nods, a soft yes barely louder than a whisper.

I situate us both back, turning us around so that I'm using the edge of the desk for support. A wave of my hand has Barlowe stepping around the desk. He bends to pull

her jeans and panties from her, freeing her legs.

Planting new kisses along her exposed flesh, I watch over her shoulder as Barlowe's touch spreads up her thighs until he has a good grip on her. Then we hoist her in the air between us. It slides her down my cock a bit deeper because of gravity, and she responds like a queen, head back, biting back a dark moan.

"Okay, Sofia. You're going to take his cock in your tender little pussy like a good girl. Aren't you?"

A near-wild nod. "Yes. Yes, please."

Barlowe grunts, nearly growling as he runs his cock through her folds. Just the first few inches has her tightening up and panting. We work slowly until she's adjusted.

She's got a hand gripped on us both, bracing herself as we start to move. The way she's quivering says we've found something that's going to send her in a tailspin of orgasms. I can't help but preen at how much she enjoys herself.

It's so much more as momentum builds.

Knight appears on my left, hand in her hair as his mouth comes down across hers. Her moans are muffled by his tongue.

Good call. It's too easy to forget we're in my office. That someone could walk by and hear us. But I'm so far gone for her that I'm willing to risk everything for her pleasure, to give her this moment. Right now.

I meet Barlowe's gaze and nod. Our thrusts synchronize, and the change is immediate. Moans vibrate low in the back of her throat, needier than before.

Her muscles pulse. She twists, stiffens, and jerks as she comes for us again.

Knight retreats a few inches, stroking her cheek with a grin.

Time to change positions again.

She's more than compliant as Barlowe sits in my chair and takes her ass. Knight steps between her thighs to fuck her sweet puss, and I clean myself up before I step forward to take her mouth.

We shift and resituate and ensure that she doesn't cramp or get too stiff from a single position, but all three of us are determined to both fill her up and to make her come. It's quickly becoming my new favorite pastime.

When we've worn her out, we lay her back against the desk and take turns standing between her thighs, pumping our own release into her.

I take her last, needing to stake that final claim on her body. Who am I kidding? I want to claim much more than just her body.

I'll take whatever she'll give me. Everything she gives me.

Her knees tremble against my sides, and I tuck them against me, trying to take some of the pressure and weight off. She's exhausted but has made no complaints.

Leaning down, I bracket her in my body, holding her to me, wanting this moment to be just us, and I know she can stay with me and not let anything else in.

Sofia's eyes are at half mast, but she's present with me as I brush a few stray hairs off her forehead and cheek.

*Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 5:26 am*

“You doing alright?”

She nods, her touch caressing my cheek, my chin, my mouth. It’s so soft and sweet, solidifying our connection. I don’t think I can go back to the way my life was before her.

Her mouth lifts to cover mine, and it’s so goddamned tender.

Who knew something so gentle could cut me so deeply?

I sink a little further into her, glad to have unbuttoned my shirt, and feel her flesh against mine. Her skin is cool, but she’s fire.

And I need her.

Fuck, I need her...

Bracing myself just above her, a mere inch between us, our gazes lock. Those beautiful blue eyes capture me, and I’m a goner.

Pleasure swells low, building as I thrust into her with slow, determined thrusts. Sure, I could come quick and take her with me, but I don’t want this moment to be over. I don’t want her to slip out of my grasp, and she will as soon as I spill myself inside her.

No matter how long I stall, this will end. I have to let her up to go to class. To teach my own.

Fuck.

That tender twist makes me pump with more determination. A slight angle change has her mouth falling open, and I revel in how I can make her body respond to mine. How easily she hands over the reins to let me take control of her pleasure.

And we're both barreling there now.

Sofia's thighs shake, trembling with her impending orgasm. Trilling little moans have me kissing them to near silence.

They tear through me.

My muscles ripple, picking up my pace, and she squeezes so tightly, clamping down and wringing herself out on my cock.

Another few thrusts. It's all I need.

Pump. Fuck. Slam. Slam. Slam.

My cock pulses, balls drawing up, and I fill her with my cum, grinding into her, wanting every last drop left to be mine.

All fucking mine.

26

SOFIA

Today is the day I take Noah to a family cooking class. He has been asking me about it every day for the last six weeks since I booked it. I'm so happy he's excited to do

this with me. We signed up to learn how to make pizza from scratch.

“What kind of pizza do you think we will make?”

“Everything.” Noah hops in his booster seat, jumping against the harness.

“Everything? A supreme?”

“Yes. Supreme everything!” His smile is so big and beaming that I know we’re going to have a good time. He’s usually subdued and easygoing, but food is his fun button.

There's eight small groups, and we each have a counter, a sink, and an oven range. He’s got a step that has a small safety guard. If they only knew just how comfortable my little dude is with cooking on far more unstable stools.

He’s already manhandling the veggies on our counter, touching them gently since he’s learned how bruising works. He smells the red bell pepper in front of him, pressing his nose right against it and looking up at me with a silly grin.

Laughing, I pull over the recipe as we begin, measuring out every ingredient for each step of making the dough before we start mixing.

## Page 64

*Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 5:26 am*

Smart move. Kids get sidetracked so easily, and they generally move slower. You know, lack of practice.

Noah and I have a routine for baking. It means he's on top of holding measuring cups, scooping, and following directions. However, he's also notorious for tasting ingredients he's not familiar with.

Like the yeast.

It's a packet, but that doesn't stop him from scooping some into his mouth.

"How'd that work out for you?"

He makes a nasty face at me and hands me the packet.

I sprinkle it over the honey water and scoot his stool closer to the sink to spit and rinse. Can't say that's going to slow him down at all. If the baking soda didn't stop him, I'm not sure anything edible will.

"What did I say about trying dry ingredients like that?"

Noah giggles and puts on his pretend ashamed face like I don't know the difference. The little punk. I grab his side for a quick tickle, and he giggles high and bright.

A few moms and dads look over to smile at us.

When the dough comes together, I knead it hard until it's smooth and then have Noah

practice on it, pushing, rolling, and folding.

Then, we get to his favorite part—what goes on the pizza.

First, we season the sauce with garlic, onion, and oregano. I give him a little on a spoon to lick, and he goes back for seconds. I expect nothing less.

Then, we grate the mozzarella. He's got a handful before I swing it across the counter, but I also take a pinch and smile at him as we munch together. He's too cute.

I ruffle his hair and give him half of a cleaned bell pepper. It's something he's worked with before, and he knows how to slice and dice. Still, I watch him as I peel the onion.

We get mushrooms, pepperoni, sausage, and olives all prepared to go on the dough.

Noah has had a bit of everything, and I doubt he's going to be able to eat much of the pizza, but it looks delicious when it comes out.

And it turns out pretty damn good.

I cut him a thin slice, which he devours, but he doesn't ask for more.

Too easy. We get a box to take it home in, by which I mean, we take it to Dad's house. As soon as we walk in the house, Noah is jumping and chattering and telling Dad all about the pizza and what it's made of.

Dad oohs and aahs whenever Noah takes a breath to keep going. He's crawling onto a chair between the kitchen table and the counter where I set the box.

“Yeah, Peepaw, you should try a piece. You try a piece.” He pats the top of the box,

struggling to open it.

We laugh with him as he beams, so proud of himself. And he should be. My good little man.

“Should I reheat some, and we can put on a new movie?”

“Yes. Yes. Yes.” He hops on the chair, and I give him our gesture to settle down a little. Noah plants his sneakers on the chair and squats down.

The little dictator points at different snacks to bring to the couch. I allow him a bowl of chips with his pizza slice but not the ten different candies he wants. He can have a few chocolate kisses later.

It’s easy to settle down with him between Dad and me and put on a new animated movie. I swear they come out with a new one every week or so.

Unfortunately, halfway through, my stomach cramps. Nausea sends a wave of hot and cold over me.

Am I having a reaction to the pizza? It all seemed to taste fine. It was cooked through.

No. Dad and Noah are both fine.

## Page 65

*Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 5:26 am*

This acidic kind of queasiness has been building over this last week, and that's starting to worry me. I don't have a bug. No fevers or aches. Just the burn at the back of my throat and the sour feeling in my belly.

I've been a little tired, but my days have been filled to the brim with school, my project, my son, and the guys.

Oh, no. My stomach twists a little harder, and I have to excuse myself to the bathroom. I heave a little, but nothing comes up.

I run my wrists under cold water and breathe.

Gasping myself to an even in and out, I sit in misery until the roiling settles. I grasp for my phone and pull up my text chain with Jordan.

I can't do it myself. Too many people know me. Know my father. Know my mother.

Jordan's the kind of friend who can do this for me, no problem.

Can you pick up a pregnancy test for me?

27

SOFIA

Early the next morning, Jordan picks me up at my parents' house before classes. Her dark hair is a mess, and it makes me feel a little bit better about my baggy sweater

and leggings. I try to look professional at school.

Today is not the day for it. Fuck, I might not even go to class.

Her smile is a warm one, if not a worried one. I'm sure mine in return looks much the same.

"Let's go back to my apartment. All of my roommates are gone for their early morning classes."

