



# Coming Home

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**Description:**

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1

Emily Reid drove down familiar roads surrounded by white-tipped pine trees, steering her rental car around a bend, the snow falling heavier here than it had been when she'd left the city a little over three hours ago.

The afternoon sun had already begun to disappear behind the trees as Emily turned down Main Street where storefronts twinkled with lights and festive wreaths, a wave of nostalgia coming over her as she drove slowly, taking in her hometown and all its familiar sights, like Tony's Pizzeria and The Winding Stairs, the bookshop where she used to beg her parents to take her to every weekend, always ready to dive into another book.

The lampposts were wrapped with garland and warm lights, the sidewalks covered in snow, and Emily couldn't believe that she hadn't made it home for Christmas since she'd left almost twelve years ago.

It was impossible to ignore the guilt that bubbled up as she continued driving down the street as the fading light dipped behind the buildings, and the Christmas tree in the town square came to life as the lights were switched on.

New York City had always impressed her this time of year, but there was something special about being back here, where she grew up, and Emily wished it hadn't taken her so long to come back, that it hadn't taken the loss of her last living grandparent to get her here.

When her grandfather passed away in January, she'd intended to come home for

Christmas this year, knowing how much it would mean to her family to finally get back, even if it was just for a few days, but when she received the news a few weeks ago that she was going to inherit her grandfather's cabin, she knew she'd need to spend more time here.

When her boss had found out, he'd insisted that she take the entire month of December off to come upstate and decide what she wanted to do with the property and spend time with her family.

Emily had been so shocked by his suggestion that she hadn't pushed back.

A month off of work?

Yes, she was due time off. But that was because she worked so hard that she could never seem to use up her vacation days.

How could she take a month off?

But here she was, on December 3rd, turning off the main road, following the twists and turns until she was several miles away from town, surrounded by woods, her headlights illuminating three deer as they darted across the road and into the snow-covered forest, leading her up to her grandfather's log cabin, the tires crunching on the snow.

Darkness had all but set in as Emily left the car running, the headlights shining on the property. The logs were barely visible beneath the snow, everything a blur of white and gray and black. She hadn't received the keys yet. She would any day now according to the attorney that had gotten in touch with her. But she wanted to come out here before she went to her parents' home. She knew she wouldn't be able to see much now that it was practically dark, and she didn't even get out of the car, the flakes drifting to the ground and gathering on her windshield.

She sat there for a few minutes, in the driver's seat, wondering how so many years could have passed so quickly. She was thirty-five years old, and while she'd achieved so much professionally, living a fast-paced in New York City, she had to ask herself, at what price?

She could have come home for Christmas any year, but she always chose not to, knowing that her boss would be short-handed those days. Not everyone celebrated Christmas, and he always said that while others were drinking egg-nog and running around buying last-minute presents, there were so many deals to be done, so many campaigns to pitch and clients to close.

And Emily had bought into that mentality.

She felt a pang in her heart now as she took one last look through the gray haze, the snowflakes thicker now, before she reversed her car out of the snow-covered driveway and onto the road. She couldn't change the past. She had plenty of memories to remember her grandfather by, and he had lived a long life, getting to eighty-seven years old, but that didn't stop Emily from being shocked by the call she'd received from his attorney.

Why had he left her the house? She only had one older sister, Rebecca, and she had a beautiful home with her husband, but there were other members of the family that he could have left it to.

Why hadn't he just left it to his children to decide who might like to live there or if they were better off selling and splitting the proceeds?

Emily had no idea.

They'd had a close relationship right up until she decided to move to the city, but she'd visited so rarely, that his decision baffled her. It was all she could think about

as she drove back down Main Street, and she had to pull in, finding a space right outside the coffee shop that was still there all these years later.

She wanted to think about her options before she went home and got swept up in baking with her mother or watching college football with her father. Now, that she'd been up to the cabin, it suddenly became so much more real.

And she had to decide what she was going to do with it. She wanted to do some research, even if it was just a few minutes spent on her phone, checking local real estate prices and comparing the short-term vs long-term rental markets, because she knew she wasn't ready to sell it. Not yet, anyway.

The snowflakes continued to fall from the dark sky as she got out of the car, the town looking even more festive now that all the lights were on, glowing against the night sky. The sidewalks were busy with couples and families out on a Saturday evening, maybe doing their first bit of Christmas shopping.

Emily pulled open the coffee shop door, the scent of hot chocolate immediately hitting her as she took in the bakery, noticing all of the things that had changed. It still had an incredibly cozy feel, but the tables were all new, even if they looked rustic.

The fireplace was still there, the flames licking the split logs that crackled as two women sat at the table beside it. A huge blackboard hung behind the counter displaying a wide range of coffee varieties, desserts, cakes, and sandwiches written in beautiful white calligraphy.

Her stomach rumbled, distracting her as her eyes moved back over the menu, unable to decide what she wanted until she saw a young woman behind the counter bringing out a fresh batch of apple crumble tarts.

That was exactly what she needed right now and a cup of coffee. Then she'd head home before too much snow had fallen.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 3:20 am*

The bell above the door of The Winding Stairs jingled as Quinn Grant left the bookshop with a thriller and a cozy mystery instead of the latest biography of an entrepreneur or tech mogul. The snowflakes fell thick and lazily, taking their time as they made their way to the ground, the heavy footfall of people in town today not letting it gather.

She'd made sure to evolve her lecture material over the years, adding relevant marketing campaigns that all of her students would recognize and using them to demonstrate the psychology of that company's marketing tactics.

If Quinn had stuck to the basic material, what was in the textbooks assigned to that course, she'd put her students to sleep. And that meant reading a lot, which she enjoyed, but she also spent more time on social media than she'd like to, even if it was for research purposes. Her own profiles were private, and she actually didn't know why she bothered keeping them. She never used them, but if she ever did try online dating, she figured she had to have somewhere to direct someone.

She stood outside the bookstore, taking in the festive atmosphere. When she'd entered the bookshop, it had still been daylight, but now the Christmas lights glowed, and the town really did look like something out of a movie. She knew they'd started actively campaigning online to promote this area, and specifically this town, trying to draw more tourists in these last few years, promising beautiful foliage in the fall and a picturesque town just a few hours away from the city.

This was what they should be focusing on. December and all of this festive cheer.

When Quinn had moved here ten years ago, she'd been house hunting this time of

year, and she'd been struck by the charm and the community spirit of this town. It was a complete contrast to the busyness of the college town she'd been living in, wanting to be just five minutes from campus, but it had come at a price.

Quinn couldn't step outside her door without running into a current or former student. They were everywhere, taking jobs and staying during the summer. At first, Quinn had loved that aspect of it, of feeling like their college and town provided a real home away from home for its students, but after a few years, Quinn struggled to switch off.

She'd be enjoying a glass of wine with another lecturer or even a date, and they'd end up having a group of students sitting at the table beside them. It wasn't that they were loud or immature. It just affected their evening. Quinn wouldn't feel like she could chat as freely, and she'd definitely be conscious of the glass of wine in her hand, almost afraid to order a second or third.

Quinn remembered wandering up and down this street on an evening just like this, with the Christmas lights bright against the dark sky, and the scent of mulled wine in the air. She'd discovered the bookstore that day and the coffee shop too.

A shiver chased up her spine, and her feet were already moving, thinking about the table beside the fire in that coffee shop and how nice it would be to sip on a latte to warm up.

Quinn strolled down the busy sidewalk, admiring the window displays of the shops and restaurants. How was it December? It seemed like the semester had only started.

This time of year was always a strange one for Quinn. She did look forward to it, but it was always tainted with the twinge of loneliness. Thanksgiving, then her birthday, Christmas, and finally New Year's. All reminders of the fact that she was alone.

She tried not to focus on that. She knew she had a lot to be thankful for. She'd made

the right decision to move to this town, and as a result, she'd made wonderful friends. She still had the job that she loved. She didn't think she'd ever get tired of teaching.

She just had to stay busy, really. That had always been her antidote to feeling alone. Her home wasn't even a ten-minute drive away from town, so she made sure to come in often, even when she was tired after a long day at work. On weekends, she came into the coffee shop and had breakfast or a pastry in the early afternoon if she'd already eaten at home.

The snow continued to fall now, and this was the first real snowfall of the season. At least eight, maybe ten or twelve inches, would fall tonight and into the morning. That was what motivated her to buy the thriller and the cozy mystery. She planned on curling up on the couch in front of the fire tomorrow and enjoying some guilt-free reading. Work could wait. She had papers to grade, but she'd get to them in the afternoon when she had a football game on in the background.

Quinn pulled open the door of the coffee shop, the scent of pastries and coffee beans greeting her. She spotted her friend, Lucy, already sitting by the fire, and Quinn gave her a wave before she got in line.

She smiled warmly at the barista who greeted her, and the two caught up on each other's news until Quinn was ready to order.

Quinn couldn't resist a gingerbread latte. The aroma of ginger and spice wafted up from its creamy surface, like a freshly-baked batch of gingerbread cookies just out of the oven.

"Shopping?" Lucy asked, eyeing up Quinn's bag.

"Only for me." Quinn took off her coat and hung it on the back of the chair before she sat down, the warmth of the fire already permeating her gray jeans. "I got two

new books, that psychological thriller I was telling you about and a cozy mystery that sounded interesting.”

Lucy nodded approvingly and sipped at her coffee as Quinn shared more about her plans for tomorrow. “About that... I was wondering if you’d meet—“

“No.” Quinn held up her hand.

“How do you even know what I was going to say?”

“Because it’s always the same thing. And where are you finding all these amazing, single women?”

Lucy shrugged, tucking a single lock of her fiery red hair behind her ear. “Friends of friends.”

Quinn sighed. “If they’re so great, why aren’t you going out with them?”

“You know how much I value my freedom.”

“Hm.” Quinn was starting to wonder if Lucy had the right attitude, if maybe not everyone needed to settle down and be in a relationship to be happy. She’d been doing just fine all these years. Why did anything have to change?

Quinn took a sip of her latte, the taste of cream and sugar comforting her. “You know, I think I’m going to be just fine by myself. I appreciate the thought. But yeah... I think I need to accept that this is more than likely it. Me and you being single,” she added with a smile.

Lucy cracked a knowing smile, a mix of respect and admiration in her eyes. “If that’s what you want, then I support it wholeheartedly.” She raised her cup for a toast

before taking a sip. “But staying single doesn’t mean always being alone.”

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 3:20 am*

Quinn shook her head as she smiled. “Talk to me in the New Year, okay?”

“Okay.”

She settled in beside the fire, feeling its gentle warmth and basking in its golden light. The logs were large and gave off an aromatic woodsy smell as they burned, crackling brightly with each shift of the flames. The wood snapped and popped with vigor, sending sparks flying against the screen.

The rich aroma of spiced and sweetened apples mixed with the earthy smell of the logs burning beside her. She glanced back toward the counter to see one of the girls filling up the glass case with what looked like apple crumble.

“I need to try that,” Quinn said, turning back to Lucy. “Do you want one?”

“Please.”

Quinn got up, immediately feeling the absence of the fire’s heat. There was a line now of six people, but it would be worth the wait. Everything she’d ever had here had been delicious.

Quinn’s steps slowed as she met the woman’s eyes as she joined the line. Her hair was a dark, rich brown like freshly brewed coffee, with threads of golden highlights running through it when the light hit in just the right way, a cascade of soft, loose waves that framed her face, her cheeks flushed a rosy hue from the cold winter air.

Quinn knew her, but from where?

She was strikingly beautiful, so Quinn couldn't have forgotten if they'd been on a date, although the second that thought entered her mind, she chased it away.

This woman was too young for that to even be a possibility. She was probably in her early thirties, and Quinn would be fifty next week.

But there was undeniably a sense of recognition between them since this woman was staring back at her with an almost perplexed expression. Her eyes seemed to be searching hers as if looking for answers.

Only a few seconds had passed, although it felt like so much longer, and that confused feeling lingered even when the woman's gaze eventually softened into a kind smirk.

3

Emily took her spot at the back of the line, tempted to take out her phone and make sure she wasn't missing anything at work, but she forced herself to ignore it, at least for the weekend.

She was supposed to be taking time off, and she had to learn how to leave work at work. She'd done more than her fair share, always coming in early, staying late.

Emily forgot what she was thinking about when her eyes locked on a blond-haired woman coming towards her. It all seemed to happen in slow-motion, like one of those scenes from a movie, where time almost stands still.

It took Emily maybe five seconds to realize why she couldn't look away. It wasn't just because she was stunning and exactly Emily's type.

She knew this woman.

That was Professor Grant.

Emily held her gaze as her mind flashed back to her senior year in college. She'd taken Professor Grant's marketing class as part of her business degree.

That must have been twelve years ago.

And she was as gorgeous as ever.

Did Professor Grant recognize her? Was that why she was looking at her with a strange expression, her head slightly tilted? Maybe she was trying to remember her name?

"Hi," Emily said with a hint of a smile, her heart beating wildly in her chest. She had zero problems approaching women in a New York City bar. Women she knew were high status, whether that was because of their careers or their wealth. But standing in front of her former lecturer? Emily was struggling to keep it together.

"Hey," Professor Grant said, coming to stand beside her in the line.

Emily took in her former professor. She was wearing gray jeans with black boots and a long-sleeved black top. Her blue eyes dazzled as she studied Emily.

Professor Grant inhaled a sharp breath as she turned to face her. "You were a student of mine." It was a statement more than a question.

Emily swallowed. That woman's voice. It made her weak. And it hadn't changed a bit. If anything, it had gotten sexier.

"Yes." Emily wondered if she still wore glasses.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 3:20 am*

“Emily, right?”

“Wow. That’s impressive, Professor Grant. Twelve years later you still remember my name.”

“Quinn. Please.”

What was Quinn Grant doing in her small town? Did she have family here? The thought popped into her head that maybe she was married now, and her husband was from the area.

Emily felt a little sick at that thought, and while she knew she’d had a serious crush on this woman, she wasn’t sure where that pang of jealousy came from, a heaviness at the pit of her stomach.

“Are you visiting family?” Emily asked.

Quinn frowned for a second before her lips slid into an easy smile. “Oh, no. I live here.”

Emily’s heart sped up again. She never thought about Professor Grant once she’d moved away from their college town. What was the point? Emily thought she’d never see her again.

Except, here she was. In her hometown.

“Why do you look so shocked?” Quinn asked as they shuffled forward in the line.