A change of scenery sounds fantastic. That way, I don't have it marked in my own place. "How lucky."

Jordan laughs with real humor. "Yeah. Lucky you asked on a Thursday. They both have weekly morning classes. It's my sweet spot. Three and half hours of peace. I usually masturbate, but I can make that sacrifice for you."

That yanks a genuine joyous laugh out of me, and she grabs my hand and gives it a shake.

"I've got a frozen quiche thawing in the fridge. We'll chuck that in the oven so that either way, we'll have some good old comfort food for breakfast."

I relax back into the worn bucket seats in her car and let the feeling of movement sway my body. Jordan doesn't live far. It's a six-minute drive, and a little panic sets in. We sit for a moment after the car's turned off before I manage to open my door.

It's not like I haven't been thinking about this all night. I haven't gotten any sleep for thinking about it.

And I remind myself that this is not the worst situation I've ever been in. My life is

much more stable now than it was nearly five years ago. Whatever happens, I can get through this.

Following Jordan to the second floor, I slip into her chaotic apartment. The corner has an easel with a half-finished painting on it. A sewing machine is set up on the kitchen table with a pile of cut out pieces of fabric.

The bathroom is back between them and the couch. Jordan slaps the box in my hand and guides me toward it. “I’ll hold your hand the whole time. Even while you’re peeing if you need me to.”

My chuckle is soft and small, but I shake my head. “No. I’ve got that under control.”

She nods and gives me a little nudge to go on and get it over with. I close the door and pee on the damn stick.

The moment I flush the toilet, Jordan has the door open and is pulling me out of the bathroom. She hands me a cup of orange juice and pulls me into the one habitable piece of furniture in the living room—the couch.

Our hands are linked, and I’m tugged into her side. A wave of exhaustion hits me, all of my adrenaline from the unknown outcome spent. I’m ready to crash.

I’m really hoping that this is just a false alarm. That I’ve just stretched myself thin and I’m feeling the effects of it.

Jordan’s timer goes off, and she slowly tugs me to my feet. “I’ll do it on the count of three. Alright?”

“Yeah.”

## Page 66

*Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 5:26 am*

“One. Two. Three.” And she flips it over, revealing that double blue line.

Fuck.

Tears fill my eyes, and Jordan guides me to the closed toilet lid and squats before me, pulling me into her shoulder.

How did I fuck this up a second time? How could I be this naive? Falling into a fantasy of a romance with three men.

It’s not like I’m not on birth control, and I know it’s not one hundred percent protection. God. What am I going to do?

I’m such an idiot.

When my quiet sobs settle, Jordan wipes off my face with a washcloth and kisses my forehead. She’ll make a good mom someday.

It makes me laugh a little hysterically as she pets my hair back from my face.

“How did I let this happen?”

“Well, you have been having a shit ton of sex.”

I laugh harder, the tears blurring as the tears pool. “Yeah. I have.”

“First thing, you need to go to the doctor to confirm. Then, you need to decide what

you want most of all. Don't worry about them. Think about you. What it means for your career, for your family, for your dreams. Then, you can tell them."

I nod at this wisdom. "My phone. I have an app."

God, how absurd that sounds, but I can make an appointment without having to call in. Easier to do it that way. It's in a week.

Shit. Am I going to have to cut this from my footage? How dishonest would that be? How much do I owe my vision for my project when it hampers my mental health?

I can't even talk about it with my advisor until I figure out what I'm doing.

Jordan is patting my knee, drawing me back from my spiral. She hands me a plate with a slice of quiche. She taps her own plate against the edge of mine and lifts her fork in toast. "I got your back no matter what, baby doll. Don't you worry."

We both devour the hot, gooey eggs and flaky crust. Afterward, I feel halfway human again.

"Okay. I know we can stay here and wallow in the silent peace that is my Thursday mornings, or... we can go get some hot chocolate. One of the fancy ones from off campus."

I am so lucky to have a friend like her. She pulls me up, and we drive into Bricktown and hit up the posh chocolatier's I've never been in. A place I've been keeping my son from because I can only imagine the chocolate coma he would have after a single visit.

My poor baby boy. I'm just going to make his life tougher.

I think about him with my dad right now. How much more will I be imposing on him because of all this?

The scandal when it comes out.

I'm going to ruin my parents' careers with this, too, aren't I?

We get cocoas and a shared chocolate fondue plate. Sweet and salty options come with it, and as soon as I get a bit of it in me, my tension starts to settle. It's not dissolving like the sugar crystals on my tongue, but they're doing their job.

"Now, I know this isn't a major distraction, but I have to say, I'm curious about Noah's dad. What happened there?"

I laugh. "Nothing too dramatic. He was a foreign exchange student. Older than me, of course..."

"Of course," she prods.

"I met him on the first day of the semester. He was suave and smooth, unruffled by my lack of a filter. Few men are, you know." I dip a strawberry in the chocolate and nibble on it.

"Oh, I know it." Jordan wiggles, full of life and vigor. No wonder we get along so well.

*Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 5:26 am*

“My mom warned me many, many times about men like him.”

“Especially since you spent so much time over with the swoon-worthy Casanovas.”  
Her brows waggle.

“Yes. She didn’t imagine that if I could fend off the Italians, the French, and the Spaniards, I could hold my own on American soil. But she didn’t prepare me for the Brazilian man I spent an entire semester with. How long he had to chip away at my armor. And he did just that. Took the guy months before I’d let him sit beside me, let alone kiss me.”

I make a pattern in the chocolate with a skewer. He’d been relentless. Not quite in the same way as Orion. Too much young vigor behind it, much more pressure.

“And once he kissed me, it was over. I fell off the deep end hard. It took a week from our first kiss before I let him in my bed. The romance was quiet. Or at least most of it was. My parents had no idea, but with my being an adult, they let me have that space.”

“Very understanding parents.”

I laugh. “Yeah. Good grandparents, too.”

And I’m about to put them through everything all over again.

Jordan leans over and squeezes my hand in support, knowing where my head is going.

“Anyway, the night we conceived was my birthday. He booked us a hotel room, bought champagne and flowers. Made a whole big night of it. And he showed me every move in his repertoire.”

My friend’s eyes light up. “Like what?”

“Well... there’s this thing he does with his tongue that made my toes curl. I’ve never felt anything else quite like it.” Although Cedric gets close. He’s more than talented with his mouth. Different techniques but advanced skills.

“He was older, you know. Had the experience to back it all up. My parents weren’t too happy when they found out, but they were understanding. I didn’t know I was pregnant until after he went home. I always knew he’d go home, but it wasn’t real until he was gone.”

My heart didn’t break when Marco left, only when I found out about Noah. He wouldn’t be able to grow up with his dad.

Jordan leans in. “I want more details about that night. I don’t think I’ve ever had a night like what I’m picturing.”

“I have more for later. Don’t worry. What I’ve got to say isn’t appropriate for the public.”

She laughs nice and loud, getting a few looks.

And I spot Leann at a table behind us. Great. I wonder how much she heard.

By the look on her face, she’s heard more than I want her to. I think back over what I said and realize I never used his name. Shit. Even if I do now, she’ll think I’m covering.

It's not hard to know she's put Orion in Marco's place.

Fuck.

28

BRAXTON

Every time I see Sofia with Birdie, my heart grows a little bigger. She's begun taking much more space in my chest, a place I thought would remain empty after Bethany left. Somehow, Sofia fills every nook and cranny left behind and has smoothed the edges to make herself a home.

It's made my daydreams much more vivid. Having her here during the day. In the mornings. Not just the dirty things we could do with an empty house, but the domestic things like waking up with her in my arms, breathing in her sweet scent first thing, getting to hold onto her for a blissful moment before life and responsibilities seep in.

Every little fantasy builds to something more—like the desire to move her and her son into my house. To make us a real family.

Fuck. I want it so badly that it aches.

I've fallen for her, so completely that I'm willing to share her if the other option is not having her at all. As long as she's mine.

Birdie's high giggle sounds above my head, tumbling down the stairs and through the open door to my office.

Shaking myself out of the thought of asking Sofia to spend the night, I focus on the

paperwork in front of me. I've read it over twice. This legal document is full of boilerplate jargon that boils down to officially filing for divorce from Bethany for abandonment.

*Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 5:26 am*

Two years are long enough to wait.

The sick twist in my gut when I thought of this before doesn't rear its head. It's certainly time.

Not that I waited this long in hopes of her coming back.

Because of Sofia, Birdie seems to be okay with the loss of her mother, too. Or more okay than she was before. I don't think she'll ever get over that hurt fully.

But even if Bethany does come back, I don't want her anymore. I don't want her in my life any more than having her be a mother to Birdie. Our daughter certainly deserves to have a mother.

Maybe it can be Sofia instead.

She's already doing such a good job with her already.

Fuck, I sound insane, even in my own head.

I slash my signature across the last page and stuff the papers into a manila envelope to drop at my lawyer's office tomorrow morning.

Standing with a big stretch, I wipe a hand down my face. This is only one step of many. I should be focused more on how my friend is going to respond when he discovers I've been intimate with his daughter.

Just thinking about it makes shame weigh my shoulders down. It's not enough to keep me from her, though.

Neither is the fact that she's closer to my daughter's age than mine. Sofia could be her older sister. My rational mind screams that she's young enough to be my daughter. That this isn't right. That I shouldn't feel this way about someone her age.

All of the reasons I shouldn't have her take a back seat to the turmoil burning me up whenever she's out of my reach.

I lumber into the kitchen and finish cleaning and putting away the dishes from dinner.

The three of them are upstairs in Birdie's room as she works on painting her biggest canvas yet. They're recording it in parts to put together as a whole completed start to finish piece. It's been a long process. Birdie has been working on it for a month, and she's putting the finishing touches on it tonight.

Sofia has offered her the footage from her camera glasses, and they've set up with her big camera and tripod.

Part of me wants to go up and watch, but this seems to be something my daughter needs to do on her own. Or as close to it as Soph can offer her. A little mentoring and guidance without the parental influence.

By the time Sofia comes back downstairs, I've devolved into the cyclical thoughts of what it might mean to keep her here. And then into the ones of her naked beneath me.

My gaze shoots up to meet hers, and she stops halfway through the kitchen to me, eyes wide before a sultry smile fills out her features.

"Noah's asleep, and Birdie's getting there."

I nod, vibrating in place as she takes slow steps toward me, like she thinks that the moment she's within reach, I'll snatch her up.

She's not wrong.

"It'll probably take one more editing session with her, but we've got a great idea for revealing it. We'll do it in parts, paired with shorts, and then the full process with the end reveal. I think it's going to be popular."

"You're the expert there. I'm too old for social media."

Her laughter is sweet, and it only makes me crave her more.

"Have you seen how her other videos are doing? People love Birdie."

"She's told me a little in her excitement, but I haven't been checking in daily." Not like I had when she posted her first few. The comments were positive, and the few that weren't were easily reported. Birdie didn't seem affected by the stupid comments as much as she glowed under the attention and praise from other artists.

Sofia takes another step toward me. It's almost a taunt with how restless I feel when I'm not touching her. "She's gotten really good at editing them herself. Developed her own style. I'm really proud of her."

I grin now. "Yeah. Me, too."

It was hard for her to put herself out there since she's had such a hard time making friends at school. She's been getting more messages on her phone from people who saw her videos. Some of her classmates have even sent her texts, complimenting her talent.

*Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 5:27 am*

And it's all because Sofia was able to give my daughter a new outlet to feel seen and connect with others in a way she didn't have before.

What would we have done without her?

"She's coming into her own now. You handling it okay, Papa Bear?" Sofia's finally within reach, and I grab her by her hips, reeling her in against me.

"I'm happy for her. Everyone else is finally seeing what I've known for a long time. My daughter is special." I smooth my hands up her waist, pressing us closer together.

Sofia's palms slide up my arms, shoulders, across my chest as she leans in, head back, mouth a ripe offering.

Capturing her mouth with mine rewards me with a small gasp and a moan. Her body fits so perfectly against mine. I'm so desperate in these moments. I crave the feeling of her all day, afraid to touch her in front of our children.

The moment we're alone, I'm afraid I'll maul her. It takes conscious effort not to. Instead, my hand glides low and takes a firm grasp on her ass, rocking her into me just a little.

I break our kiss, rubbing our noses together as I soak her in. "Come sit with me on the couch."

Not what she expects, but her smile is still joyful. I turn her around and plant a few choice kisses on the back of her neck and shoulder.

We settle on the couch, and I wrap her leg around me, needing to feel her there more than anything else. The intensity between us doesn't wane, but it does settle into something more romantic. More meaningful.

At least for a while.

When her touch trails down my chest, my stomach, over the fly of my pants, the simple pleasure of her company becomes more. My cock stiffens under her hand.

Sofia presses her mouth under the back of my jaw, nips my neck with her teeth, and I'm a fucking goner.

I yank her into my lap with one sharp move that has her grinning at me until it melts into a soft O as I lift my hips against hers.

Her skirt gives me easy access to her bare thighs, and I appreciate the wardrobe choice. She's been wearing them more often, even as it gets colder. Like she knows neither of us will be able to help ourselves when we're alone.

It's difficult enough when we have an audience.

She's quiet and efficient as she unsheathes me from my pants and pulls her panties aside. So fucking wet. Slick. Ready for me.

I kiss her as she lowers herself onto me, moaning into her mouth as she sinks and sinks and sinks until our hips are flush and she's taken all of me.

A slow rhythm has our foreheads pressed together, breathing loudly from the immediate onslaught of pleasure. "God, Soph, you feel like coming home."

Her hands tighten around my shirt collar. Maybe she's half as desperate for me as I

am for her.

And I know one thing and one thing only. I have to find a way to keep her.

29

## ORION

The end of the semester film premiere is packed. Thankfully, we booked one of the ballrooms in the student center. Sofia set most of it up but needed my signature on a few things. The room is huge and decked out in sleek white, navy, and gold.

Round tables are set up around the big, open space, a small stage up front with a microphone where Sofia briefly introduces the film.

Their twenty-minute short film premieres to rounds of applause and praise. Sofia's fellow club members take the stage to make funny speeches on the makeshift stage, laughing and giggling like kids.

Our hospitality department has catered the event and is running the show behind the scenes. But Sofia is running everything else. She's in her element, and I wish I could be by her side through it all.

Once enough people asked me about the project and I put my hands up and pointed them to Sofia, they let me slink to the outer edge of the crowd to let Sofia shine.

All I did was stand back and wait for them to need me. They rarely did.

I didn't need any of the credit for it.

*Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 5:27 am*

Everyone is chatting and eating, mingling with good cheer and ease. It seems like the entire Film, Media, and Design departments have come to celebrate their students.

I've talked with more people I don't know than I'm used to, but fielding their questions and comments is the simplest part of my job tonight. The hardest part is not hovering around Sofia.

Trevino and Barlowe are also making a concentrated effort to not bring more attention to her than she already has. She's the film's producer, so she's surrounded by people at every moment.

Her friends help her out, bringing her plates of snacks and refilling her drink since she can't seem to disengage. It doesn't appear to wear on her at all. She's made for this.

For the umpteenth time, I hear her say, "It was a team effort. Really. Everyone in the club is so fantastic. Did you see how good Cindy was? She killed her role."

Another murmur from her audience. "Oh, it was Collin's idea to shoot the scene that way."

Sofia practically glows when she praises others, shifting the attention away from herself. She's got all of the qualities to be an excellent producer after she graduates. I'm betting on her success.

Unfortunately, it doesn't seem to matter how much she deflects the compliments. Leann circles the room, being a perpetual thorn in everyone's side. The adults

abandon her quickly to her snide comments and how much effort she put in but isn't getting proper credit for. Or what she would have done differently if she'd been in charge, how much better her version would have been.

It's hard to not roll my eyes at her, but every time I draw my attention away, I catch Dr. Squires staring at me. She stalks toward me with a drink in her hand. We've encountered each other enough times, and I was my usual flirty self for a while. Until the day she cornered Sofia in the hallway.

Since then, it's been a polite indifference, although I still flirt with practically everyone. Soph and I agreed that it would look better if I kept that up, lessen any chance of people thinking I've given her special treatment.

It's not like I hold any real authority over her, but I'm glad she understands how I feel after what happened at my last school.

Only when Squires is at my side do I see the entitled look in her pale eyes. Those long fingers and sharp fingernails calculatngly brush her fake copper hair off her face. "Why aren't you in there boasting about the project and soaking in the praise?"

Those nails drop to clink against her cup threateningly.

"Not my praise to take. I didn't do much beyond stand there and let them do their thing."

"Mmm. Yes. Miss Newman seems quite capable for someone so young. I suppose that comes from being a single mom." Squires spares a glance at Sofia, but the look she gives me when her attention turns makes me cold.

Grasping the bottom of my tie with her nails, she rubs the material between her fingers. The move is too intimate. Too forward for the vibes I'm giving off.

Maybe she doesn't care. She doesn't seem like someone who gives a shit about what other people want.

"I bet it does. She seems like a good mom, too." I take a small step back. It's a clear message that I'm not interested.

Her eyes narrow as she takes a sip from her cup.

"It's too bad you're so prone to making the same mistakes." Her sigh sounds anything but regretful. She turns slowly, and I watch Squires confidently make her way to the stage.

My stomach bottoms out.

A bad feeling slings itself across the back of my neck in warning as she stands in front of the microphone.

Especially when I turn to see the triumphant grin on Leann's face.

Oh, no.

Squires gives the microphone a few taps, sending screeching feedback through the loud room and dropping it into silence. She clears her throat.

"Sorry to interrupt. I just wanted to say, what a fantastic project, Sofia. You have quite the talent."

She has to pause as a round of applause lifts and crescendos around the room before it falls back to a temperate silence again.

"But I have a rather... delicate question."

The room quiets even further. My chest tightens around my lungs, leaving little room for breath. Like I'm standing on the edge of a cliff, and the ground is about to fall from under my feet. Still, I'm frozen in place.

“Do you think it's ethical for a student who has certain—let's say, intimate relationships with multiple faculty members—to hold such a leadership role?”