“Sorry. I guess, I never thought I’d see you again.” Emily inhaled a deep breath.  
“This is where I grew up.”

“Really? I’m surprised we haven’t seen each other before now. It must be ten years since I moved here.”

Emily tried to keep her mouth from falling open. “We just missed each other. I’ve been living in New York for the last twelve years.”

“In the city? Must have been a big change.”

“It was at first, but I knew I wanted to work for a big agency, and that meant leaving here.”

Quinn nodded, and they moved forward again. “You’re home for the weekend?”

“Yeah. Well, the whole month, really.”

“Oh. That’s nice.”

This conversation was going to end very soon, but Emily was still shocked, still trying to process that Professor Grant was standing beside her.

“Go ahead,” Emily said, letting her in front of her. Quinn would be next to order.

“Thanks.” Quinn stepped in front of Emily. “Well, it was really nice to see you again.”

Emily bit the inside of her cheek, her lips still sliding into a smile as she tried to play it cool. “You too.”

And then it was Quinn's turn to order.

Emily had to just let the situation be. Asking for Quinn's number then and there would have been way too risky. Was she even into women? Emily had always trusted her gaydar, but she wasn't so sure this time.

Emily's crush on this woman had easily been the hardest she'd ever fallen for someone, someone that she'd had no chance with.

Quinn flashed her a smile as she picked up two plates of apple crumble, and then she made her way back to where she was sitting by the fire, her back to Emily.

"Next!"

Emily shook herself out of the daze she'd fallen into, watching Quinn walk away. She ordered, unable to stop herself from glancing over her shoulder while she waited, and she met the woman's eyes who was sitting across from Quinn. She had red hair and was probably about the same age as Quinn.

The woman held her gaze for a second before returning her attention to Quinn, saying something that made Quinn shake her head.

Emily had asked for her order to go. As much as she wanted to stay, to maybe try and talk to Quinn again, she knew she was better off going home.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 3:20 am*

She peered out the window while she waited for her coffee, her gaze transfixed by the mesmerizing snowflakes as they fluttered and danced in the air. The flurry of white flakes had intensified, coming down in heavy waves that blanketed the ground below.

She'd be here for the next month.

She would more than likely run into Quinn again at some point, and maybe she'd find out what her story was.

4

Quinn had barely sat down before Lucy was quizzing her.

"Who was that?" Lucy asked with a smirk.

"Who?" Quinn slid Lucy's apple crumble towards her.

"The woman in the line."

"Oh." Quinn shook her head. "No one." She picked up her spoon and dug into the warm apple crumble. The apples were tart yet sweet. They'd been cooked perfectly so that they still had some bite but they melted in her mouth with an almost caramel-like creaminess as she chewed them slowly, savoring the delicious flavors.

"What do you mean no one? I saw the whole thing. She couldn't take her eyes off you. She looked almost starstruck."

Quinn ignored Lucy's commentary, preferring to concentrate on eating instead.

"She's cute," Lucy continued. "You should ask her out."

"No."

"Why not?"

"How do you even know she's gay?" Quinn asked between bites.

"Besides the fact that she couldn't take her eyes off you?" Lucy shrugged. "What does it matter? If she's not interested, she'll say no. And that's definitely not going to happen."

Quinn dropped her spoon with a clatter as she sat back in her chair. "She used to be a student of mine."

Instead of deterring Lucy, that only made her more persistent. "What?" Lucy was grinning now. "No..."

"Yes. And I'm not asking out a former student. Plus, there's the age difference. So, no. Definitely not happening."

"What's her name?"

"Emily."

"And how long ago did you have her in your class?"

"She said twelve years ago," Quinn said, returning to her apple crumble.

“Hm. I see.”

“You see what, exactly?”

“Do you remember all of your past students’ names?”

Quinn swallowed her food. “No. Not every single one of them.”

“Then why her?”

Quinn bit her lip. “Honestly? It was impossible for me not to remember her. It did take a second, you know, for me to realize where I knew her from, but once I did? I could remember exactly where she used to sit. Her hair was shorter then. Not too much.”

“Why was it impossible?” Lucy asked, leaning forward now, her arms on the table, her apple crumble still sitting untouched between them.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 3:20 am*

“Because it was obvious that she had a thing for me.”

Lucy’s eyes widened. “I don’t believe this.”

“Yeah. Don’t get any ideas. It’s off-limits for a lot of reasons.”

“Yeah, but a former student? That’s not really a thing anymore, is it? You were adults then. You’re adults now.”

Quinn just stared at her friend. “I’m not dating someone who’s something like twenty years younger than me.”

“It’s probably not that much. She doesn’t look that young.”

“And it doesn’t matter,” Quinn countered. “She said she lives in New York. That’s enough of a reason, never mind everything else. So, no. Not happening.”

“Okay,” Lucy said with a sigh. “But that doesn’t mean you two can’t—“

“Lucy!”

“Okay, okay,” Lucy said, holding her hands up before finally reaching for her apple crumble and taking a bite. “Hmm. This is fucking delicious.”

Quinn shook her head. Lucy was a great friend most of the time. But when she wanted to fix Quinn up? It was hard to deal with. Quinn didn’t even know why she was so against it, but she was, and she just wished that Lucy would take her word for

it.

That she was happy.

That she didn't need anyone else in her life.

Quinn sipped her latte. She'd never say it out loud, but Emily's crush had lifted her spirits during a really tough time. The woman she'd been dating and living with for almost five years had ended things during the summer.

Quinn had been so glad to see the start of the semester, knowing it would get her out of the house every day and keep her busy, but it was only looking back now that she appreciated how much Emily's very obvious crush on her had given her this subtle confidence boost, reminding her that she was attractive, at least to one person.

Emily had certainly matured into a very attractive woman, moving from her early twenties to probably mid-thirties, her style more sophisticated. Despite catching Quinn off guard with that almost puzzled gaze, Quinn could easily picture the deep inky black of Emily's jeans contrasted against her vibrant crimson coat, her captivating honey-brown eyes warm and steady.

It was a good thing that Emily didn't live here. She wouldn't admit it to Lucy, but Quinn knew she was attracted to the younger woman. She hadn't been all those years ago. It had been a strange time, and just having that barrier of their student-teacher relationship meant that Quinn wouldn't have even entertained the thought.

But now?

Seeing Emily again after so many years?

Quinn could admit, if only to herself, that Emily was a very beautiful woman.

Emily brought her suitcase up the stairs to her childhood bedroom which had been turned into a guest room probably ten years ago, when her parents already knew that she wasn't coming back anytime soon.

Emily was okay with it, but it was strange to walk in and see bare white walls and a light gray carpet, the bedding a darker gray, all very neutral. There were no signs of her teenage years here anymore, her Evanescence posters rolled up and stored away in the attic with the rest of her things.

She took out her navy plaid pajamas and got changed into them, pulling on a comfy hoodie before heading back downstairs.

Her mother was still in the kitchen even though Emily had helped tidy up after dinner. She was sitting at the table, her hands wrapped around a cup of tea.

"Hey, Mom," Emily said softly.

Her mother smiled and said, "It was nice having you back home with us again. I hope you don't have to rush off in the morning. Stay and have dinner again tomorrow evening before you head back."

There was no accusation in her voice, yet Emily still felt a twinge of guilt, and her mother must have sensed it.

"Look, I know you work hard," she said. "But I can't tell you how nice it was having you here for dinner and knowing that you're planning on coming back for Christmas this year. Your father can't stop talking about it."

Emily felt a heavy weight in her chest. It was definitely more than a twinge now.

“Yeah. I know. About that...”

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 3:20 am*

“Please tell me you can still make it. Even just on Christmas day.”

Emily smiled as she shook her head. “No. I’m still coming. I’m actually not leaving tomorrow.”

“What?” The chair scraped against the tiles as her mother stood up, already wrapping her arms around her before she could explain.

“I told my boss about the cabin,” Emily said as she pulled away. “And he insisted that I take the month off and get everything sorted.”

“You’re going to be here until January?” Her mother’s expression was one of surprise. She slowly shook her head, her silver earrings swaying with the motion. Her eyes were wide with confusion as she tried to make sense of what she had just heard. “I’m happy. Don’t get me wrong. It’s just... You work so hard and can’t get time off and now you’re here for a whole month? It’s amazing.”

Emily’s guilt quickly returned. She never had to stay in New York for Christmas. She’d been the one to make that decision, knowing that very few people could show that kind of commitment. And she’d always just let her parents believe that her boss was an asshole who wouldn’t give her enough time off to make it back for the holidays.

“Yeah,” Emily said as her mother hugged her again. “It was really nice of him to suggest it.”

“Let’s go in and tell your father the good news.”

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Emily couldn't concentrate on the college football game that was on the TV. She wanted to relax after a long week at work and then the drive here, but she kept thinking about getting the keys to her grandfather's cabin and the mixed feelings that would bring.

But it wasn't long before her thoughts started drifting to Quinn Grant.

She kept replaying that vision of Professor Grant walking towards her, her blond hair falling across her shoulders, her blue eyes vibrant and captivating.

Emily knew she wouldn't be able to go more than a few days without asking either her parents or her sister if they knew Quinn. Because Emily needed to know if she was straight. It didn't matter, really, but she just had to know.

Emily moved from the couch to the floor, adding another log to the fire before she got comfortable, the heat radiating through her hoodie as she pulled her knees into her chest.

She could remember Professor Grant commanding a lecture hall packed full of students like it was yesterday.

How was that twelve years ago?

Emily's life was so different now. She never regretted leaving. She'd always been restless since she realized she was gay. She needed to be in a city where she could have gay friends and plenty of bars to go to. She'd always felt so isolated here.

And it hadn't taken her long to realize that she had a talent for marketing, so she knew she wanted to work for a big firm, and that also meant moving to New York.

She'd been happy all these years, hadn't she? She had the career, the nice apartment, a good social life. She'd been single for a while now, but that was because she had a thing for older, unavailable women.

"Are you going up to the cabin tomorrow?" Her father asked her, taking her away from her thoughts.

"I'm going to call the attorney and see if I can get the keys. But yeah, I'd like to get in there and see what we're working with."

"Let me know. I'll give you a hand."

"Thanks." Emily didn't bother explaining that she'd been there earlier, that she couldn't come back here without even sitting outside it for a few minutes.

She knew she'd need some time to process the fact that her grandfather was actually gone. She'd come back for the funeral, but she only saw him once a year when she came back for a random weekend or occasionally his birthday. She was used to not seeing him for a few months at a time.

Except this time, he really was gone, and seeing his cabin empty would bring all that home.

Emily planned on getting to work right away. Appliances would need to be replaced, furniture updated, and she was glad that her father was offering to help.

6

On her yoga mat, Quinn began to unwind her tight muscles from a long day at work as she moved through each stretch and pose, and Maya's melodic voice filled the space as she instructed the class.

There was something about her voice that almost put Quinn in a trance, forgetting about everything else for the hour she was here. The gentle music in the background and flickering candles filled the room with a soothing energy.

As the class neared its conclusion, Quinn was lying peacefully and calmly on her mat. She had been focusing deeply for what felt like hours, but it was exactly what she needed in the middle of the week. Tomorrow she had a long day ahead of her, and coming here every Wednesday night kept her going.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 3:20 am*

“Thank you all for coming,” Maya concluded, her black hair pulled back in a ponytail, the lines around her eyes feathering as she smiled.

Soft voices echoed around the room as people caught up before gradually leaving the studio. Maya approached her as Quinn stood up and rolled her neck, always needing a few extra stretches before she felt like she could pack up.

“Hey,” Maya said, a smile on her lips. “I got some good news.”

“About the loan?”

“Yeah. It’s happening. I can finally start working upstairs without worrying about how to pay for it.”

“That’s great news,” Quinn said as she wrapped her arms around Maya in a long hug, genuinely happy for her friend.

Ever since Maya had bought this building a little over three years ago, she’d wanted to turn the upstairs space from storage into something worthwhile.

“Do you know what you’ll do with it yet?” Quinn asked as she pulled away. Out of the corner of her eye, she thought she saw Emily. Quinn bent to pick up her yoga mat and began rolling it up, stealing another glance to the side.

Yeah. That was Emily. She was wearing black yoga pants and a white loose-fitting tank top. Had she been here the whole time? She was talking to someone closer to her own age. Maybe an old friend from high school?

Quinn focused her attention on Maya once again.

“Yeah,” Maya said with a happy sigh. “The back half has enough space for two offices, and the front has those great views of the town square. That’ll be converted into a one-bedroom vacation rental.”

“Wow. That’s fantastic.”

“I still can’t believe it.”

“We should celebrate,” Quinn said. “Are you free tomorrow?”

“Yeah. How about dinner?”

“Perfect.” Quinn slung her mat over her back, hoping to catch Emily on her way out after she’d said goodbye to Maya, but she was gone. Just three people were left talking, and there was no sign of Emily even when Quinn slid on her winter coat and stepped out into the freezing night air, her breath evaporating in a puff of white smoke.

Quinn didn’t even know what she would have said to Emily, but the feeling of regret lingered as she made the short walk to her car. The snow had sprinkled the streets that afternoon with a soft white blanket, now illuminated by glimmering stars and glowing street lamps.

It was a quiet, peaceful night. The only sound was the gentle crunch of snow underfoot and the cheerful beep of her car unlocking. The air was crisp but not too cold, and it felt cozy standing still on such a tranquil winter evening, her body still warm after the class.

There weren’t many people out on this weekday night, so she paused to appreciate

the beauty of her surroundings, knowing it was only going to get busier each day as they got closer and closer to Christmas.

7

Emily sat across from her older sister at a café that was new since the last time she was back home. Rebecca raved about it, so she had no problem agreeing to meet her here, knowing they'd have less than an hour to catch up before she had to get back to work, and this café was right around the corner from her practice.

The sunlight spilled through the windows onto their shared table. All that remained of yesterday's snow on the sidewalks was a few scattered patches here and there. The smell of freshly brewed coffee drifted up from a nearby carafe as they looked over laminated menus and both ordered club sandwiches.

"So, how's it going at the cabin so far?" Rebecca asked with her hands clasped on the table in front of her. "If you need help with anything, just ask. Zach said he'd help on weekends too." Her brown hair was pulled back into a ponytail today.

"Thanks." Emily blinked. Rebecca was always so much more practical and straightforward than Emily ever was. It was probably a good trait to have as a doctor. Being able to clearly and quickly say what needed to be said. "Well, Dad's actually been really eager to help," Emily said as their waiter brought them two coffees. "You're not upset? You know..."