## Page 71

*Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 5:27 am*

The room murmurs and whispers, noise building as more and more ask their small groups what Squires is talking about.

My stomach sinks.

I catch Trevino's gaze first.

Then Barlowe comes up beside him.

Their expressions match the dread surging in my gut.

Fuck.

Sofia steps forward, ready to respond, but Squires leans into the microphone again, a small, smug smile curling the corner of her mouth.

"Leann..."

I turn to find Leann at the media table behind the projector.

"Would you mind plugging in that footage for me? I think everyone will find it... enlightening."

30

SOFIA

I can't breathe. Images flicker to life on the screen, and I recognize the shot immediately.

This is not good.

The footage is from my camera glasses, which goes straight to my secure virtual storage until I'm ready to review and download it.

I have downloaded this, but how did she get her hands on it? It doesn't seem possible.

My face warms with mortification as I clutch a sheet around my breasts on screen. It's clear that I'm naked beneath it.

And all three of my men are clearly visible in Cedric's room, but none of their faces appear on screen.

It's a small mercy.

Cedric's trim, bare torso is shown. Tan with a spattering of hair across his chest and around his navel.

Orion is tucking in his shirt, clearly revealing his custom belt buckle. I recognize it immediately, and anyone who pays him close enough attention will, too. Like his female students.

Braxton is fully dressed, thank God, but his sleeves are rolled up to reveal his forearm tattoos. Not that the barrel of his chest and thickness of his limbs aren't telling enough. How many men are big and bulky like a lumberjack?

Each glimpse is damning enough for the people who know what they're looking at.

I unfreeze, jumping to my feet to snatch the thumb stick away from Leann. To stop this from showing more than it already has.

But when I turn, Jordan is already there, shouldering Leann aside to her outraged screech and pulling the device free.

Leann is red in the face as she glowers up at Jordan, but my friend is intimidating when she wants to be. All of those pole dancing classes have given her some muscles so that her arms flex as she pulls back, ready to clock Leann.

She backs down easily, and I switch gears, going to take the mic from Squires instead.

Dr. Squires steps back before I make it to the stage, her hands up as if she didn't just blow up four people's lives by showing a very private moment to an entire ballroom full of people. Full of professors and deans and other students whom I have to work beside for another semester.

I couldn't care less about people knowing I'm sleeping with three men. Even if it's no one's business but my own. I'm not ashamed.

They don't deserve this, though.

*Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 5:27 am*

I brush the hair from my face, sure my cheeks are red, but a cool wave of unnerving calm washes over me as my hand closes around the microphone. “Wow, Doctor Squires, I didn’t realize you had such an interest in my love life.”

She merely smiles at me, like she’s won another contest I didn’t agree to compete in.

“Well, what you just saw was a personal recording of mine for my thesis project. Part that didn’t make it past the editing stage. As everyone can clearly see why. So, I’m wondering...” I put a hand on my hip and tilt my head Squires’ way. “How did you get your hands on it?”

This is my only defense. To twist it back on her and Leann. She stole my footage, and if Leann had the thumb stick, I have to imagine she’s the one who got it from my computer. I bring my laptop with me everywhere. It’s always at our meetings, and it was certainly sitting unsupervised a lot of the time we filmed our movie.

Had my calling Leann jealous been the final straw for her to invade my privacy? Did she think this would endear her to Orion?

It seems like a case of if she can’t have him, no one can.

“Correct me if I’m wrong, but it’s considered at least an invasion of privacy when you take footage from someone without their permission. And since I haven’t given anyone permission to access it, this could be considered theft.” I address the ballroom of professionals. We discuss this very thing in film classes frequently.

“We’re all professionals here—well, most of us are. Can someone confirm that fact

for me?”

I spot my dad right then, his face dark with fury, but I can't tell whether it's at me or for me. Not with the fact that he certainly recognized Brax in that clip. Not with the implication that his best friend is sleeping with his daughter.

Him and two other professors.

Don't be disappointed in me, Dad.

The crowd's murmurs grow in volume, asking who leaked that footage. Who was filming me without my consent?

A breach in morality from a tenured professor, one who roped in a student for her dirty work, is ripe for a lawsuit. And they'd better believe I will sue Dr. Squires for this. I know more about my rights than she likely does.

How could I not? It's not like she doesn't know who my father is.

And that's part of the problem. The other is how she's been rejected by one or all of them. She certainly hasn't been subtle about eye-fucking Orion in the office.

“I mean, beyond the impropriety of your watching this to begin with, if you found that someone stole this footage from me, shouldn't you have brought it to me instead of revealing it to the public? I believe there are legal terms for this as well?”

Voices sound around the room. Collin is one of the first to speak up for me, calling this bullshit, offering to call his dad for me, a high-priced attorney.

That has other voices sounding in response.

She's having an affair with three men, presumably professors here at the university.

Even if that's true, it doesn't give anyone the right to expose her like that.

It should have been brought to me. Quietly.

She hasn't even denied the accusation.

It's clear enough.

Two wrongs don't make a right. This is unacceptable behavior from our faculty all around. Victimizing a student in this way.

I sigh. The room is divided among their uproar against my affair and the way Dr. Squires revealed it. No sense will be made of any of this right now, and I'm certainly not going to stand here and wait for them to decide who's more wrong in this situation.

"Well, if you want to know the truth of it, you'll just have to wait until the actual project is complete. I am a film student, and we all know how snippets of footage can be deceiving."

Refusing to look at my men, to indicate them in any way, I settle the mic back on its stand.

"Don't let this ruin the work of the Film Club and the beautiful story they told." And I walk off the stage and out the door with my head held high.

When I'm done with my story, they won't be able to do anything other than root for me.

I guarantee it.

31

SOFIA

Jordan is by my side after I leave the ballroom, and she drives me back to my townhouse. She doesn't say anything except to direct me to give her my keys, sit on the couch, drink the herbal tea she makes me.

Oh, my God.

That just happened.

And beyond the indignation, past the flare of anger, I've gone numb from the shock of it.

My phone keeps lighting up on the coffee table, message after message coming in before Jordan flips it over.

"They can wait."

Closing my eyes, I take a deep, slow breath. "I told you about Squires cornering me a few weeks ago, right?"

"You did. And Leann's change in behavior. This, though, is so out of bounds that I can't even fully wrap my head around it yet. I can't imagine how you feel." Her hand braces my knee in support.

“I don’t know what to feel right now.”

My phone pings and pings and pings, and I’m overwhelmed. I have to at least see what messages I’ve received, know what I’m up against. Then, all of my worrying, the spinning replay of what just happened. The look on my dad’s face.

I didn’t even search out the guys. I didn’t want to implicate them any more than they already were. Didn’t want to confirm anything.

At least if I know, I can spiral toward some kind of solution.

Jordan holds me back when I reach for it.

“I’m going to go crazy without knowing.”

“You’ll go crazy either way. Just let yourself process this part first before you pile on. Trust me. Okay?” Her arm is around my shoulder, squeezing me as I lean into her.

“Okay. Thanks for having my back.”

“Always.”

She lets me wallow a little longer, asking me if I want some chocolate or if I need anything else, but the peace of sinking into my own despair only lasted a few minutes.

I reach for my phone again, and Jordan sighs.

“Just can’t help yourself, can you?”

“Not in the slightest.” I swipe through my notifications without unlocking my

phone—messages from Brax, Cedric, and Orion, some from my mom and dad, others from people in the department and Film Club.

I click on one text from the department head that reads, We need to talk when you get the chance. Please reach out.

My heart goes into a frenzy. Shit. Maybe Jordan was right and I should have just left my phone for a little longer.

A firm knock sounds against my door, and Jordan peeks through the peephole before glancing back at me and opening the door to my mom.

She steps in, clasps Jordan's arm, and whispers to her. My friend nods, comes back to kiss the side of my head, and grabs her keys.

"You okay?"

"I'm fine. You have class. You should go."

Jordan frowns. "Call me later. Even if you don't need me."

## Page 74

*Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 5:27 am*

I nod, fretting as my mother closes the door and steps my way. She's elegant in her sleek cream suit. It highlights the natural tan of her skin and the richness of her dark brown hair. She's as beautiful as ever. Regal.

She's been away for months, most of the semester, in Spain and France. But I'm so glad she's made it home for this. Even if I'm mortified.

Mom's dark eyes are luminous as she stands at the arm of my couch and looks me over.

She lowers herself to the edge of the cushion beside mine. "Tell me what's happened."

And I do.

The whole story from starting my thesis with Cedric, meeting Orion at Film Club, babysitting for Brax. How each of the romances developed separately before they crashed together.

How frequently they seek me out on their own, in pairs, or as a group—the latter of which's frequency still surprises me. Not that I have any complaints.

And the way they make me feel... I don't have the words to explain it except that they make me happy.

I stop before I tell her about the pregnancy. I'll see the doctor later to confirm, and I'm just not ready to let that one out of the bag, but the reality is, my body has given

me enough evidence that I don't really need the confirmation.

Mom keeps a straight face through the entire thing, and once I'm done, I'm ready to deflate.