"No, I don't know." Rebecca stared at her, waiting for her to continue.

"With me inheriting the cabin outright."

Rebecca shook her head matter-of-factly. "No. Not at all. You were always his favorite. Out of all the cousins. And you know, you're renting an apartment in New

York. Zach and I built a house. It makes sense that he wanted you to have it. To have somewhere closer to home.”

Emily nodded. “I just don’t want there to be any hard feelings.”

“There’s none, Em. I promise you.”

“Okay.” Emily drummed her fingers against the table. “I could use your interior design skills though. My apartment came furnished. There’s beautiful art on the walls. I have never made those kinds of decisions before, and I wouldn’t know where to begin with a cabin.”

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 3:20 am*

“Let’s go to the furniture store together. There’s one outside of town, but if you’re willing to spend a bit of money, there’s a better place about an hour away. Real rustic, handmade furniture. Leather goods. It’s a nice place.”

“Yeah. That sounds good.”

Their club sandwiches arrived a few minutes later, and both of them were too hungry to talk, happy to eat in silence.

They had a strange relationship. Emily had always looked up to her older sister, but with seven years between them, it meant that by the time Emily had turned twelve, Rebecca had already left for college.

Before that, she’d had plenty of memories of them playing catch outside or going for hikes through the woods behind their house, playing some kind of imaginary game. But that all stopped when Rebecca went to college, and with medical school, by the time she was done, Emily was getting ready to leave too.

It would be nice this month to finally spend time with her sister again.

“Thanks for telling me about that yoga class last night,” Emily said. “I think I would have been a lot stiffer today if I hadn’t gone. And I think I needed the distraction.”

Rebecca finished her sandwich. “Try not to treat this cabin like a work project. Take your time with it.”

“I’m only here for a month.”

“And why does it have to be wrapped up by then?”

Emily shrugged. “I don’t want it to be left empty for weeks. I assume I’ll rent it out. And it would be good to have it ready to do that in the New Year. I can do that part remotely.”

“Hm. True.” Rebecca held her gaze. “All I’m saying is don’t put any unnecessary pressure on yourself. I know you work really hard in New York. Maybe, try and see this renovation as a fun thing. A hobby.”

“I know.” Emily nodded. She did have a tendency to go all in when she was working on something, and her sister knew her well enough to see that the same thing could happen here.

“I’m glad you went to that class. Maya is so good.”

“Yeah. I used to go two or three times a week a few years ago, but I guess I just got busy with work, and I let it slide.”

“You have to look after yourself.”

“Yeah. I know.” Emily inhaled a deep breath. It was advice she knew she needed to hear. “What’s Maya’s story?” The question was out of her mouth before she had a chance to stop herself. She couldn’t shake the image of Quinn wrapping her arms around Maya last night after class. They could be friends. That was probably all it was, but she might as well find out from someone who knew just about everyone in this town.

Rebecca’s eyebrows rose. “What do you mean?”

“Is she gay?”

Rebecca laughed. "I see your thing for older women is alive and well."

Emily tilted her head, still waiting for an answer, not particularly caring if her sister had the wrong idea. "Is she?"

"I honestly don't know, but aren't you supposed to be able to tell?"

"Never mind," Emily said, glancing down at her watch, knowing Rebecca would have to go any minute.

"Are you free Saturday? I know you'll be working on the cabin, but I was hoping to steal you for a couple of hours. I'm a few people down this week."

"Oh." Emily stood up and slid on her jacket, leaving a few dollar bills on the table. She'd completely forgotten that Rebecca spent her Saturdays running a meal delivery service for the elderly in their community. "Yeah. Definitely."

"You're sure?"

Emily nodded as they went up to the counter to pay. "This week is all about making decisions, and then I'll be letting the professionals in. I'm going to need new carpets. The kitchen is getting a full remodel. So, yeah by Saturday, I should be free."

"Thanks." Rebecca waved her off when she tried to pay. "Are you really around for a whole month?" she asked as they left, the cold air hitting them as they stepped outside.

"Yep. Boss's orders."

"It'll be nice having you around this year," Rebecca said, wrapping her scarf around her neck as they headed towards their cars.

*Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 3:20 am*

“Yeah. It will.” Emily stuffed her hands in her coat pockets. It was the same tone her mother had used. There was no judgment there. Rebecca wasn’t trying to make her feel bad for all the years she wasn’t around, but it still felt that way. It just reminded Emily of all the times she could have been here, and she’d chosen not to.

“Do you want to do that furniture shopping after I close up?” Rebecca asked.

“Yeah. Sure.”

“You might see something that will end up being a centerpiece almost. The color of the carpets, the walls... It could all end up working around this perfect couch or coffee table.” Rebecca shook her head. “Sorry, I get carried away.”

“Don’t apologize. That’s why I asked you. I know you love it, and you’re really good at it too.”

“Thanks. See you later,” Rebecca said, giving her a quick hug before getting in her car.

Emily found her shades in her bag and put them on as she got in her own car, the afternoon sun strong as she pulled out onto the street, taking that familiar winding road back to the cabin.

Quinn entered the community center on Saturday afternoon. As she looked around the entrance hall, she noticed the festive decorations sprinkled throughout the space.

Strings of colored lights twinkled, tinsel and garlands glimmered in the light, and a small Christmas tree sat in one corner adorned with ornaments and multi-colored lights. Paper snowflakes dangling from the ceiling above her head.

Quinn surveyed the festive scenes with admiration as she prepared to help out with their weekly meal delivery service for local seniors. She'd volunteered here most Saturdays, delivering meals to those who needed it most.

"Hey," Rebecca said, kicking open one of the double doors that led to the main part of the community center, her arms full of bags. "Can you take some of these for me, please?"

"Sure." Quinn strode towards her, taking some of the toys and clothes from her arms. "Where do you want me this week? Wrapping these?"

They brought the presents into a back room, another pile already stacked in the corner and three young women were unrolling wrapping paper and lining up the gifts, still figuring out their system it seemed. They added their bags to the collection.

"No," Rebecca said as she stood up. "I've got that under control." She led them back out, stopping to point a volunteer Quinn didn't recognize to the kitchen.

"New faces," Quinn commented. "That's good. You can never have too many."

"Oh, I know, but we're still short-handed this week." Rebecca stopped in the office on the way to the kitchen, grabbing a clipboard with a few sheets of paper attached to it.

Quinn kept coming back every week, because she could see how much of an impact their efforts had on the community, and Rebecca was the perfect woman to be in charge. She was the local doctor, although not Quinn's. She'd kept the one she had by

the college.

But Quinn had liked Rebecca from the start, when she'd began volunteering probably four or five years ago now. She was in her early forties, and she was the one who suggested Quinn try going to the yoga class in town even though Quinn had been certain she wouldn't be able, her body too old for that much contortion. Rebecca had been right though. Quinn always felt better the weeks that she went.

"No Zach today?" Quinn asked, knowing Rebecca's husband was usually pretty reliable.

"Man flu."

"Oh. I hope he's not too bad with it."

Rebecca gave her a bit of a smile. "It's like clockwork. Every single year. I usually manage to avoid it though. He'll be fine in a few days." She glanced down at the clipboard. "How do you feel about doing deliveries this week?"

"Good. Yeah, that's no problem."

"I managed to recruit my sister." Rebecca tucked the clipboard under her arm as they made their way down the hall towards the kitchen. "If she shows up," she said, checking her watch.

Quinn wasn't sure what to make of that, so she just followed Rebecca into the kitchen, containers of food stacked and ready to be loaded into cars. That was the first time Rebecca had mentioned having a sister which was kind of odd considering that she'd often talk about her parents and her husband.

Quinn knew her parents too. They were a lovely couple, Marie and Richard, and over

the years Quinn kept bumping into one or both of them around town. She couldn't recall either of them mentioning another daughter, but then again, they'd never really chatted for more than a few minutes. She'd wanted to make it Marie's father's funeral, but she'd been away at a conference and wasn't back in time to attend.

"Is she unreliable?" Quinn asked, curiosity getting the better of her.

"Not necessarily." Rebecca scanned the kitchen, seemingly happy enough with the way things were running. "Maybe you can drive? Send her trudging through the snow with the meals," she suggested with a smirk.

Quinn chuckled. "Do you two not get along?"

"No. We do. But she knows how punctual I am, and how I like others to be too when they're meeting me. She shouldn't be fifteen minutes late. Plus, you know all those names and addresses. She'd be putting some of them into the maps app on her phone. Trust me. It'll be more efficient if you take charge and drive."

*Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 3:20 am*

“Okay.” Quinn turned when the door banged shut behind her, her eyes widening when she saw Emily standing there, a black slouchy beanie covering her dark brown hair.

“Sorry, I’m late,” Emily said, coming over to join them. Her steps faltered for just a second, and Quinn had to guess that Emily was just as surprised to see her here as she was. “Guess, I missed the cooking part,” Emily said with a ghost of a smile.

Quinn’s heart was beating a little too fast. This was what small-town life was like. Why did it surprise her that she kept seeing Emily?

And why did it still feel... Awkward wasn’t the word. Strange? Like Quinn was still in a position of authority even though she definitely wasn’t. But it was hard to shake their previous student-teacher relationship.

Rebecca’s eyes were on Emily. “You’re on deliveries.” She handed the clipboard to Quinn next. “And Quinn will be driving. Emily, this is Quinn. Quinn, this is Emily. My sister.”

Someone called Rebecca over from the back of the kitchen, and Quinn was left staring at Emily, her mind playing catchup. Emily was Rebecca’s sister? How did she not know this?

“Hi,” Emily said with a smile, and whether she’d intended for it to be or not, it was a charming one, one that made Quinn’s heart flutter.

Emily looked out the passenger window as they drove by her grandfather's cabin, forgetting for a moment that Quinn was beside her. They'd delivered four meals so far, and their conversation had been light between stops, talking about the weather or a particular part of town and what it had been like when Emily was younger.

Now though, Emily couldn't focus on anything except the fact that her grandfather wasn't there to receive a meal. He'd been on the list for years. Even though he'd been independent and living alone in his eighties, he liked the company and the conversation he could have with a volunteer who came to his door with a hot meal each weekend.

Even though Emily had been back home for a week, and she'd been in and out of the cabin every day since she'd received the keys on Tuesday, the feeling of loss overwhelmed her now, and she found herself swallowing down the lump in her throat.

"I'm sorry," Quinn said softly, the car slowing slightly as they went by the cabin.

Emily turned as they rounded the corner, putting the cabin out of sight again. "Hm?"

"I'm sorry about your grandfather."

Emily just stared at Quinn, almost as if she'd spoken in a different language. How did she know?

Quinn glanced over at her before she turned back onto the main road. "You couldn't have forgotten how small-town life goes in the years you've been away."

Emily looked straight ahead, putting two and two together now. "Apparently, I have."

"I know your sister. I'd call her a friend even. I know your parents too. And I had

intended on going to your grandfather's funeral, but I was out of town."

"I had no idea," Emily said. "And thanks. For saying that." Her stomach did a little flip-flop at the idea of Quinn knowing her family. It was a completely unexpected revelation, and while it might have left her feeling almost giddy for a second, that feeling was quickly replaced with the familiar one of regret. How much sooner could she have met Quinn again if she'd visited regularly?

Quinn shook her head as they came to a crossroads, and the light turned red. "I had no idea about the connection though. To you, I mean. That Rebecca had a sister that I'd taught. Or that Marie and Richard had another daughter that I knew."

Emily had not been prepared for any of this today. She thought she might recognize a few of the volunteers, and she had, but seeing Quinn standing beside Rebecca when she'd walked into the kitchen? Emily had tried to cover up her reaction, but it'd been impossible not to stare. She'd been shocked, but it was more than that. Quinn was so incredibly beautiful. It was hard to do anything but stare.

"I'm surprised we hadn't bumped into each other years ago," Quinn said as they pulled up to an old-fashioned, New England-style farmhouse with snowdrifts piled up against the white picket fence.

Emily released her seatbelt. "I rarely get back here. That's probably why." She held Quinn's gaze for a second, unable to decipher it, before getting out and carrying a meal up the porch steps, taking her time on the slippery surface.

Quinn joined her just as the door opened and a woman in her eighties was wrapped up in a cardigan, a smile on her face as she waved them inside.

This was only Emily's fifth house she'd visited, and she could see why Quinn had been doing this for years. It was rewarding, and Emily could see the relationship that

Quinn had built with these people. She didn't always do the deliveries, Quinn had said. The volunteers take turns, and some weeks she would be away, but these people had become friends. Emily could see it in the warmth of their interactions and the friendliness of their conversations.

This woman's name was Nora, and she was actually ninety years old, which Emily couldn't believe. Not only did she not look it, but she was very mobile. There was no walking stick in sight.

When Nora joined them at the kitchen table with a pot of coffee and some homemade cookies, she asked Emily about herself, saying how she didn't recognize her.

Emily just had to mention her parents names, and Nora knew exactly who she was. But she told her about her job and life in New York.

"Did you play the piano some days at church?" Nora asked, and Emily sucked in a breath, the memories coming back to her after years of being tucked away.

"Uh, yeah. Yes," Emily said, once again feeling that tightness in her throat. "That was me." She could feel Quinn's eyes on her too.

## Page 12

*Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 3:21 am*

“I hope you didn’t give that up,” Nora said, her voice serious. “You were very talented, especially at such a young age.”

Emily had gone to church willingly until she realized that she couldn’t any longer, when the occasional homophobic comment no longer whizzed over her head, hitting her like a sucker-punch instead. But she had played the piano some Sundays from the ages of ten to fourteen. Her grandfather had taught her, the same piano still in the living room where it would remain.

“Thank you,” Emily said. “And I do still play sometimes.”

“That’s good to hear.” Nora’s eyes moved between them. “Any news for me, Quinn?”

Quinn smiled as she shook her head. “There’s never any news, Nora. Not that kind anyway.”

Emily quirked an eyebrow. This must be some kind of inside joke.

“Oh well,” Nora said with an exaggerated sigh. “I guess I’ll just keep waiting.”

“You really shouldn’t,” Quinn said with a soft laugh as she stood up. “We better get going.”

“Thanks for stopping by. And it was lovely to meet you, Emily,” Nora said as she walked them to the door.

“You too.” Emily gave her a wave as Quinn stayed in the doorway, Nora leaning in to whisper something as Emily made her way down the steps.