Although the ideas for my project—for a way to show a complete other side of the story—bloom in the back of my brain.

Mom grabs my hand in a tight grip.

“You know, something similar happened to me when I was in university. Before I met your father. I had an affair with my poetry professor in Madrid.” Her eyes light up as she looks into my living room, like she can see her past. Her smile makes her look thirty years younger.

“What happened?” How much of my mother did I really inherit? Because... even with the current legal and social issues in play, I miss them. I want them here so we can help each other figure things out. It's selfish of me.

Mom's features soften with knowing, and she scoots a little closer. “It blew up in our faces, as these things always do. I was infatuated with him, although then I thought it was love. He did not share those feelings, and I was sent to America until my community could forget it.”

Her hand waves in the air between us in a staunch dismissal. “Or let it fade enough that it no longer mattered.”

My ribs constrict, and I have to battle with my body to suck in a breath. How do I know if this is real for anyone other than me?

But as to the horror of my intimate life being exposed to so many people at once, I

think past that footage to the rest of what I've reviewed. It's intoxicating to be able to see the reality of what happens between all of us versus what I remember.

It's why I haven't been able to give any of them up, despite how shaky other parts of my life have gotten.

"Is that when you met Dad?"

"It is. All things happen for a reason." She squeezes my hands. "But that doesn't mean we have to let all of the pieces fall where they may. You still have a lot in your control. So, tell me, baby. What are we going to do about this?"

"I have an idea. But first things first. How do I tell Dad I'm sleeping with one of his best friends?"

My mother's laughter is sweet. "Oh, honey. I think he already knows, has known for some time. He's not as oblivious as he pretends to be."

Well, that's a surprise. Why didn't he say anything? Why pretend to be oblivious?

I guess I'll have to ask him.

"Mom. I need something else from you."

"Anything, baby."

"Come with me to the doctor?"

"Oh, baby. Of course." It's obvious the first thing Mom considers is that I'm pregnant. A flash of concern is overshadowed by her excitement.

I let myself feel excited, too, for the first time.

32

SOFIA

I've been holed up in my parents' house for the last few days, working hard on my plan. I've texted the men not to worry. I'm not avoiding them. I just need to get this done before my meeting with the board this afternoon.

It's nearly done, too.

I bring it downstairs for Mom and Dad to watch. Dad and I have talked in depth but not in detail about what's been going on. He's not upset with me, understanding my reluctance to tell him. But he's not been so forgiving with Brax. At least, not yet.

I think this will change his mind.

Even though I've cried so many times in the process of editing this, scouring the footage from all of my cameras, from the ever-growing hours of time I've spent with Brax. With Orion. With Cedric.

It's made not seeing them harder, but it also confirms what I knew this whole time.

This is different.

Mom and Dad are both crying by the end of it, and I know I've done my job well.

The editing isn't as perfect as I could make it, but the storytelling is there.

I publish it everywhere I'm able. If I'm going to be outed as publicly as I was, I'm going to make a bigger splash to drown them out. You can count on that.

Dressed as professionally as I can manage, I march myself to the board to face the music.

"Miss Newman," the College of Fine Arts and Design dean greets me. We've had a few long email exchanges over the last two days, giving him the best initial account of what happened from my point of view. I haven't given him much else, though. "I hope you don't mind, but I feel inclined to skip the pleasantries and get right down to our inquiries."

I nod. "I think that would be best. Yes."

"Good. Then, I will begin. Did any of these professors influence your grades or academic standing in any way?"

"No. I've put in the work for everything I've earned. I never asked for, nor have I received any special treatment."

"Are you certain that is entirely true? Dr. Barlowe certainly doesn't have any hold over you at the university, but Professor Knight is your club sponsor, and Professor Trevino is your thesis advisor."

"I gain nothing by having Professor Knight—or any professor, for that matter—as my club sponsor. I was elected as the club's president before he arrived, and he's certainly caused me more trouble in that regard than he's provided help." Like the blowup with Leann's jealousy. "Besides, he does not control my grades. He doesn't give me access to anything I didn't already have access to. Other than the fact that he is a professor in the Film Department, which is the department I am earning my degree from, there is nothing for our connection to interfere with."

Each of the men and women on the board watch me carefully.

The dean taps his steepled hands against his mouth. “And Professor Trevino?”

“Yes. He is my thesis advisor. And as I’m sure you know, he’s a hard ass—excuse my language. That’s why I asked him to advise me. I want to be pushed. I don’t want to make things easier on myself. Easy doesn’t help me grow.”

I can see their thoughts working through this, contemplative. He’s their biggest issue. He does have some control over my grade, but it’s still not as much as they think it is.

“I have a rather easy solution to this singular ethical dilemma.”

Another professor chimes in, “I don’t believe the dilemma is singular.”

“It is. He’s the only one with any sway over my grades, but as you all know, my project is graded in a pass or fail capacity. Therefore, the proposed special treatment you’re suggesting is minimal. Whereas I cannot speak for Professor Trevino, I am confident that he would have given my project a passing grade. As I said, I chose him for the simple reason that he would not just pass me for going through the motions. I wanted to learn from him.”

“You speak as though he is no longer in control of your grade,” the man on the end says.

“I assume that to be the case.” I fold my hands in front of me and wait to be corrected.

“Well, that is what we are here to decide. Isn’t it?”

Now my hands fall to my hips without conscious thought. “It would be piss-poor

management on your part if that wasn't already decided before I stepped through that door. No, what you're here to decide is how much damage control needs to be done. Whereas, I've maintained a relationship with three faculty members while being a student—a fully adult, single mother, mind you—you want to be sure that the blatant disregard for my safety and the violation of my privacy are outweighed by what I've done.”

*Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 5:27 am*

I take a moment to look them all in the eyes, gauging their shock and outrage at my speech. “It doesn’t.”

They all bristle a little at my tone. It’s my Mom tone. And as much as I haven’t had to use it on my son, I’ve become more than practiced with it.

“Now. I do have a solution to propose that can help navigate the more unseemly parts of what I’ve done in regard to the potential scandal I have willingly taken part in. And that is to have someone else grade my final project.”

At this, three out of five of them lean back. How many students have they encountered like me? Strong-willed and smart, ready to bowl them over before they can do the same to me.

The dean smiles. It’s big and genuine.

“We’ve seen your video. We assume that’s to what you are referring?”

It wasn’t meant to be my thesis, but if they’ve seen it, they may as well grade me on that. The original project can still be something I do on my own. “Yes.”

“Then we can offer our own opinions when we are finished here.”

I nod, waiting for their inquiries to continue.

The woman in the middle leans on her forearms, hands folded nicely in front of her. “I only have one final question.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Did you at all feel pressured into these relationships?”

My spine straightens. “No. Not at all.”

She nods, and it looks like they all want to discuss this with each other, but I wait to be dismissed.

“Is there anything else you would like to tell us before we make a decision?”

“Nothing necessarily to add, but I do feel as if I’m owed knowing what will be done about Dr. Squires’ behavior. She not only invaded my privacy, but she shared very private moments publicly.” My face heats at the memory of it. Of the feeling of being so completely exposed.

“What do you think she should have done instead?” The dean looks a little uneasy at this question.

“What she threatened to do initially. Tell you. But she did not have the right to humiliate and expose me like that. If we’re talking about the ethical behavior between a teacher and a student, she crossed a much bigger line.”

Something I will be pressing charges for, but I won’t say as much. I don’t want to tip my hand. And I don’t want the board to feel as though I’m trying to influence their decision.

He gathers his papers up into a neat stack. A clear diversion. For himself or me, I’m not sure. “I’m afraid that we can’t divulge what we will be doing about that as of yet. You will have to wait until we have finished our review of her behavior before we can share any details.”

“That is something I can live with.”

“Good.” The dean nods.

Another professor taps the folder in front of him. “We understand that you are meant to graduate this year.”

“Yes.”

“We have reviewed your credits, and if you pass all of your classes this semester, including your thesis project, you could graduate on the 15th instead. What do you say to that? If the board approves your thesis, you will take your degree, and we will no longer be responsible for anyone’s behavior.”

Graduate early? The plans I had for next semester run through my mind. Though I’d miss some things I was looking forward to, it’s better than simply being kicked out of the college altogether. Especially without a degree.

They could devise a much worse punishment.

“I’ll take it.”

The group nods.

“Okay. Let’s take a vote.”

33

CEDRIC

It's amazing how far silence can take me. A few people have talked to me—the department's dean, the faculty dean, and the president of the college. No one has formally said anything or brought any reprimand.

And then, Sofia's video happened. Her authenticity once again pulls me into the way she creates a story. She's made her project a love story. Our love story.

It's beautiful.

It makes me miss Sofia even more. I haven't seen her in days, haven't talked to her except in short text exchanges, and when she asked for us to give her a little time and space, I had to give it to her.

Even if it has left me with a hollow feeling in my chest. I know that if Sofia wanted to end things, she would simply do it.

Still, it's difficult for me to refrain from texting her every hour, calling her to hear her voice. Early in the morning and before bed are when the urge rides me the hardest.

I've never been this attached to a woman before, had friends quite like Braxton and Orion before. Forged from a mutual relationship with said woman, from affection and the need to care for her.