Quinn joined her in the car a few seconds later.

“What was that about?” Emily asked as they pulled away.

Quinn blew out a breath. “Nora loves reading romance novels, and for some reason, she thinks that any day now I’m going to meet someone.” Her gentle laugh filled the space between them. “And I have no idea why. Maybe, she’s like that with everyone. I don’t know.”

“She didn’t ask me,” Emily said with a smile.

“True. But she probably assumes someone like you isn’t single.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Well. It was obviously meant as a compliment,” Quinn said as she turned onto the main road again. She let out a breath. “I guess, I just meant when you were going on about your life in New York. You come across as someone who has their life together. That’s all.”

“Thanks, I think.” Emily bit her lip. What a strange conversation. And now that they were having it? Why wouldn’t she try to find out something more about Quinn? “But for the record, I could also do with Nora’s optimism.”

“You’re not seeing anyone?” Quinn asked without looking her way.

“No. Not for a while now.” Emily pressed her lips together, her heart beating faster as she debated her next few words. “What about you?”

Quinn didn't answer right away, and for a second, Emily thought she'd said the wrong thing, that somehow Quinn knew what Emily was really asking, but Quinn didn't seem fazed when she did answer.

"Well, I didn't lie to Nora. I am single."

Emily had gathered as much, but she was hoping that Quinn might say something that would allude to her sexuality or about how she was waiting for Mr. Right, and then Emily could finally forget about this ridiculous crush on her former professor.

Emily would worry about her desperation later, but right now she couldn't let this topic of conversation go without at least trying some other angle. "What's Maya's situation?"

"The yoga instructor?"

"Yeah." Emily tried to keep the nervous energy coursing through her out of her voice. "I always thought my gaydar was decent, but you know, when you haven't tested it out in a while, you start to doubt yourself."

"Uh, well." Quinn stumbled over her words. "As far as I know, she's single. Bi and single."

"Interesting." Emily wasn't sure where Quinn's potential nervousness was coming from, but at the very least, she wanted Quinn to know that she was gay. What that would actually achieve? Probably nothing.

Emily didn't even know what kind of game she was playing. Even if Quinn was gay, single, and interested, what good would it do?

Emily's life was in New York City.

But there had always been something about Professor Grant.

Quinn.

Emily still felt it all these years later, and she couldn't stop herself from at least putting herself out there. She just had to hope that Quinn hadn't seen her crush all those years ago. Emily liked to think that she'd been subtle, but it was impossible to know.

10

By the time they arrived back at the community center, it was nearly dark. Quinn had always taken her time when she was delivering meals, but she couldn't know that it would actually take longer with Emily.

Just about everyone they'd delivered to either recognized her or thought that they knew her from somewhere, and that led to a longer conversation about what she was up to now, and once she'd mentioned New York City, most of them had their own stories about their time either living or working there or a great night out they had fifty years ago.

On the way into the community center, Emily stopped to talk to someone else who was about to get into their car. This trip home must have felt like a reunion of sorts for Emily.

Quinn kept going, wanting to return the clipboard to the office, and Rebecca was just coming out of it when Quinn arrived.

“How did it go?” Rebecca asked as Quinn handed it back to her, and she left it on the desk.

“Good. Yeah.”

“You were gone a long time. I was almost worried.”

Quinn nodded. “Yeah, well. Everyone seemed to recognize your sister or at least wonder where they knew her from.”

“That’s not surprising, really. She’s never been back long enough over the years to see anyone other than our family.”

Quinn wasn’t sure what to say to that. Did she detect some level of disappointment in Emily?

“Did she ask you about Maya?”

Quinn must have missed something. “What?”

“Did Emily ask you about Maya?”

“Uh, yeah. Actually, she did. Why?” Quinn leaned against the doorframe as Rebecca perched herself on the edge of the desk, her arms folded across her chest.

Rebecca chuckled. “Well, that’s never going to change, I guess.”

“What’s that?” Quinn asked, a smile coming to her lips as she tried to read between the lines.

“Emily has always had a thing for unavailable, older women. She asked me about

Maya the other day, but it wouldn't be the first time she was chasing after someone she probably shouldn't be. There was a professor in college, then her first boss when she moved to New York. A client at some point? Maybe, Maya is an improvement now that I think about it. Assuming she's gay. Sorry," Rebecca said with a shake of her head. "I try not to get too involved with Emily's personal life, but I worry about her. Her career is solid. She works hard. But her personal life? Not so much."

Quinn inhaled a shaky breath. So much new information. "It's normal to worry about your younger sister. I think. I don't have any siblings so..."

"I'm sure it is, but I'm also sure most people's younger siblings aren't always on the verge of some kind of scandal. And I'm sure I don't even know the half of it."

Quinn's palms were sweaty now, her mind finally processing everything that Rebecca had just said. Was she the college professor?

She had to be.

Emily's crush on her had been so obvious. Not to the point that other people saw it. Quinn just couldn't miss it, but that was probably because she'd needed that attention back then, at that point in her life.

Emily must never have mentioned Quinn's name, or because it was so long ago, Rebecca had forgotten it. Either way, if it really was her that Rebecca was talking about, then Quinn hadn't been imagining things. She had wondered at different points throughout that year, that maybe she was reaching, seeing what she wanted to see after her breakup.

"Any plans tonight?" Rebecca asked, taking her away from her thoughts. "I'm trying to stay out of the house and avoid Zach's flu."

“None.”

“Do you want to check out the markets and go for a drink after?”

*Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 3:21 am*

“Sure.” Quinn pushed herself off the doorframe. “Around seven?”

“Perfect.”

“Okay. See you then.”

As Quinn left, Emily was coming back inside.

“Thanks for today,” Emily said as Quinn held the door open for her.

“I feel like I should be thanking you.” Quinn held Emily’s gaze. “You were really good. A lot of people find it awkward to talk to older people. Strangers. They don’t know how to make conversation, because they’re worried about maybe triggering them by bringing up the holidays or their family when maybe they don’t have any left. You were really good.”

Emily inhaled a sharp breath. “Thank you. That’s a really nice thing to say.”

“I mean it.” Quinn felt an unexpected tug towards Emily, her gaze connecting with Quinn’s in a way that was both mysterious and electric. They looked at each other for a moment and there was something between them, like a silent understanding. Emily’s eyes were full of emotion as she looked at Quinn, and it took her breath away. Could she feel it too? Was this older, more mature version of Emily still interested in her?

“I was just following your lead,” Emily said, her voice soft and warm. “You clearly have done this for years so...” Emily’s lips curved into a smile. “Anyway, I’ll see

you around, Quinn.”

As Emily went inside, Quinn’s eyes trailed her with an unmistakable attraction. She stood in the doorway, mesmerized, for a few seconds longer as she watched her go before finally closing the door.

What a strange day.

Quinn had not expected to see Emily, and then they ended up spending most of the day together.

Nora had whispered in her ear, telling her that this young woman would be an excellent option if she was finally ready to put herself out there. Thankfully, none of that was said with Emily in earshot. Quinn had simply smiled, telling Nora that Emily was too young for her.

It was true. And it looked like Quinn was going to have to keep reminding herself of that fact.

Quinn had always appreciated Nora’s open mindedness although as the years went by, Quinn was starting to think that maybe Nora was gay too, and perhaps she hadn’t lived the life she’d wanted to. Maybe, she wanted to live vicariously through Quinn now, and that was why she was so interested in her dating life.

Then Emily was throwing it out there that she was gay. Just in case Quinn didn’t already know.

And if that wasn’t enough, she had Rebecca’s comments about Emily’s history of being interested in unavailable, older women.

Was that her? Was she the professor?

She had to be.

Quinn definitely could do with going out tonight and having a few drinks, otherwise she'd just keep overanalyzing everything that had happened today.

11

Emily arrived back at her parents' home and spotted her sister's car in the driveway. Emily knew there was no point in explaining why she'd been late today. Rebecca probably wouldn't have appreciated the fact that she'd nearly backed out at the last minute, sitting in her car outside the community center, debating driving away. She knew her grandfather would have been on the list, and she also knew that there would be a pretty good chance that they'd drive by the cabin.

She'd been spending a lot of time up there, so it wasn't really about the cabin, but she knew it would feel different, delivering meals to other elderly people, knowing that in the past, volunteers had stopped by and spent a few minutes talking to him. And she had felt that twinge of grief earlier, with Quinn.

Emily stepped out of her car, the cold evening air brushing against her warm cheeks as she climbed the three steps to the porch. The house was illuminated in a festive glow. White Christmas lights twinkled around the windows and outlined the eaves.

Pushing open the door, an inviting burst of warmth and mouth-watering aromas poured out into the hall. The heavenly smells of roast chicken and mashed potatoes drifted through the air, and Emily really hoped there was buttery corn on the cob to go with it. She heard voices in the kitchen, Rebecca's infectious laugh intermingling with that of her parents, and as Emily hung up her coat, she promised herself never to leave it this long again without coming home.

She'd been feeling that way all week, but there was something about today, visiting

those older folks in the area that made Emily promise herself that she actually would come back more regularly. Her parents weren't getting any younger, and she knew it was a privilege to get to the age of some of the people they met today, like Nora.

Emily wandered down the hall, still thinking about that interaction between Quinn and Nora when Emily had already gone back to the car. It was better to think about what Nora had been telling Quinn than to think about how much Emily had enjoyed spending those hours with Quinn.

It had been so different from any of their previous interactions. Back in college, there was the student-teacher dynamic, so Emily had never said more than a few words to her about an assignment or some general comments about something going on at college or the weather. They'd never actually had a real conversation.

The coffee shop encounter didn't count. That was more awkward than anything, with both of them trying to place the other. And as much as Emily had wanted to wait outside the yoga studio on Wednesday night to catch Quinn, she forced herself to keep walking to her car, not wanting to appear as desperate as she felt.

"Hey," Emily said to Rebecca after she'd greeted her parents. Her father and Rebecca were pulling out chairs at the dinner table while their mother carved the chicken. "Shouldn't you be at home taking care of your sick husband? You are a doctor after all," she said as she sat down.

## Page 15

*Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 3:21 am*

“Hm and as a doctor, I need to keep seeing my patients. I can’t do that if I’m at home catching Zach’s flu.”

Their mother dished out the chicken as they filled their plates with potatoes and corn. “Will you bring him home some leftovers?”

Rachel thanked her. “Well, I would, but he’s not really eating much more than soup, and I’m going out anyway.”

“Do you want me to drop you in?” Emily asked, assuming she was having a few drinks.

“Why don’t you join us?”

Emily held out her plate so her mother could pile on a few slices of chicken. “Thanks,” she said before turning to Rebecca. “Who’s us?”

“Just Quinn.”

Emily’s fork full of chicken and mashed potatoes paused in mid-air before it reached her mouth. She processed that bit of information before enjoying the perfectly cooked chicken and all the seasoning that came with it.

Her mother sat down across from Emily. “Tell Quinn she’s welcome here for Christmas. I know I ask her every year, but I don’t want her to think that she’s not welcome. It is a real invitation. I’m not just saying it.”

Rebecca chuckled. “She knows that. She also doesn’t mind spending the day alone.”

Her mother chimed in between bites. “No one should be alone at Christmas.”

Emily just looked between them as she ate. What was going on? Quinn was asked to have dinner here every year?

What?

“I’ll tell her again,” Rebecca said. “But I doubt she will.”

Her mother’s eyes were on Emily now. “You’d like Quinn. She’s so sweet. She’s always helping Rebecca out at the community center.”

“Yeah.” Emily blinked. This was surreal. No one seemed to realize that Emily already knew Quinn. That she had been her professor. “I actually spent the day with her today. Delivering meals.”

“Then you should go out with them tonight,” her mother said as she lifted the corn on the cob to her mouth and took a bite. “You’re spending too much time up at that cabin. Take the day off tomorrow. Sleep in. It’ll still be there. Plus, Tom is working tonight. I met him in town earlier.”

“Who?” Emily asked.

“The local taxi driver,” her mother said.

Emily wanted to, but she wasn’t sure that it was a good idea. Quinn wouldn’t be expecting her to join them, and there was always a chance that Rebecca would put two and two together and realize that Quinn had been Emily’s professor, the same one that Emily had confessed having a massive crush on.

“So, what do you think?” Rebecca asked a few minutes later.

Emily’s leg bounced beneath the table. Ever since she’d met Quinn at the coffee shop, she’d been hoping to run into her again in a casual setting where they could talk, and hopefully, Emily’s crush would start to fade the more she got to know Quinn as Quinn and not Professor Grant. And this was the perfect opportunity for that.

Not that that had happened today with all the time they spent together. More than once, Emily had caught herself checking Quinn out. How could she not? Emily had never seen Quinn in jeans before. And a red sweater that fit her perfectly?

So, maybe Emily’s plan was delusional.

But was she really going to turn down spending more time with Quinn?

“Yeah. I think I’ll join you guys,” Emily said as casually as possible while her mind was already wandering to what she’d wear, running a hand through her hair now as she sat back, knowing she’d need to shower before they left. She’d had a beanie hat on for most of the day.

“Great. You might even see Maya later,” Rebecca said, taking Emily away from her thoughts.

“What?”

“Maya. She has a stall at the market. She sells incense and essential oils. Some yoga gear too.”

“Oh,” Emily said as she finished her dinner. She had to tell Rebecca that she actually wasn’t interested in her at all in case she started interfering.

*Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 3:21 am*

“Will you be ready to go in an hour?” Rebecca asked when they cleared the table.

“Yeah.” Emily loaded the dishwasher while she ran through her clothing options, and quickly realized that the only thing she had that was dressy was her favorite black blazer. She’d pair it with black pants and a silver top that dipped just enough to reveal a hint of cleavage. A few waves in her hair and hopefully she’d be able to determine if Quinn was in any way interested.

Why? That was the question that she couldn’t stop asking as she climbed the stairs to go get ready. Why was she even bothering with this? She should just be happy that she’d met Quinn again after all these years and leave it alone. She’d dated plenty of women since Quinn had been a daily distraction.

Then why couldn’t she get Quinn out of her head all week?

12

Quinn stepped out of the taxi, arriving at the Christmas markets on the edge of town. Snow flurries lazily danced through the air in spiralling patterns. She inhaled deeply, taking in the intoxicating scent of mulled wine, gingerbread, and sugared almonds. The air was full of the festive aromas that could only be found at a traditional Christmas market.

Everywhere there were crowds; people laughing and talking excitedly as they moved from stall to stall searching for presents or holiday treats. All around there was an atmosphere of joy and anticipation tinged with a certain wistfulness. Quinn allowed herself to get swept up in it, letting go of the worries she’d been carrying for the last

few months.

Whether she liked it or not, today was her fiftieth birthday, so she might as well embrace it.

She spotted her almost immediately; standing in the middle of it all like she belonged there, looking beautiful as ever, laughing with a stall owner who Quinn couldn't see from where she was standing.

Emily's candy cane red winter coat stood out, her hair tumbling across her shoulders. Quinn's heart leaped at the sight and before she could figure out what to do and why she'd even reacted that way, Emily's eyes locked onto her own from across the crowd.

It was a moment that Quinn might have thought she'd imagined. It was impossible to tell from this distance if Emily really had been looking at her specifically and not just in her direction, but even from this far away, Quinn could swear that she had been.

As Quinn found herself walking towards where she last saw Emily, at the opposite side of the market, Rebecca came into view. They were strolling along, side by side, and then Rebecca saw her, throwing her a wave with a cream-gloved hand.

"Hey," Rebecca said as they finally met in the middle of the stalls. "I hope you don't mind, but I invited Emily. Hopefully, you two aren't sick of each other after spending so much time together already today."

"Not at all," Quinn said with a nervous chuckle, and Emily echoed the same sentiments. Quinn just noticed now that Emily was holding two cups and Rebecca had her own.

Someone called Rebecca's name, and she turned to go talk to them, an older couple

who were wrapped up in scarves and hats. While she was gone, Emily handed her extra cup to Quinn.

“It’s a gingerbread hot chocolate,” Emily said. “I had a friend who worked in the campus coffee shop, and she mentioned that because of you they kept a gingerbread latte on the menu all year long. Not just in December. You were her favorite customer, because that was her favorite drink too. So... I figured a hot chocolate with a hint of gingerbread would be a safe bet.”

Quinn was momentarily stunned by Emily’s thoughtfulness, her breath drawn in slowly as if inhaling the surprise. A small laugh escaped from Quinn too, part amazement at what Emily had done, and part appreciation.

“That’s really nice of you. Thank you,” Quinn said with a smile.

Emily shrugged her shoulders modestly. “I’ve only been here ten minutes, and I’m already freezing, so I thought this might keep us warm while we walk around. If we get walking around,” she said, glancing over her shoulder at her sister. “She knows everyone. We might have to abandon her or we’ll never get to the bar.”

“Is that the plan then?”

“To go to a bar?” Emily’s lips curved into a smile. “That’s what Rebecca said was happening. I think the markets were just an excuse to go out.”

Rebecca chose that moment to join them, linking her arm through Emily’s as she took a sip of her drink. “Sorry about that,” she said as they started walking, the snow still falling steadily. “Oh Quinn, before I forget. My mother extended the annual Christmas invitation. Do what you like with it, but I’m just doing what I’m told and making sure you know it’s still there this year.”

“Thanks,” Quinn said, bringing her cup to her lips and taking a drink of the rich hot chocolate. While she couldn’t really avoid feeling lonely at some point during Christmas, she’d never wanted to impose herself on Marie and her family.

“Oh,” Rebecca said, “There’s Maya’s stall up ahead on the right. I want to get one of her homemade candles for my mother.”

Quinn couldn’t miss the way Emily’s face dropped. It was subtle, but it was definitely there. A moment of panic maybe? Did that mean she really did have a thing for Maya?

Quinn tried to push away the feeling of jealousy that crept in as she watched Emily smile and chat easily with Maya once they reached her stall. It was entirely irrational to worry about who Emily was or wasn’t interested in. It didn’t matter. Emily would be headed back to New York City next month, and Quinn had never been one to go out with someone she knew had no chance of a future with, unlike Lucy.

Speaking of Lucy, that was her red hair up ahead, and then she turned, flashing Quinn a smile.

Quinn told Rebecca she wanted to go say hello, and she was glad of the excuse to leave Emily and Maya chatting without overhearing anymore of their conversation.

“Hey,” Lucy said with a grin, looking past her. “Isn’t that your student from the coffee shop?”

“Yes.” Quinn sipped her drink, letting the hot drink warm her as she suppressed a shiver.

“And are you here with her?”

“Yes and no.” Quinn licked her lips, savoring the rich sugariness of the cocoa and a hint of warmth from the nutmeg and cinnamon.

“Oh,” Lucy said with a smirk. “If you’re trying to pretend that nothing’s going on by telling me as little as possible... You’ve failed completely. I know that glint in your eyes. I’ve only seen it occasionally. Usually, it’s reserved for the lead actress in whatever movie we’ve just been to. But I know that look.”

“There’s nothing going on. I’m here with Rebecca.”

“Doctor Rebecca?”

“Yes, and her sister, Emily.”

Lucy frowned. “Your former student is Rebecca’s sister?”

“And there’s yet another reason why it’s not happening. I like the Reids. The ones I knew of. And now I like Emily too. But it’s not happening.”

“Did Marie ask you over for Christmas dinner again this year?”

“Yes.”

“You need to go this year,” Lucy said with a sly smile.

“This is the one year I shouldn’t go.”

“She’s looking at you right now. This is ridiculous. You clearly both like each other. Go have some fun. Let loose.”

Quinn sighed. “Look, even if I wanted to, she’s not interested in me. Not anymore.”

“Are you being serious?” Lucy’s breath came out in a puff of smoke, the night air getting colder by the minute.

“Yes. I just came over to spare myself watching Emily flirt with Maya. And to say hello of course.”

“Of course.” Lucy frowned, looking beyond her again. “Well, she’s not talking to Maya right now. And she’s looking over here again. She’s got it so bad.”

“Lucy, enough. Seriously.”

“Okay, okay. Sorry. What’s your plans for tonight? Can I crash the party?”

“There’s no party, and you can only crash what probably is just going to be a few drinks, if you behave.”

Lucy made a face. “Fine.”

Quinn took another drink, turning to see Emily wrapping her arm around her sister’s waist as they kept walking, her eyes lifting to find Quinn’s.

Quinn looked away.

Why did their eye contact always feel so charged?

Emily had never been to the wine bar just off the town square. The atmosphere was cozy yet chic. Dim lighting glowed from pendant lights suspended above walnut tables and intimate booths that were arranged throughout the bar. Rebecca led them to a free booth at the back of the room, and Emily slid in beside her, while Lucy took the inside across from them, leaving Quinn to take the outside seat directly opposite Emily.

Emily took a deep breath as Quinn sat down across from her, trying her best to keep her emotions in check. Emily fixed a smile on her face as she looked into Quinn's blue eyes, hoping that it would be enough of an indication of friendliness without betraying too much about what lay beneath the surface.

Quinn met her eyes as she shrugged out of her coat, hanging it on the hooks outside the booth, and Emily forgot to breathe.

Quinn's blond hair was tousled in soft, luscious waves tonight, her eyes set ablaze by smokey eye makeup. Her lips were stained with a deep red hue that only accentuated her captivating beauty.

Emily's heart raced as she felt her world tilt on its axis, and in that moment, she knew that any idea that she might be over this attraction was nothing but a lie.

*Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 3:21 am*

“You okay?” Rebecca asked, snapping Emily back into reality.

Emily blinked twice before responding with a nod. “Yeah,” she said breathlessly, quickly focusing on the menu in front of her to avoid Quinn’s gaze.

She needed a drink. Fast. She’d been in so many high-pressure situations with work, never even considering using alcohol to help her in any way, but this was a whole other situation. Emily’s leg bounced under the table, the realization that she was possibly even more attracted to Quinn now than she’d ever been hitting her with a sudden intensity.

The conversation around the table was light and easy, with Emily being careful to focus on the others rather than Quinn.

They shared a bottle of wine between the four of them, ordering a second as they continued laughing and talking with Emily quickly warming to Lucy, someone she couldn’t remember from her time here.

When the third bottle of wine had been delivered to their table, Lucy was asking Rebecca about a medical story she read online that morning, and both Quinn and Emily seemed to simultaneously tune out of that conversation when things started to get a bit gross.

Quinn gave Emily a half-smile. “I’m not squeamish, but...”

“Oh, I’m not even going to see where that conversation is going to go. Once Rebecca gets started... She’ll have her own story to match that one.”

Emily offered her a quick, sympathetic smile, feeling the heat coming to her cheeks as she now held Quinn's gaze for the first time, really, since they'd sat down.

Emily sipped her wine. Now that they were only paying attention to one another, Emily couldn't shake the feeling that this could be a date. It certainly felt like one with the candlelight flickering between them. The alcohol was starting to take effect, that tipsy feeling taking over in the last few minutes, and that meant that Emily might not be able to hide her attraction as easily.

That was if she had even been doing a good job up until that point. Her only strategy was to not look at Quinn.

But now that she was?

Emily struggled in every sense. She absently slid her fingers up and down the stem of her wineglass just to give herself something to do while she tried to think of something intelligent to say that definitely wasn't anything about how amazing Quinn looked tonight.

"Rebecca mentioned that you were doing up your grandfather's cabin," Quinn said, and Emily could only nod as she tried to get her shit together.

"Yeah. I couldn't really believe it when I found out he left it to me, but yeah, I'm just updating it a bit. It'll still have a rustic feel, you know, like a cabin." Emily internally groaned. She was rambling and talking nonsense. Quinn didn't care about the details. She was probably just making conversation.

"Are you planning on selling it?"

Emily took a deep breath. "I honestly don't know. Not in the short term. In the future? Maybe. Right now, I'm just focusing on freshening up the place. New

appliances, furniture, carpets. I guess renting it out makes the most sense.”

Quinn nodded, and Lucy said something to Quinn, hitting her on the arm and bringing her back into the conversation, but Emily was too focused on Quinn and the way her hair fell across her eyes as she shook her head and laughed with them.

Emily slipped out of the booth and found the restrooms, staring at her reflection in the mirror, wondering how exactly she’d ended up in a worse place than she’d been in college. At least then, Emily knew it was only a fantasy. A crush that would never be acted on.

But now?

Emily could swear there was something in the way Quinn looked at her. She had zero actual evidence. If she tried to explain it to Rebecca? Emily wouldn’t even be able to find the words to describe it, which more than likely meant Emily was seeing what she wanted to see.

She wanted to splash cold water on her face, but she couldn’t without ruining her makeup. She settled for using the bathroom and taking some deep, calming breaths as she washed her hands.

When Emily came back to their table, Rebecca was reaching for her coat. “You’re going?”

“Three glasses and I’m tipsy. See? This is what happens when you only drink two or three times a year.”

Quinn got up as Lucy slid out.

“I’m going to head off as well,” Lucy said, glancing at her phone.

“Hot date?” Quinn asked with a smirk.

Lucy just nodded. “This was nice though. Thanks for letting me crash.” She gave Quinn a long hug, whispering something in her ear while Emily said goodnight to her sister.

“I’ll see you in the morning,” Rebecca said as she put on her jacket.

“You’re staying at home?” Emily asked. “Wow, you really don’t want the flu. Does Zach not feel neglected?”

*Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 3:21 am*

“No. We do this every year. I leave him with plenty of soup and tea and whatever else he might crave, but I’m out of that house as much as possible when he’s sick. I can’t afford to take a week or more off work.”

Emily nodded. “Okay. I guess, I’ll see you back at the house. There’s still most of a bottle left.”

“Well, enjoy,” Rebecca said, and she left with Lucy holding the door open for her.

Emily must have had a delayed reaction, because it wasn’t until she’d sat back down that she realized that it was just her and Quinn now, with nearly a full bottle of wine on the table between them.

14

Ever since her reaction to seeing Emily at the Christmas market, Quinn had been caught off guard by the strength of her attraction to Emily. Before, it had been something she could admit to herself. She wouldn’t say it to Lucy, but she could appreciate that Emily had matured into an enchantingly gorgeous woman.

Quinn had been wrestling with those thoughts all night, but now that it was just her and Emily? Sitting alone in a cozy booth in the back corner of the wine bar?

The awareness was overwhelming.

Quinn reached for the bottle, topping up both their glasses. “Can I tell you a secret?”

Emily's eyebrows lifted. "Yeah."

"Well, Lucy knows, but that's about it." Quinn took a sip of wine. "Today's my birthday."

Emily's mouth fell open. "Today?" She blinked. "As in, I've spent practically all day with you, without knowing?"

Quinn shrugged. "Yeah."

"Well, happy birthday," Emily said with a smile, picking up her glass and clinking it off Quinn's.

"Thank you." Quinn took another drink, knowing that she had to be careful not to move from slightly drunk to completely drunk. Because she wouldn't trust what would come out of her mouth tonight. She had no intention of letting Emily know that she was the one with the crush now.

"Why so secretive? You don't like the attention?"

Quinn sighed. "It's not that. I mean, I would never want a surprise party. It's more the significance of this one."

Emily quirked an eyebrow.

Quinn figured she'd better just say it out loud to keep Emily from worrying about whether or not she should be asking. "I'm fifty."

Emily nodded slowly, a ghost of a smile on her lips. "Thank you for telling me."

Quinn took another drink. "I'm still coming to terms with it."

“I feel bad though. Not knowing all day. I would have got you something. I don’t know. Dinner?”

“You can still do something for me,” Quinn said, an idea popping into her head.

“What’s that?”

“I’m sure you noticed the piano over there.”

“I did.”

“The bar’s nearly empty now.” Quinn looked over at the piano. “I’d love to hear you play.”

Emily laughed softly, her cheeks rosy. “That I can do.” She slid out of the booth, bringing her wine with her but leaving her jacket hanging up.

Quinn did the same, following her over, trying not to let her eyes linger too long on Emily.

Emily sat down, watching Quinn take a seat beside her on the bench. “We’re not very festive, are we? The nearly all black, I mean.” Emily’s eyes traveled over Quinn. “But that doesn’t mean I can’t play a Christmas song. At least to warm up.”

*Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 3:21 am*

Emily placed her glass on top of the piano and started to play. Her fingers moved lightly over the keys, and it didn't take long for Quinn to recognize the melody, the words coming to her in her head, 'Chestnuts roasting on an open fire...'

"Can you sing?" Emily asked as she continued to play.

"No. Not at all. You?"

"Unfortunately no." Emily's hands drifted up and down the keys. "I was hoping we could've made it a duet."