We haven't contacted each other, either. It's the smartest move, but it still leaves me with a new emptiness I didn't have before.

Normally, at this time of the day, I would be shoos Sofia from my office or house to get on with her classes. But I canceled my classes today, providing my students with online assignments to keep them busy.

I don't want them to see me hiding, but I'll only turn into an asshole if I step foot on campus right now.

Yet, I dress as if I'm going in to work. I don't really know what else to do with myself.

I want to go to Sofia.

Three days is too long without her.

I'll tell her so when I see her. Whenever that is.

I'll repeat what I sent her in text right after the premiere, that I should have done more to protect her. That I'll take the fall for everything. That I will do whatever needs done to keep things from getting worse for her.

But I should have known better than to think she needs me for any of that.

Her strength and her character are what drew me to her to begin with.

Pacing and drinking a second cup of coffee, I wait. It's the only thing left for me to do until she's ready to talk. I rinse my mug in the sink and sprawl across my couch.

I'm in a hell of my own making.

My phone buzzes across the coffee table.

Her name pops up on the screen.

Meet me at my townhouse.

My heart beats double-time.

I'm on my feet immediately, grabbing my jacket and keys and jogging out to my car.  
She doesn't have to tell me twice.

The drive takes a little more than five minutes. Early morning traffic settles to an easy flow.

Once parked, I'm ready to run to her, but I slow as I see Orion getting out of his car.  
Braxton must not be far behind.

I nod to Orion. He looks about as disheveled as I feel, golden curls a mess, bags under his eyes. The T-shirt and jeans are a far cry from the suit he usually wears to work. Although I know the blowback is worse for him somehow. No tenure. A new hire. A history of inappropriate relationships with students.

It sucks because he held no sway over Sofia.

*Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 5:27 am*

Only I did. And that was minimal at best.

I tuck my hands into my pockets. “How are you holding up?”

He shrugs. “Been to a lot of meetings, but they haven’t made a final decision yet. Pretty sure I’m done in academia.”

For some reason, that doesn’t sink his shoulders any further. Orion looks up at the door to Sofia’s place. Her absence has made him this way. Worn him down. Made him suffer.

Me, too, bud. Me, too.

It takes another minute for Braxton to pull up, his hulking form slow and steady as he approaches. The sad determination in the man’s eyes says it all. No need to stretch this out.

I lead us up the steps of her stoop to knock on her door.

There’s a colorful wreath there, like she’s taken the time to decorate for the upcoming holidays. A decent enough distraction for her and her son. Where is he now? With her father?

The door opens to reveal Sofia’s bright blonde hair, gathered back from her face. Her cheeks are a rosy pink, eyes sharper than ever.

But she’s dressed in a baggy T-shirt and sweats. Very much not the usual Sofia that

I've come to know. Unless on top of everything else, she's on her period.

Thankfully, she has no dark spots under her eyes. And the small amount of tiredness she displays could easily be from the normal end of semester crunch.

How many hours did it take her to edit that video? To scour the hours of footage she's amassed over the semester? Even narrowing down to the times she knew we were all together, that amounts to days and weeks of raw footage to comb through.

My instinct is to reach for her, but I don't.

She waves us inside, and although it's not the first time I've seen the place, I've always been far too distracted to give it a good examination.

Clean, white, but nothing about this place is sparse. Kids' toys are piled in the corner. Some items spread across the floor out of the usual walkways. Her couch is a deep burgundy that makes her skin flush by proximity.

The open kitchen behind the living room is equally clean and white, although more fruit is split between two bowls on the counter than I've ever kept in my kitchen. More signs that her life is not just her own.

She has to consider her son, too.

I'd be a fool to think otherwise.

"I need you three to have a seat because I have something I need to get off my chest."

Fuck. My chest tightens. My muscles protest as I lower myself onto the big, billowy cushions beside Braxton.

She's going to end this now, isn't she?

I'm not sure I can take it. At least, not well. I rather think this might be the first thing to ever break me.

Closing my eyes briefly, I open them to meet her gaze. I don't want to go out like a coward.

No, what I want is to order her to spread her thighs to let me lap at her core until my heart is content.

I can't do that, either.

The silence stretches, and my muscles tighten, ready for this to blow up in my face.

God, if this is how I make others feel, I'm certainly paying for it now.

Sofia sucks in a long, deep breath. Her gaze drops to where her fingers tangle together in front of her.

Her words blow out with a gust of air that has me missing what she says.

Or is that the ringing in my ears?

*Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 5:27 am*

I blink at her for a few seconds before they register.

“I’m pregnant.”

34

BRAXTON

I swear my heart doubles in size. Pregnant? Birdie has been the best thing in my life. Bringing another child into the world with Sofia would be twice as good. I didn’t realize just how badly I wanted it until she told us.

She wobbles there, fingers twisting together as we stare at her. Her face is paler than usual, blotchy, like she’s resigned to stand her ground about the baby.

I’m on my feet without thinking, wrapping her up in my arms. “That’s fantastic news!”

Sofia sags against me with a half laugh, half sob, like she didn’t believe this would be a happy moment. Like we might reject her for it.

It’s on the tip of my tongue to tell her how much I daydreamed about this very moment. A reason that she might stay with us after all of this.

The last few days without her have been tormenting, worse than having her around and not being able to touch her.

Now, though... Now, we can tell Birdie. We can make bigger plans. Bigger moves.

But fuck, I don't want to overwhelm her even more with everything I've been hoping to have with her.

My hand smooths down her back, my other arm tightening around her shoulders to cradle and support her.

I drop kisses onto the top of her head as I commit every detail of this to memory. Sofia is having our baby.

She takes in a shaky breath, nails digging into my back. I want to give her all of my strength.

Orion appears behind her shoulder, and I hate to relinquish her at all, but I do.

She turns slowly in place, and I keep my hands on her hips as he embraces her. His face drops to her neck, breathing her in. He kisses her cheek and under her ear, and she lets out another strangled noise halfway between happiness and sorrow.

I peer over at Cedric, who seems stunned. It's the first time I've seen him visibly shocked. He's blinking before he pushes to his feet. I pivot to give him access, catching tendrils of her hair as she leans into him next.

Tears track down her cheeks as he takes her face in his hands. "What are all of these tears about, Sofia?"

His thumbs brush the tears away as he examines her, back in control once more.

"Part relief, part hormones?" A bit more hysterical laughter catches in her throat as she looks back at him.

One thing we can all count on with her is that she's strong enough to stand up and face reality. Face us.

"I'm keeping her." Her hands come up to cover his, and Cedric pauses for a breath before he leans in to kiss her.

Her hand drops, and I snatch it up, twining our fingers together.

Sofia looks at Orion as if to repeat what she said, and his lovesick expression seems to be more than enough for her.

When those vibrant blue eyes are focused on me again, I laugh a little. "We're having a girl?"

Her real laugh breaks through this time, letting her head fall back with her joy. "I don't know for certain. It's just a feeling."

Sofia touches my cheek, her thumb stroking the back of my jaw as she smiles. My relief is a tangible weight off my shoulders. I don't want her to regret this, regret us.

"I know this is a bomb on top of everything else, so if the shock wears off and we need to talk things through, just..." And she's back to being her take-charge self.

"Oh, Soph, we're going to have a lot of things to talk through. Don't worry about that." I drag her in for a kiss.

*Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 5:27 am*

My mind is moving us super-speed into a shared living space, her belly swollen with our baby, not having to let go of her for more than a few hours at a time.

When she pulls back, concern clouds her happiness again. “You have to tell me what the fallout is for you guys. Please. I feel so guilty.”

I huff a laugh. “None of this is your fault.”

“But I should have said something when Dr. Squires approached me the first time. We could have?—”

“Could have what? Hidden it better? Those files were stolen from you. You had little control over that.” Cedric brushes her hair off her shoulders and neck to lay a kiss on her skin.

“Still, I’ve caused a lot of trouble for the three of you.”

“Pretty sure we each made the first move.” Orion’s brow lifted, his golden boy good looks accentuating that fact. “I mean, I’ve seen the video. I don’t know who hasn’t.”

Heat spears me. Yes. It was beautiful. A teaser. The start of a story I want to keep telling.

The way her heart glimmers in her eyes says that she does, too.

“I’ve been talked to by a few higher-ups, but my tenure saves me. No one has mentioned any disciplinary action,” Cedric says, deadpan as always. He doesn’t boast

or show how lucky he must be feeling. Tenure doesn't save us from this kind of thing on a regular basis.

The situation must have tipped that in his favor.

I bow my head a little. No one's talked to me about it. Although the look Charles gave me when he saw the clip... My tattoo identifies me to those who know me.

And Charles was there when I got it touched up a few years ago. His anger at my betrayal was a hard punch in the kidneys.

"No one's approached me. Not even your father." I brush the hair from her face again, and her features soften.

"He'll come around."

I smile sadly. "He will. I should have told him long ago."

"Apparently, he's known for quite some time." Her brows raise incredulously. "Or so my mother says. He wishes one of us told him, but he gets it."

The twitch of Orion's mouth tells a different story. A new hire. A history. "I'm pretty sure they're going to fire me, but they haven't said so yet. I think they want to wait until I've handed in my grades for the semester."

The empathy on Sofia's face has no pity in it. She is awfully good at that. "We'll figure something else out."

I don't begrudge him the way Sofia wraps him up in her, the motherly compassion at work as Orion soaks her in. She is certainly worth the lost job. Although this might mean his career as a teacher.

“Wait.” He pulls back, cupping the back of her head. “What happened for you?”

She pats his cradling hands with amusement. “They said I could graduate early if I pass all of my finals.”

“What about your thesis?” Cedric asks behind her. His eyes darken as he waits for her answer. It’s obvious he doesn’t like having that taken away from him.

She pouts for a moment before she breaks into a grin. “They loved it.”

“Of course they did.” My pride pushes a smile across my face, but it drops as she wobbles a little. God, she must be exhausted.

“They’d be stupid not to.” Cedric catches her elbow, seeing the same thing I did.

I nod him toward the couch, and we all help her make her way there.

“I’m going to make you some tea.” Cedric tips her chin up to look at him. “We’re going to have to take better care of you, sweet girl.”

“Thank you.” Sofia sinks into the cushions, but after a second, she jolts, grabbing my arm. “Oh, have you seen what happened to Birdie’s video?”

Panic cranks in my chest. I swear if people are making fun of her, I will...

“It’s gone viral.”

35

SOFIA

The fact that each of them accepted my bombshell without any signs of regret is such a relief. The roiling in my stomach settles in increments. Or as much as it can settle. The first two months of my pregnancy with Noah had me sick in bed most mornings.

No longer keeping this a secret has freed me up.

I’ve been in this since Jordan and I talked through it more than a week ago. And whereas I might have been on the fence for much of the time, the doctor’s visit with my mother solidified how much I want to keep this baby.

And I am pretty sure it’s going to be a girl. For the same reason I was sure Noah was going to be a boy. Maybe that’s a coincidence, but it’s given me false confidence.

Their confirmation that they’re in this with me, too, soothes the sting of what that witch did to us.

And I know she used Leann beyond showing the clip during her big reveal.

The shift in her attitude came around the same time as the threat. Or maybe Leann went to her. Things changed after the trip to NYC.

I could have sworn no one caught us sharing a room, but I must have been wrong.

It doesn't matter anymore.

With finals over, I've handed off the baton of Film Club president to Cindy after a landslide vote.

Collin cornered me and handed me his father's card with a final shot of, "What they did was fucked up, Soph. Let him help them not get away with it."

I hugged him. Hard.

It was a truly bittersweet moment.

And now, I'm just kind of in limbo. All three of my men are buried under papers and projects to grade, so Mom packs up Noah and me for a trip into the city to meet one of her many, many friends.

The promise of trying new foods along with getting his favorite car snack seals the deal for Noah. He's such a good boy.

Mom is her glamorous self, even as she slides behind the wheel. Her hair sweeps into a loose braid over her shoulder, and those big bug glasses will make her look famous when we hit the streets of the city.

The funny thing is, in her world, she is famous.

Once we're on the road and Noah is snoring softly behind us, Mom reaches over and grabs my hand. "How are you, Baby?"

I smile over at her and squeeze her hand back. "I'm okay. A little queasy. A little

tired. Feeling a little lost, if I'm being honest. I had a whole other semester planned out."

"All to be expected. You will find your path. I have faith in you." The authority in her voice calms me a little. It's too easy to believe her when she says things like that.

"Thanks, Mom."

Her shoulders shimmy as she sits straighter behind the wheel. "The woman we're meeting, Izzy Price, she's a former student of mine, and she is always in the middle of something. I wanted you two to meet because I think she might help you find a direction."

I laugh. "Because I'm not one to wallow."

Mom's laugh is low and throaty. "No, Baby. You wallow with the best of them. Just never for long."

That sends me into a fit of near silent giggles. "When you're right, you're right."

"I saw what you've been doing with Braxton's little girl, Birdie? I bet she's excited."

Perfect topic shift. "She is, but she can't let one viral video go to her head."

*Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 5:27 am*

“As I’m sure you reminded her.”

“I did. But I also told her that hard work will continue to pay off if she keeps it up.”

“Sound advice. You’ve always been so smart.” Mom’s hand finds my knee for another reassuring squeeze.

“Yes. Well, thank you, but my point is that she was already prepared for this. Birdie showed me a long list of ideas she has for her next project and how she wants to film and edit them. Talk about a brilliant little girl.” I’m so super proud of her.

And she didn’t even blink when Brax told her about us. Birdie just gave him thatduhlook every teenager masters early. The news of a new baby didn’t shake the foundation of her world, either.

Her only comment was that she doesn’t change diapers unless she’s being paid.

At that we both shrugged and went about our business as usual.

The chat flows easily as we make it into Midtown for some obscure café and eatery I’ve never heard of and never would have found without her.

With coffee, tea, and chocolate milk, we sit at a booth by the window, beating Mom’s friend there by a few minutes.

The moment I set eyes on Izzy, I know we’re going to get on just fine. She’s dressed in a mix of biker-Bohemian chic.

Her jet black hair is short in the back and swoops long across her forehead and left eye. She winks at me when she sits.

“The prodigal daughter, Sofia. Nice to meet you, chickie. I’m Izzy.” Her hand is cold and rough as she gives me a firm handshake. She also offers Noah her hand to shake, and he does with a grin.

“Noah.”

“Hi, Noah. I’ve heard a lot about you. Your grandma loves to brag about you and your tastebuds. This place has tapas. Do you know what that is?” It’s obvious Izzy has kids, too. She’s got the perfect tone. Not baby talk, but a bit more animated than normal.

My son shakes his head.

“It means we get a little bit” —she holds up two fingers close together and looks at him through the gap— “of a whole lot of different foods. Does that sound good?”

Noah lights up, hopping in his seat. I run my hand over his back, and he settles down after a minute.

Izzy puts in the order and turns to face me, her hands spread wide. “I saw your project, and may I just say...”

She gives me a chef’s kiss.

“I bet you had a truckload of footage to pull from based on what your mom told me about your original intention for your thesis.” It’s half a question and half a statement. Something to prod me to talk about it.

“I did. Yes.” I reach up to touch the glasses I’ve been wearing for it, but they’re not there. It pulls a soft laugh from me. “But my steady schedule helped me pull what I needed more quickly.”

She nods, and I see Mom help distract Noah with the crayons she brought and the back of the paper placemat out of the corner of my eye.

“Smart. I wonder what it would have turned into without what that woman did.” Her face is thoughtful, and I’m curious why she’s asking.

“Me, too. Maybe after a break from it, I’ll go back and turn it into what I originally intended.” Right now, that idea seems far away. Time off is definitely the only thing I have planned for the foreseeable future.

At least, for a little while.

“So you’re between things.” The sly look in her dark eyes has me raising my brow.

“I guess so?”

“Oma, did you tell her anything before you brought her here?” A sharp look is shot my mother’s way.

“No, darling. I thought I would leave that to you. It is your idea, after all.”

What is going on here? And why do I suddenly feel as though I’ve been set up? When Mom mentioned that she might help me find a direction, I didn’t think she meant what seems to be happening right now.

*Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 5:27 am*

With a hefty sigh, Izzy turns back to me and crosses her arms. “Well, I don’t suppose I should have expected anything less with how well I know your mother.”

“It would be wise to be wary.” I smirk at how Mom’s spine straightens on the other side of my son.

Her elegant fingers brush through his hair affectionately. “A leopard changes her spots for no one, baby.”

I share a knowing look with Izzy and nod to her. “Go on and tell me about what you’re working on.”

As it turns out, Izzy is not just Mom’s former student. She’s a film producer, and she has a big new project she’s about to start. It’s a historical reenactment adapted into a modern reality TV style to appeal to new waves of educational content for youth. Something that will connect to teach.

And honestly, it sounds fascinating. I would have paid better attention in history if they’d done something fun like this.

“I love the sound of this. How far into it are you?” I’m chowing down on a mini meatball, trying not to laugh at how enthusiastic Noah is being about all of the little things on his plate. He keeps asking Mom, What’s that?

“Well, that’s the thing. We’ve just gotten funding, and I’m in need of a First Assistant Director and Set Manager. Among other things.”

I blink at her for a moment, wondering if I'm putting this all together right. "What kind of other things?"

"Help building a team, a set, hiring actors, the whole shebang. And I want you to help me. If you're up for it." Izzy pins me with her gaze for a long few seconds.

I wasn't imagining things. Okay. "Why me?"

She shrugs. "Like I said, I'm impressed by the video you put out. The attention to story and authenticity and character arcs in such a short time frame. And I hear you put it together in two days. That's the kind of talent I want on my team, helping me run my team."

I laugh—part bewilderment and part relief.

"It sounds like fun, but I do have to warn you, I am pregnant. That means no crazy schedule."

"I can accommodate that. Are you good at delegating?"

"I am. And you say you need to build the entire team? From scratch?"

Izzy lets a slow grin form on her face. "I do."