"We still can," Quinn said, putting her glass down beside Emily's, and placing her fingers on the keys.

"You play?" Emily asked, surprise in her voice.

"It has been a while but I should be able to manage this one." Quinn's fingers moved over the keys, a smile playing across her lips as she surprised herself by how easily it was all coming back.

Thankfully, the bar was nearly empty, and no one was paying them any attention. Warmth filled Quinn's chest as she let herself enjoy this moment, even if a part of her wanted it to be more than this.

Quinn couldn't ignore the jolt of electricity that ran through her when Emily's bare arm brushed hers as she moved her fingers across the keys. It was an innocent touch, an accidental one, but it still set Quinn's skin alight.

Maybe she did need to take Lucy's advice and put herself out there. It had been a long time since she'd been with anyone, and clearly, her body couldn't handle a simple, unintentional touch.

Emily played the last few notes, a small smile on her lips as she looked up at Quinn. They both slowed their pace together, and they each softly pressed down on their final notes before coming to a gentle end.

Emily's lips slid into a smile as she held her gaze. "You're full of surprises, Quinn."

Quinn inhaled a shaky breath. That was the first time, that she could think of anyway, that Emily had used her first name.

"Ladies," one of the bartenders said, coming over to them. "That was great and everything, but we're getting ready to close up."

Quinn reached for her wine glass and took a drink. The night had flown by, and she didn't want it to end.

"I don't suppose there are any late bars around here," Emily said with a half-smile.

"You're not in the city anymore." Quinn finished her drink and stood up, wishing they'd had more time together at the piano.

"I don't really feel like that was much of a present. One little Christmas song."

"It was lovely. But yeah... I was going to see how much I could remember of some of my old favorites."

"You don't play much anymore?" Emily asked as she put on her red coat.

“Well, I have a keyboard, but I rarely play it. It’s in my guest bedroom. I guess, I should put it somewhere more prominent if I think I’m ever going to play it.” Quinn slid her arms into her jacket. “Do you... Never mind.” She shook her head, not quite believing that she’d nearly said that out loud.

“What were you going to say?”

Quinn held Emily’s gaze, her heart rate increasing. An invitation back to her house hung on the tip of her tongue. It was so tempting.

Emily smiled as if she could read Quinn’s mind. “I’m not ready to call it a night.”

Quinn locked eyes with Emily, feeling the attraction like a jolt of electricity between them. She could see in Emily’s eyes that she wanted her, and it sent a rush of heat through her body. There was an unspoken invitation in Emily’s expression; all Quinn had to do was take it. She felt her heart beat faster as they stared into each other’s eyes, both daring themselves to make the first move. The pull between them seemed almost irresistible.

“Do you want to come back to my place?” Quinn asked finally, barely able to keep her voice steady.

“I’d love to.”

15

When the taxi driver pulled up outside Quinn’s home, the snow had stopped falling, but it still lingered on the driveway and steps untouched by a plow or a shovel. It was only two or three inches, but under the moonlight, the place looked almost magical.

Emily followed Quinn through the front door of her home and looked around while

Quinn turned on a few lights. The room was airy yet cozy, with glossy hardwood floors, and she spotted a few bookshelves in the corner of the room, creating an inviting reading nook near the window lit by a standing lamp beside it. A Christmas tree twinkled by the fireplace and the mantel over it was decorated with garland and white lights.

*Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 3:21 am*

“Have a seat,” Quinn said once she’d taken Emily’s coat and hung it up. “Will I open a bottle of wine?”

Emily suppressed a shiver. Yes, she was cold, but it probably had more to do with the nervous energy running through her now than the temperature.

“Actually,” Quinn said, “I’ll light the fire first. It’s all set up.”

“I can do it.” Emily found the matches on the coffee table. “And yes to the wine. Please.” She crouched down to light the fire, striking a match and watching the rolled-up newspaper ignite. The split logs slowly began to catch a flame.

Quinn opened a bottle of red and poured them both generous glasses. She handed Emily hers and they sat on the sofa.

“I hope you had a nice birthday,” Emily said by way of a toast, hardly believing that this was really happening. That she was sitting in Quinn’s living room, enjoying some wine, and unless she was really mistaken, that Quinn was looking at her like she might just want Emily to stay.

“Thanks,” Quinn said with a smile, and they clinked their glasses together. “I did. I had a really nice day.”

Emily would never have thought that Quinn was fifty. When Emily was in college, she would have guessed that Quinn was around thirty, maybe thirty-two, when she’d actually been thirty-seven. So, there were fourteen years between them.

“What were you thinking?” Quinn asked.

“Hm?” Emily blinked.

“Just now. What were you thinking? You had an interesting look on your face.”

Emily choked out a laugh. “I was doing math.”

“What?” Quinn asked, laughing softly with her now.

“Eh... Yeah.” Emily took a drink, realizing that she couldn’t explain what kind of math without embarrassing herself.

“Why?”

Emily bit the inside of her cheek. God, she was beautiful, especially now that she was laughing. There was this glint in her eyes. Quinn was relaxed and maybe even enjoying her company.

“I was uh...” Emily almost said that she was thinking back to when she was in college, but she stopped herself in time, because that was the last thing she needed right now. Even though Emily had been twenty-three back then, Quinn had been her professor, and for some people, that could still be a problem all these years later, even with both of them being adults who could make their own decisions.

Quinn propped her elbow up against the back of the couch, sliding her fingers through her hair as she leaned against her hand. “Well, now I have to know. I’ve never seen you struggle for words like this.”

Emily searched Quinn’s eyes. The chances of this happening were so slim. Worrying about reminding Quinn of their past relationship as student and teacher was

ridiculous. Nothing was going to happen. They'd just wanted to continue their night out.

"When I was in college," Emily said as she averted her gaze to check on the fire, "I thought you were maybe thirty years old. So, I was just adjusting my math and my memories."

Quinn laughed, and that brought Emily's eyes back to her. "This is going to sound weird, but I have to say it..."

Emily sucked in a breath, fearing the worst, her heart beating faster. She felt the heat rising to her cheeks as she waited for Quinn to tell her that she knew about Emily's crush.

"You know what?" Quinn sipped her wine. "I better not... Never mind."

Emily stared at Quinn, curiosity taking over. "What?"

"It's too strange to bring up." Quinn shook her head as she leaned forward to put her glass on the coffee table.

"Oh, come on." Emily was really starting to feel that last bottle of wine that they'd shared at the bar. Before then, Emily had let the others top up their glasses while she sipped away, very conscious of the fact that Quinn was sitting across from her, and the more wine Emily had, the less she trusted herself. "It can't be that bad."

"Okay," Quinn said with a sigh. "But I have warned you. It's a weird thing to say to someone."

"Okay." Emily's pulse swished in her ears. Unless she had this wrong and Quinn had something else to say?

Quinn pressed her lips together. “Speaking of college... I um...” Emily felt her breath hitch as Quinn’s intense gaze met hers. “I could tell you had a thing for me. And that was fine. You were never... You never made me feel uncomfortable, is what I’m trying to say.”

Emily swallowed. Okay, so Quinn knew. The thing she’d been dreading wasn’t actually that bad. But where was this conversation going?

*Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 3:21 am*

“But it’s only now,” Quinn said, her voice a little husky now as the night wore on, “Seeing you again, that’s made me realize how much of a positive effect that had on me.”

Emily mentally gasped. What?

“I was going through a breakup,” Quinn said with a bit of a sigh. “Things ended badly. She... Anyway, I had no self-esteem. But I knew that if I glanced in your direction, you’d be looking back at me as if...” Quinn searched for the right words. “I don’t know. I was the only woman you’d ever wanted. And at that point in my life? It saved me.”

All the air left Emily’s lungs. Her heart pounded in her chest, a thousand questions racing through her mind at once. She felt like everything she thought she knew about Quinn was suddenly thrown out the window and replaced with this new truth: Quinn had dated a woman.

She knew that Emily had a massive crush on her back then.

And she didn’t mind it?

“See?” Quinn said with almost a grimace. “That sounded strange. I hope I didn’t make you uncomfortable.”

Emily struggled to calm her racing mind. “No.” She cleared her throat. “No. Not at all. I’m just...” She smiled. “I wasn’t aware of how obvious I was.” She took another drink before leaving her glass on the coffee table. “I would apologize except for what

you just said.”

“Please don’t. I mean it. I don’t know what that says about me though. That I was happy to have a student looking at me like she wanted to undress me,” Quinn said with a wry shake of her head.

“Was I that obvious?” Emily could feel the heat back in her cheeks again, but she couldn’t stop herself from smiling. There was an odd sense of relief in having her attraction to this woman out there now.

“Yes.” Quinn delivered that one word so seriously, that Emily didn’t doubt it.

“Wow.” Emily wasn’t sure what to say to that. “I had no idea you could feel so embarrassed about something that happened twelve years ago.”

“Don’t be embarrassed. I’m sure I was like that with a lecturer or a boss when I was younger.”

“If you don’t remember it, I doubt you were,” Emily challenged her with another shake of her head. “See, by the time I was in your class...”

“What?”

Emily exhaled. “I’d seen you around campus in the years before that.”

“Oh,” Quinn said with a curve of her lips. “Okay. So, it wasn’t my teaching skills that had you intrigued?”

Emily bit back a smile. “By the time I was listening to your lectures, I was already hopelessly smitten.”

Quinn's smile spread across her face. "It's a good thing my morals were never in question."

"You would never have crossed that line?"

"Never," Quinn said matter-of-factly. "I'm glad that I never had to turn you down."

Emily's pulse tripped. They were really having this conversation. "And now?" she asked, although it came out barely above a whisper.

"Now, what?"

"Would you turn me down?" Emily asked, her throat suddenly tight.

16

Quinn's eyes lowered to Emily's lips, her words still in the air between them.

'Would you turn me down?'

Quinn was in a daze. Had it really only been a week since she'd met Emily at the coffee shop?

Because it felt like so much more time had passed. They'd spent practically the whole day together. Her birthday of all days.

And more than once Quinn had found her gaze lingering on Emily.

*Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 3:21 am*

But it had all been harmless. Her turn to have a crush. Something that wouldn't be acted on.

But what if it was?

Quinn lifted her eyes to find Emily's gaze locked on her, waiting for her to say something.

Quinn's pulse thundered in her ears. This was such a bad idea. For all the reasons she'd been telling Lucy all week, and looking back, Quinn knew she'd been trying to convince herself just as much as she had been her friend.

"I'd be a fool to," Quinn said softly, already closing the distance between them on the couch, and Emily met her halfway, her hand on Quinn's cheek, guiding their lips together.

Quinn's lips parted against Emily's in a soft kiss, the sensation sending a shiver through her entire body. Quinn's hand slid underneath Emily's hair, resting on the back of her neck as their lips met again, a gentle, breathless moan leaving her lips as Emily deepened the kiss.

Emily's thumb softly traced her jawline as she opened her mouth, and as their tongues met, the sensation sent a wave of warmth surging through her entire body. Quinn felt herself becoming undeniably lost in this kiss, and it might already be too late to stop and think about what they were doing.

Emily's other hand was lightly resting on Quinn's thigh, the warmth of it almost

burning her through her thin black pants, and Quinn couldn't remember ever feeling an intensity like this, not for a first kiss. It didn't make sense. Her entire body was humming with desire, and she couldn't stop herself from sitting up and getting even closer to Emily.

Emily's hand slid up her thigh and over her hip, barely breaking the kiss as Quinn swung her leg over Emily, pushing her back against the cushions so that she was sitting in Emily's lap.

Emily sat back with a seductive smile on her lips, looking up at Quinn, who could hardly believe she'd just done that, taking control like that, when she knew she should be doing the opposite. She should have been slowing things down, not escalating them.

"You are absolutely stunning," Emily said with a happy sigh, her eyes raking over her, and Quinn felt like she'd been transported back to those days when Emily's eyes made her feel that way. Now it was everything. Her words, her hands, her lips.

Her eyes still told Quinn everything she needed to know, but it was so much more than a lingering look now. This was real. This was happening if Quinn didn't put a stop to this.

Except that was the last thing she wanted to do.

Instead, she dipped her head, her hand on Emily's cheek, bringing their lips together, and Quinn didn't hold back this time.

The cautiousness of that first kiss, the tentativeness of it, was long gone. Emily's hand slid underneath Quinn's top, her palm warm against her back as their lips met in a hungry kiss.

Emily opened her lips, and the moment Quinn's tongue slid against Emily's, a fire was ignited within her.

This couldn't be considered their first kiss. There was too much history, too much wanting, and Quinn felt it all as their lips met again and again. So much built up attraction led to a kiss so passionate that Quinn didn't even know it could be like this.

Heat flooded Quinn's body, her hand gliding over Emily's shoulder, desperate to touch her, but trying to show some restraint at the same time. Her hips rocked ever so slightly, the ache in her core growing with every kiss.

But Quinn pulled away, their noses still touching as she inhaled a shaky breath, her pulse thumping in her ears. She sat back, meeting Emily's eyes, an almost dazed look in them.

"Emily," Quinn started, not even sure what she was trying to say. "I..."

"Is this you turning me down?" Emily asked with a lop-sided smile.

"I don't want to." Quinn raked a hand through her hair, still in Emily's lap, her hands still on Quinn.

"Then don't."

"This is crazy."

"We're not doing anything wrong." Emily looked up at her, but her voice held no desperation. Only confidence.

While Quinn might have been worried about the perception of dating a former student when Lucy suggested it last week at the coffee shop, that was the least of her

concerns right now.

What was stopping Quinn was knowing that this would never be more than a few nights together.

Emily was going back to her life in New York sometime in the New Year. What did that give them? Two, maybe three weeks? With Christmas thrown in the middle of that and Marie's invitation to join them for dinner?

It might not be wrong, but it sure as hell would have consequences.

"Talk to me," Emily said, her hands on the outside of Quinn's legs now, her palms gliding over her pants.

*Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 3:21 am*

“I don’t do this.” Quinn sucked in a breath, slightly taken aback by the emotion in her own voice.

“What’s that?”

Quinn pursed her lips. “Start something that isn’t going anywhere.”

Emily nodded. “I’m afraid I don’t have a counter-argument to that.”

Quinn’s stomach flip-flopped. The adrenaline that had been running through her earlier had come to a screeching halt.

“What I do know,” Emily said, lifting her hand to tuck a piece of hair behind Quinn’s ear, her fingertips brushing along her temple, lingering beneath her ear, “Is that back then, I never thought I could want someone as much as I wanted you. But I had no idea that what I’d been feeling was just the surface. I’ve never wanted someone as much as I want you right now, and I think you feel it too.”