"So you have room for another expert." I lean in and tell her about Orion. Even if he doesn't lose his job, I'm not sure he's comfortable at the university anymore. So I lay down his work, his connection to Dickie Hernandez—it's never bad to drop a big name when you're asking a favor.

Immediately, I can tell she's on board. "Let's meet in a week to discuss further. When the men are not so busy. I want to see if they hold up in person."

It's a plan.

I can't tamp down my excitement and have to call Orion. Izzy laughs as I do it right at the table. If she's bluffing me, she'd better call it now.

Because when he picks up the phone, the first thing I say is, "I've got good news."

36

SOFIA

With the semester finally over, we've all settled at Braxton's place. He and Noah made a late lunch, and now Birdie and Noah are off playing.

I lean against Brax's big side, my head pillowed on his shoulder as a movie plays on his big screen TV. I'm drifting in and out as Cedric rubs my calves, ankles, and feet. For once, I haven't been on my feet all day, but I'm not complaining.

Although if he were to ask, I'd take those hands on my lower back. Maybe on my breasts, too. They're swollen and aching from the hormone fluctuations, but I'm sure they'll stay achy after these three get their hands and mouths on them.

The thought has me wriggling. Braxton gives me a small, soft smile, but Cedric's hands tighten around my ankle, the dark look in those Mediterranean eyes promising me all sorts of delights.

We might have a lot more things to figure out together. How the four of us fit together long-term. Where we're all going to sleep, for one, but we have the more important things figured out. Like how we all want to make this work.

No one's running for the hills.

*Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 5:27 am*

Each of them is invested in me. In us. I never thought it would happen, that it would end like this.

Meaning, it's not ending at all. Well, my second-guessing is over. My flippant look at our sexcapades is over.

I shouldn't have questioned it at all. Not with the way Cedric and Braxton are always so serious.

Orion, too, though now that I've gotten to see more of him beyond the flirty attitude and sex appeal, he might even be the most serious of the three now that he's gotten me to let him in.

Tomorrow, he drives down to talk with Izzy. I'm going, too, because I'm officially her right-hand woman. I signed my contract with her a few days ago.

I wanted to make it a full family outing, but Birdie and Noah still have school. Dad could send them off, but Brax isn't quite ready to ask him for any favors given recent events. Brax still hasn't forgiven himself for the way Dad found out.

I haven't let them know it yet, but Mom and I planned a poker night for them. A chance for Cedric and Orion to get to know him better and a chance for Dad and Brax to settle into this new relationship of not only friends...

I know it's weird, but it's not like we planned any of this.

Things just kind of fell into place. Plenty of people out there would call me selfish or

a slut, and maybe I'm both of those things. It doesn't really matter.

I've never been happier.

Orion bustles in with a new beer for Brax, Cedric, and himself and hands me a hot, honeyed herbal tea. They each stocked up on it since they found out about the baby. No more caffeine for me!

I might die from withdrawals.

I take a long, slow sip before he takes it from me and places it on the coffee table. Then, Orion slumps on the floor in front of me. My hand immediately sinks into his curls, the only one of them who has hair long enough to truly play with—although they all have length enough for me to pull. This makes it a nice way to connect with all three of them at the same time.

You know, without being naked.

As my body starts to slump in relaxation again, my lids getting heavy even though I'm not close to sleep, my phone pings with a notification.

I push myself upright, curling my feet under me. Cedric hands me my phone, and his pings as well. Then Braxton's. And Orion's.

What the hell? Why would we all get notifications? This can't be good.

I swipe open my messages more quickly than they do, scrolling and scanning. It's an alert for a viral local news story.

**BREAKING: Tenured Film Professor Fired After Scandal Unfolds**

What began as a scandal involving a student and three professors has taken a new stunning turn—one that has left the community reeling.

Dr. Constance Squires, the long-standing member of the Film Department and mentor to many of the campus's prestigious, award-winning film students, has officially been terminated for breach of university policy, invasion of student privacy, and misconduct.

Squires, who initially made headlines for exposing an alleged inappropriate relationship between a student and multiple faculty members—a revelation that rocked the end-of-year Film Club presentation—has now found herself at the center of a much bigger controversy.

According to university officials, Squires violated privacy laws by distributing footage of the student's thesis project without consent. Not only did she use the footage to “out” the student's private relationships in a public setting, but she did so without going through university channels.

But the twist no one saw coming?

“It seems that Dr. Squires was herself engaging in an improper relationship with a sophomore student attending one of her lecture courses,” said the Dean of College of Fine Arts and Design. “The hypocrisy is staggering.”

The unnamed student has since confirmed the relationship, citing coercive dynamics and an ongoing pattern of boundary-crossing behavior. University ethics review boards are investigating whether this constitutes abuse of power under Title IX guidelines.

The fallout has been swift.

Squires' office was cleared out late last night.

*Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 5:27 am*

The university president issued an official apology to the student body.

Legal counsel has confirmed that civil suits are coming.

Meanwhile, the parties at the heart of the original controversy declined to comment—but sources say the original “scandal” involved consensual relationships between adults, none of whom violated university grading or supervisory boundaries.

I skim the last section filled with a few comments from students and faculty about Squires’ behavior, but I can’t hold it in any longer.

A laugh bursts out of me, so full and loud that it takes up all of the air in my lungs, leaving me gasping. Tears burn my eyes.

“God. This is perfect.” I swear I’m cackling like some old hag—like Squires herself. But I’m delighted that Karma was so swiftly served.

Braxton kisses the side of my head and murmurs, “You know what they say. What goes around, comes around.”

I grin back at him. “Damn straight, it does.”

Cedric slides his hot hand up the side of my thigh. “You know, this gives me an idea.”

He leans in closer to whisper in my ear, breath hot enough to make me shiver against him.

“What do you say we break out those camera glasses for a little celebration? I’ve rather missed them.”

37

## EPILOGUE

Orion

Being on set with Sofia is magical. She’s Izzy’s shadow, her number-one, and her set manager. She gets to be the big boss she’s so good at being. Izzy often boasts about how she doesn’t have to worry about the minutiae like she usually does on a project because Sofia accounts for everything.

She’s so damn good at what she does.

I get to work with them both all day since many of our tasks overlap. Somehow, she got me a job—one that I’m so much better suited for than teaching in a traditional setting—even though they’ve both repeated several times that my film editor position is based on my skills.

And I suppose it is.

One thing I’ve learned over the years is that what you know is never quite as important as who you know. From my connection to Dickie Hernandez to gain the favor of Sofia, to the woman herself’s approval.

I have to admit that was the better and more hard-won prize. Getting to keep Sofia. To be by her side every day. To let the responsibilities of another lifetime fall away.

This is pretty good, too, though. I finally get to be creative again.

It's nice.

We're on set. Izzy has left for a coffee break after giving her input, and Soph has been bent over the controls, shifting angles to better fit our overall goal. She sees so many things that I don't.

I lean over the back of her seat to watch the screen as we make adjustments. I can feel her smile in the way her cheek presses against mine. My hand slides down to coast over her swollen and pregnant belly. I hardly think about it anymore, unable to stop myself from caressing our baby.

Turning, I press a soft kiss behind her ear as she bites back a giggle.

These are my favorite moments. The ones I aim to slow down and soak in every single day.

## Page 86

*Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 5:27 am*

We tweak a few details before the actors come on for the shoot. Two scenes are blocked out for the day.

Izzy has let us take a much slower approach compared to a usual film—one of Sofia's caveats. And since we're rough editing as we go, we should actually take less time to get the project done.

I've watched Izzy and the entire crew go from disbelief to awe at how Sofia's managed to pull it off. She's been more than clear that everything needs to be wrapped up before she goes into labor.

Everyone's helping to make that happen.

We're filming the final scenes next week so that the set can be packed up the week after.

Then, the real fun begins. Soph and I will be elbows deep in shoring up the edits and putting our final touches on it. Doing it with Sofia makes it far more palatable.

She's got the eye for details.

It's no wonder when we first met that she dismissed me so completely, saying that she had it handled without me. There's nothing my woman can't do.

I just don't want her to have to do it all alone anymore. None of us want that.

Although I'd never thought the best relationship I've ever had—the one that will turn

me into a father—would look quite like this.

But I wouldn't have it any other way.

As the day comes to an end, I bring her a strawberry- and cream-stuffed croissant and an iced honey lavender sweet tea.

Her happiness glows far beyond the grin she gives me. It's the brightness in her eyes, the crinkle around her nose, the way her lip eventually gets pinched between her teeth as she looks at me, that I bask in.

She's near otherworldly in her beauty when she's being creatively fulfilled.

And she makes me feel fulfilled.

The sight of her heavily pregnant form doubles it.

My hand lowers to brace our baby for the hundredth time today. I can't help it.

My lizard brain is screaming, mine.

I might not have any idea what I'm doing or how to be a good dad, but I know Sofia won't let me be anything less.

I meet those blue eyes of hers and try to remember how to breathe.

How did I get this incredibly lucky after all the poor decisions I've made?

Like she can read his mind, she grabs my hand and gives me a knowing smile. "Meaningful mistakes make for the best stories. Don't they?"