Quinn swallowed down the lump in her throat. She couldn’t say anything, so Emily continued.

“But you’re right,” Emily said softly. “I can’t offer you anything more than a few weeks together. If that’s something that you’d want. I don’t even know which is worse,” she said with a wry smile. “Having to say goodbye to you without knowing what it was like to be with you or...” Her voice trailed off.

Quinn bit the inside of her cheek, knowing exactly what Emily meant. Which was

worse? “It would be easier to never know,” Quinn said, thinking out loud.

“Would it?” Emily’s eyes searched her own, and Quinn lost herself in the pull of Emily’s gravity, leaning in, because in that moment, the only thing she wanted was for her lips to meet Emily’s again.

Emily moaned into the kiss, her hands slipping underneath Quinn’s blouse, her palms hot, her fingers lightly raking over her back as they deepened the kiss.

A strangled moan left Quinn’s lips when Emily’s hand rested on her hip, urging her to continue her gentle rocking motion, and the pressure of her pants against her throbbing clit sent off fireworks within Quinn.

There was no going back.

Not now.

Not when Quinn was already so close.

17

Emily groaned when Quinn’s hand slid down her neck and over the swell of her breast. Even through the fabric of her top, Emily’s nipple tightened, her hips lifting to meet Quinn’s as they continued to kiss, their hands roaming now, and Emily didn’t know how much more she could take like this, fully clothed.

Emily loved having Quinn on top of her, but they were both losing control, desperation taking over. And Emily couldn’t keep the vision of pressing Quinn against the sheets and having her way with her out of her head.

Behind Quinn, the fire crackled and popped. It was the only noise in the room besides

their moans. It was electric, this chemistry, and as much as Emily had wanted Quinn, she never could have imagined it being like this.

Quinn's lips nipped at her neck now, her breath warm against Emily's skin as she murmured, "You're driving me crazy."

Emily's heart skipped, the muscles beneath her stomach jumping as Quinn's hand moved lower, disappearing beneath her top, her fingers hot against her skin.

"I need more, Quinn." Emily's hand groped her ass now, both of them more daring it seemed. "I need to see you."

"Then come to bed with me."

Emily swallowed as she noticed the unmistakable lust in Quinn's eyes.

\* \* \*

Emily's breath caught as she lifted Quinn's top over her head, letting it fall to the carpeted floor of her bedroom, the warmth of the lamps in the room providing enough light to see Quinn, her black lacy bra, and the curves of her gorgeous body.

"You're beautiful," Emily whispered as she stepped into Quinn's space, her hands on Quinn's hips as their lips met again, a slow, deep kiss, and Emily sighed as Quinn's tongue slid over her own.

Emily swayed into Quinn as she felt Quinn's hands caress her ass, her thigh between Emily's legs now, and it was all Emily could do to stay standing.

Quinn's eyes were dark when she finally pulled away from Emily. "This has to go..." She reached for the hem of Emily's blouse.

Emily nodded, breathless, letting Quinn lift it over her head. Their black pants were next, both of them taking turns stepping out of them between more heated kissing.

*Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 3:21 am*

Emily popped open Quinn's bra, her hands eagerly covering her bare breasts, a shiver running through her own body at the intimacy of it.

Quinn kissed her neck, her earlobe, her shoulder while she unhooked Emily's bra, sliding the straps down her arms until they had to step apart to let the fabric fall to the carpet.

Quinn's hands moved to Emily's hips, gently pushing her back onto the bed, her body covering Emily's, her lips hot against Emily's chest until she had them wrapped around Emily's nipple, her tongue teasing her, driving Emily crazy.

It was then that Emily realized she had never felt this alive in a moment before – electric fear and sudden desire mixed together into one strong emotion, one that crashed over her like a wave, pushing away all of the thoughts in her head, all of the uncertainty, all that could keep her from this moment – until there was only Quinn.

“Come here,” Emily murmured, reaching for Quinn, bringing her up to her lips, and kissing her like the world might end any moment.

Quinn moaned into the kiss, and Emily managed to switch their positions, pushing Quinn back against the white sheets, her hand tracing a pattern over her stomach until she was cupping Quinn over her panties.

Quinn whimpered, breaking the kiss, her hips lifting to meet Emily's hand. “I can't take much more of this,” Quinn whispered against her lips. “I've never been this close, this easily. I can't even think. I don't know—“

Emily maneuvered her hand into Quinn's underwear, finding her clit and circling it slowly. She was so wet and so ready that Emily slid her fingers lower, entering her with a smooth thrust.

"Oh my god," Quinn gasped, throwing her head back, her eyes slamming shut. "Fuck," she panted, her hand gripping the sheets as Emily started moving her fingers in and out.

Emily's eyes swept over Quinn, her blond hair splayed against the sheets and a flush of pleasure on her cheeks. She felt a surge of satisfaction as Quinn tightened around her fingers, arching into Emily with each thrust.

Emily lowered her mouth to her breasts, taking one of Quinn's nipples into her mouth, swirling her tongue around it, each flick eliciting a throaty moan from Quinn.

Suddenly, Emily felt Quinn clench around her fingers as she came, panting and shuddering.

Emily held onto her, until every last wave had subsided, kissing her neck softly as Quinn's pulse jumped beneath Emily's lips.

Quinn threaded her hand through Emily's hair, bringing her lips down to hers, and kissing her so deeply that Emily felt the breath leave her lungs.

"What are you doing to me," Emily murmured against Quinn's lips, and she could feel them sliding into a smile.

"What am I doing to you? What are you doing to me? I haven't even touched you yet," Quinn said with a throaty laugh.

Emily smiled as she pushed a strand of Quinn's hair back from her forehead and

kissed her again, her hand on Quinn's neck, their legs tangled, and Emily knew it would not take much to find her release.

18

Quinn didn't have a chance to worry about how her body might compare to Emily's. From the moment she'd started kissing Emily, any logical thoughts had gone out the window.

Her mind was consumed with Emily... the taste of her lips, her breath hot against Quinn's neck, the way she'd expertly brought Quinn to her first orgasm in years.

Now, Quinn tugged Emily's black underwear down her legs, discarding her own before getting comfortable on top of Emily again, neither of them seemingly able to go more than a few moments without kissing one another.

All of this should have frightened Quinn.

It was too good. It was too perfect. Yet it made her feel alive in a way she hadn't in years.

Quinn trailed her fingertips up Emily's thigh, keeping her touch light, and earning a soft moan from Emily as she eased her legs apart.

"Can I taste you?" Quinn asked, her lips hovering above Emily's, pushing herself up enough to meet Emily's eyes, while her fingers traced the same route again, dancing along the soft skin of Emily's inner thigh.

"Yes," Emily said, her voice husky. "But I'm not going to last long."

Quinn kissed her once more, ignoring Emily's warning, as she moved her lips lower,

over Emily's neck and down to her breasts, taking her time. Quinn palmed one while her tongue teased the other with Emily panting beneath her.

Eventually, Quinn's lips found their way to Emily's lower abdomen and then the inside of her thighs, inching closer, following the intoxicating, musky scent.

The moan that left Emily's mouth when Quinn circled her clit with her tongue and then took it in her mouth left Quinn soaking wet again.

Quinn found Emily's hand, interlacing their fingers as she swirled her tongue around her, alternating speed and pressure.

*Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 3:21 am*

A tingling sensation swept over Quinn when Emily's other hand raked through Quinn's hair, holding her close, her hips moving and pushing back against her tongue.

Quinn eased away from Emily's hold on her, climbing up the bed a little further until she was on top of Emily again, her hand replacing her mouth, and with her eyes locked on Emily's, she slid two fingers inside.

"Oh fuck," Emily groaned, her eyes falling shut, her hand reaching around to clutch Quinn's ass. "More."

Quinn added a third, increasing her pace, her eyes wandering over Emily, her body responding to every touch. When Emily's breathing became heavy and erratic, Quinn bit down on her lower lip, stilling for a moment before pushing Emily over the edge.

Emily clung to her, her hips grinding against Quinn's hand as she came, her cries muffled against Quinn's neck.

When Emily eventually opened her eyes, she had a lazy smile on her lips, and Quinn felt a warmth in her chest, knowing she had been the one to make Emily feel that way.

"That was incredible," Emily said breathlessly. "Fuck."

Quinn got comfortable beside her, drawing a pattern with her fingertips on Emily's stomach, both of them basking in the afterglow.

They stayed like that for a while, until Emily sat up, climbing on top of Quinn, desire written all over her face. She lowered her body, finding Quinn's lips in a slow, sensual kiss, her hips rocking as they moved together, and it wasn't long before Quinn felt her orgasm building.

Quinn couldn't get enough of Emily, her hands gripping her waist, their skin damp with sweat as they moved in perfect unison. Her hands curved around the swell of Emily's ass, both of them breathing heavily now, unable to keep kissing, and it was Emily who came first, taking control, pressing her hips down harder and faster, a low moan on her lips.

Quinn's orgasm ripped through her, seconds behind Emily, heat flaring, her breathing ragged. "Oh god," she grunted against Emily's neck, her hand fisting Emily's hair now, the other gripping Emily's ass while their hips rolled.

Emily fell forward, her head against Quinn's shoulder, her body trembling. They stayed like that for a while, completely spent until Emily managed to fall onto the bed beside Quinn, her skin flushed.

Quinn's heart was pounding, her eyes closed as she processed what had just happened. She could feel Emily's arm wrap around her middle and the two of them lay there in silence, catching their breath.

It had been a long time since Quinn had felt this way. So at ease with someone. So physically and emotionally connected. She didn't want the moment to end.

Emily shifted, her hand moving up Quinn's waist, her fingers tracing circles over her skin in a soothing rhythm.

Quinn felt something stir inside of her then, reminding her that this was not something she could get used to.

Emily rolled onto her back, slowly waking up as she stretched her legs beneath the sheets, her muscles aching, reminding her that last night had been real.

Her eyes fluttered open to see if Quinn had woken up yet, but the space beside her was empty.

She pushed away that feeling of disappointment, listening for the sound of the shower, but the master bathroom was quiet.

She reached for her phone as she sat up, the sheets falling away from her naked body. It was almost nine o'clock, and Emily opened the text that had come in from her sister just a few minutes ago.

Rebecca

Hey. I hope you got lucky last night. Otherwise I'm thinking the worst. Text me!

Emily smiled as she replied.

Emily

All good. Will be back soon. Cover for me!

Well, that was new. Rebecca worrying about her.

Emily scooped her clothes off the carpet and got dressed. She freshened up in the bathroom, running her hand through her messy hair and doing her best to tame it, but she had to pull it up into a messy bun.

As soon as she left the bedroom, the aroma of coffee drifted towards her. Emily's breath caught when she saw Quinn in the kitchen, her back to her as she looked out the window over the sink, her hair tied back in a ponytail.

Emily hovered there, memories of last night hitting her hard. She now knew what it was like to run her fingers through Quinn's blond hair. She knew how soft Quinn's skin was.

*Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 3:21 am*

She knew how intense last night had been, and now she truly understood the apprehension in Quinn's voice last night, when she'd been straddling her waist.

'It would be easier to never know.'

That's what Quinn had said, and Emily now knew that it was the truth.

It would have been so much easier.

That didn't mean that Emily regretted anything about what had happened last night, but it certainly made the reality of their situation much harder.

Emily hesitantly stepped into the kitchen, her throat suddenly feeling dry as Quinn turned. Her hands were cradling a mug, and her gaze seemed to be focused on something far away.

"Hey," Emily said softly.

"Morning." Quinn left her mug on the counter. "Do you want a cup of coffee?"

Emily nodded. "Please." She inhaled a shaky breath as she leaned her hip against the counter. She had not expected to feel this conflicted, like today was the day they were saying goodbye to one another.

If this was what she felt like now, how was she going to feel in January? When they'd potentially spent many more nights together?

“You okay?” Emily asked when Quinn handed her a cup of coffee.

“Yeah,” Quinn said, her lips curving a little, but Emily didn’t believe her. There was a touch of sadness in her eyes, and Emily hated that there wasn’t much she could do about it.

20

Quinn sipped her coffee, leaning against the counter a few feet away from Emily. She should have known that this morning would be a little awkward, but it didn’t feel like it had anything to do with last night. It was about what was going to happen next. And the fact that this had a very definite end date.

“I’ll drop you back,” Quinn said. “At some point.”

“Thanks. I had a text from Rebecca. I guess, I should have told her that I wasn’t coming back. Not that I knew... Anyway.”

Quinn pressed her lips together. What would Rebecca think of this? She had no idea, but it didn’t really matter, did it? This was never going to be more than a fling.

“Can I get your number?” Emily asked after she’d taken another sip of coffee.

“Why?” Quinn asked without even thinking.

“Uh...” Emily’s eyebrows rose.

Quinn could feel the heat on her cheeks. “I just mean... You know, this isn’t... This can’t...” Her voice trailed off, and she let out a sigh. She didn’t really have the words to say that she wasn’t going to keep doing this. Sleeping with Emily.

Quinn needed last night. She needed it for herself, for her own sanity, but also for all the history between them.

But now that it had happened? Quinn could already feel that tug, that ache in her chest. She just wasn't cut out for flings. She had to keep that feeling from getting any worse.

"Yeah," Emily said, looking away. "Yeah. You're right." She visibly swallowed. "Yeah."

Quinn felt a heavy weight of guilt when she saw the look of disappointment on Emily's face, but she had to look out for herself and her feelings.

Quinn couldn't get caught up in this. All of the things she'd said to Lucy were still true.

There was the age difference, their past, the distance between their lives now. Not to mention Quinn already knowing Emily's family, and she doubted that they would be happy with their daughter dating her former professor who was also significantly older than her.

Quinn looked out the window at the snow covered lawn. She'd just have to find a way to be happy that last night had happened without wishing for it to be anything more than it was.

21

In the last week, Emily threw herself into getting the cabin finished. She still couldn't believe how Quinn had reacted to Emily asking for her number.

*Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 3:21 am*

In her mind, they would have seen each other a few times this week. Emily knew that Quinn would be teaching, but Quinn had shut down that idea, getting right to the point without even having to finish her sentence.

Essentially, Quinn had said, what was the point?

And while Emily had been taken aback by that reaction in the moment, now that she'd had time to think about it, she could see where Quinn was coming from.

A part of Emily was actually flattered. The conclusion she'd drawn from Quinn's reaction was that perhaps she was afraid of feeling too much.

Emily already felt way too much, so she was beyond those kinds of fears, but that didn't mean that she wasn't disappointed these last few days, knowing that she could have had dinner with Quinn or invited her over, but that hadn't happened.

Emily never ran into her in town in the evenings when she'd gone out to just wander around the markets or stop in the coffee shop for a pastry.

Now though, standing in the living room of her cabin, looking around at all the work she'd put in this week after the new carpets had been put down and the appliances installed in the kitchen, she was starting to feel like this place was her own.

Her eyes took in the rustic charm of the armchairs and couch upholstered in brown leather with brass nailhead trimming, the stately oak bookcases ready to be filled with her own books, and the rustic coffee table made from driftwood.

In the corner was her grandfather's old Steinway piano, its glossy black wood still beckoning as if it remembered teaching Emily how to play when she was just a little girl. She could almost hear his gentle voice explaining each note, and for the first time since he'd died, she felt gratitude for all the time they'd had together, especially when she was a child, rather than the sadness that he was gone.

Emily had accomplished a lot here in the last two weeks, and it dawned on her that she should stay here for the rest of her time off. She hadn't really planned on doing anything like that, but she had thought that she'd need the whole month to get this place ready to be livable.

Now that it was?

Why wouldn't she stay here?

22

Quinn took the clipboard that Rebecca handed her.

"Do you mind doing deliveries again?" Rebecca asked.

"No, not at all." Quinn wished she could keep Emily out of her head for more than a few hours, but it hadn't been possible all week.

When she was ordering her gingerbread latte on campus, she couldn't help but think of Emily handing her that delicious hot chocolate with a hint of gingerbread.

Quinn couldn't sit on her sofa or get into her bed without images of Emily flashing before her eyes.

And now she was thinking back to last week, when she'd delivered those meals with

Emily, before everything had changed, when Quinn had just felt that tug of attraction, never imagining that they'd act on it.

“Quinn?”

“Hm?” Quinn snapped out of the daze she'd been in.

“I said, sorry about last weekend. I didn't mean to leave that early, but I'm just not used to drinking.”

“Oh.” Quinn waved her off. “It's fine.”

“What happened with Emily?”

Quinn's heart stuttered. “What do you mean?”

“Well, what happened? Did you go to another bar?”

“No. Why?”

Quinn thought back to their interactions when they were all sitting together in the booth. She'd practically ignored Emily, because she didn't trust herself not to let her gaze linger or to say something suggestive the more wine she'd had.

There was no way that Rebecca could have picked up on something, was there?

“I'm just wondering how she managed to pick up a woman in between the time I left and the bar closing. She never came home.” Rebecca shook her head. “You know what? I don't want to know. And she'll probably tell me anyway.”

*Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 3:21 am*

As Quinn followed Rebecca down the hall and into the kitchen, she struggled to get her heart rate under control.

She didn't know why she'd panicked like that. There was no reason to hide what had happened. Rebecca didn't seem to know that Quinn had taught Emily back in college.

As Emily had said, they weren't doing anything wrong.

But it still didn't feel right. Maybe, she didn't want people thinking she'd have an affair with someone so much younger.

Quinn didn't know what to think anymore. All she knew was that she missed Emily.

How was that even possible?

They'd met two weeks ago, and spent a bit of time together before falling into bed.

Why had Quinn struggled to move on this week?

It probably had something to do with knowing that Emily was just a few miles away, and that they could have spent several nights together this week, except for the fact that Quinn had shut that idea down right away.

If she was going to be miserable anyway after Emily left, why not make the most of the time they had left?

And how would she even do that now? Ask Rebecca for Emily's number? And say

what? She wanted to hang out with her sister again? It just didn't make sense.

"On time this week," Rebecca said with a smile, and it took Quinn a second to realize that Rebecca wasn't talking to her.

"I am, generally, very punctual," Emily said, her familiar voice doing something to Quinn.

"I have you on deliveries again with Quinn," Rebecca said to Emily. "That okay?"

"Sounds good to me." Emily met Quinn's eyes, her dark hair straight today, flowing across her shoulders, her smile warm. "Let's get going."

23

Emily had counted on seeing Quinn if she went down to the community center, but she hadn't planned on spending the afternoon with her and getting assigned to deliveries again.

The day had flown by, much like it had last week, with the conversation similarly very light and casual, almost as if last Saturday night hadn't happened.

More than once, Emily had resisted the urge to tell Quinn how amazing she looked in jeans and a cream sweater, but now that they were back in the parking lot, the sunlight nearly gone, Emily had to say something.

They'd already checked in with Rebecca and were about to head their separate ways to their own cars when Emily finally found the nerve to speak up.

"Hey," Emily said just as Quinn looked like she was about to say goodbye. "Are you free?"

“When?”

“Right now,” Emily said, shivering in the cold winter air, her breath visible in the fading light.

Quinn took a step toward her, and Emily wasn’t sure if she was trying to let her down easy again or actually thinking of accepting her offer.

“What did you have in mind?” Quinn asked.

Emily studied her, searching her eyes, unable to tell if she was being serious or not. Emily clearly wanted to spend the night together again, but did she need to say it out loud?

“I’m staying at the cabin now,” Emily said, shoving her hands in her coat pockets, trying to stay warm. “I was going to offer to show you around. Maybe after I cook dinner?”

Quinn nodded. “Okay. Yeah. I’d like that.”

Emily bit the inside of her cheek to suppress her grin, managing to keep it at a faint smile. “Okay. Great. Do you want to follow me over?”

“Yeah.” Quinn looked like she was about to say something else, but she just held her gaze for an extra second before heading over to her car.

*Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 3:21 am*

Emily's heart thumped wildly in her chest. Now, she just had to manage her expectations.

This could really just be dinner and a tour. Nothing more. She'd let Quinn decide how tonight was going to go.

As Emily got in her car and drove towards the cabin, she had to hope that maybe she could convince Quinn to give her a chance, because after spending just one night at the cabin and waking up to the peaceful quiet of the woods, Emily was already researching a plan that might allow her to spend more time here.

24

Quinn followed Emily inside, leaving her boots and coat by the door, immediately catching the scent of the fresh Christmas tree by the fireplace.

"Wow." Quinn looked around her. The last time she was here, to deliver a meal to Emily's grandfather, it was much darker. The curtains were a light gray now, the sofa and armchairs a beautiful brown leather, and the carpet was much brighter, a cream color instead of the deep green that she remembered. "This is very different."

"In a good way?" Emily asked. "I forgot that you'd already been here." She padded over to the fireplace, and bent to strike a match and get it going, the flames jumping up, making the firewood hiss and crackle.

Quinn nodded absent-mindedly as she looked around the room. "Yes. Definitely in a good way. You've done a good job with it. And there's the famous piano."

Emily's lips slid into a smile as Quinn joined her in the living area. "We never did get your keyboard out."

"We got distracted." Quinn held her gaze.

When she'd accepted Emily's invitation, she'd done so knowing that there was every chance she'd end up spending the night with Emily. She wouldn't have come here if that wasn't something she wanted.

"That can easily happen," Emily said, matching Quinn's serious tone.

There were no smart remarks. No flirting. Just intense eye contact as Quinn moved into Emily's space, her hand finding Emily's at her side.

"This is crazy," Quinn said in just above a whisper.

"Which part?"

Quinn lifted her other hand to push a piece of Emily's dark hair behind her ear. "All of it. How much I want you. How hard it is for me to stop thinking about you."

"It's the same for me," Emily murmured, her eyes never leaving Quinn's as her thumb lazily swiped along Quinn's hand.

"When are you leaving?" Quinn asked, even though she almost didn't want to know.

"New Year's Day. I have to be at work the following day."

"Okay." Quinn held Emily's gaze.

Emily drew in a deep breath, closing her eyes briefly. She leaned forward and

tenderly pressed her forehead against Quinn's. "I'm sorry," she whispered softly.

"I know," Quinn said, her own voice rough. She couldn't be this close to Emily and not kiss her. She'd been thinking about little else for the last week. So, she placed her free hand on Emily's waist and drew her closer.

She kissed her with such tenderness that it caught both of them by surprise, her lips moving slowly across Emily's, both of them sighing into the kiss.

Emily's hand slipped behind her neck, her thumb resting against the nape of Quinn's neck as she deepened the kiss.

Quinn's entire body pulsed with desire. How did Emily keep doing this to her?

Quinn moaned softly when Emily's tongue met her own. The way this woman kissed her was like nothing she'd ever felt before.

"What are we doing?" Emily whispered when she broke the kiss. "I want this, but I don't know what you want."

"I want you to show me your bedroom."

Emily pulled away enough to meet her eyes. "Really?"

"If that's what you want." Quinn pursed her lips. "I've already wasted a week, and it's going to be so hard to say goodbye to you."

## Page 31

*Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 3:21 am*

Emily searched her eyes, her mouth opening for a second, like she had something to say, but she shook her head instead. “Are you sure?”

Quinn nodded. “Either way...” Her voice trailed off. “I can’t stop myself from wanting you, even if I know I shouldn’t.”

Emily tilted her head, leaning in to find her lips again, kissing her harder this time, like she was trying to convey all of her feelings in this one kiss.

Quinn matched Emily’s intensity, her hand slipping beneath Emily’s shirt.

“Let me show you the loft,” Emily said as she pulled away, her gaze still holding Quinn’s, her voice low and laced with a hint of desire.

Quinn nodded in response, and Emily gently tugged on Quinn’s hand, their fingers still interlaced, leading her up the stairs to the loft, Quinn’s heart beating fast at the thought of falling into bed with Emily again.

25

Emily had enjoyed her first Christmas with her family in years, but she couldn’t help stealing glances at her watch, knowing that Quinn would arrive anytime after six.

Emily’s mother had bumped into Quinn in town two days ago and had all but insisted that she join them. Quinn’s compromise was coming by after dinner, just for dessert.

Part of Emily was glad that was all that was happening. She hated the idea of Quinn

being alone, but at the same time, it would have been so hard to spend the entire day watching the way she looked at Quinn or filtering her words.

As it was, Emily didn't know how this evening was going to.

Emily flinched when her sister opened the dishwasher beside her and added another bowl to the drawer.

"Why are you so jumpy today?" Rebecca asked on her way over to the fridge to take out the cheesecake.

"I'm not jumpy," Emily said with a sigh.

"You most definitely are. Do you have to go back sooner than you thought? Did something come up at work?"

Emily shook her head. "No. Work's fine."

Rebecca studied her, and the doorbell rang. "See, there it is again. You just flinched! It's just Quinn, for God's sake."

"Yeah." Emily pushed herself away from the counter, trying to find something to busy herself with, but she ended up just standing in the middle of the kitchen looking around her.

"Did something happen with Quinn?" Rebecca asked just as their mother's voice greeted Quinn at the door, their laughter drifting down the hall. Emily could hear Zach offering to take her coat and put it in the guest room.

"What?" Emily asked, focusing on Rebecca again.

“I left you two at the wine bar. When I asked her what happened, she had this deer-in-the-headlights look in her eyes, which I thought was kind of strange at the time. And you,” Rebecca said, pointing her finger at her now. “You never bragged to me about hooking up with someone. Which is unlike you. You never told me who it was either.”

Quinn and their parents came into the kitchen at that moment, and Emily couldn’t keep her eyes from focusing on Quinn, a smile coming to her lips.

Rebecca knew. She had this silly grin on her face as she hugged Quinn.

Emily also hugged Quinn, but it had lasted too long. Even she knew that, unable to let go until Rebecca cleared her throat. She just hoped that her parents hadn’t noticed.

\* \* \*

Everyone was in the living room, and Emily slipped out to the kitchen to get the coffee on. It took Rebecca all of two minutes to join her.

“Quinn is one of the nicest people I know, Em. Do not mess with her. She’s not some conquest, okay?”

“Aren’t you supposed to be on my side?” Emily asked, completely taken aback by Rebecca’s reaction.

“I am. I’m just surprised, that’s all. Quinn mentioned an ex-partner, but I wasn’t sure if it was a woman. I thought it might have been. Anyway, I guess I should be glad that it’s not the mayor or one of your clients or that college professor.”

“Rebecca...” Emily sucked in a breath, her hands on her hips.

“What?”

“Quinn is that professor.”

“What??” Rebecca’s jaw dropped. “What do you mean? The one that kept you from actually dating? The one you were so hung up on that you actually debated staying here?”

“Yeah.” Emily exhaled. “That one.”

Rebecca’s eyes went wide.

“Nothing ever happened back then,” Emily said, holding up her hand. “Just for the record.”

“Well, of course, it didn’t. Quinn has her head screwed on.”

“I’m detecting some... Anger here.”

Rebecca just stared at her. “Anger? I don’t think I’m angry. I’m just shocked. I guess, it doesn’t really matter. You’re leaving. She does know that, right?”

Emily nodded. “Yeah. She does.”

“Right. Okay.” Rebecca grabbed a knife and started slicing the cheesecake, while Emily went back to getting the coffee ready.

Emily's hand shook a little as she poured each cup.

That was unexpected. All of it. Rebecca's concern for Quinn, especially. They must really be good friends.

Emily wanted to tell Rebecca that she didn't have to worry. That she was sorting out her life. That she wanted more than a fling with Quinn. But she couldn't say anything to anyone, especially not to Quinn, not until she knew for sure that she could make it happen.

26

Quinn moved the ladder a few inches to the right and climbed up it again, removing more decorations from the ceiling of the community center.

The last week had been just as hard as she'd imagined it would be.

A few weeks ago, she'd planned on working from home for the first week in January, knowing that she had no obligation to be on campus, but as it turned out, she'd been far too restless to stay at home.

New Year's Eve had been a fun night despite the fact that she knew she'd be saying goodbye to Emily in the morning. They'd gone out with Rebecca and Zach and Lucy brought a date with her too. Quinn had only reached for Emily's hand when she was sure that no one else would see, especially Rebecca who would probably frown on the whole thing.

But Emily had surprised her, grabbing her hand as the clock neared midnight. She'd led her outside and pressed her against the brick wall, kissing her as fireworks burst in the distance and cheers erupted from inside the bar.

Quinn had brought Emily back to hers that night, and once they got inside, they couldn't keep their hands off one another.

It was emotional. It was intense.

And Quinn didn't know how she was going to get over it.

They'd tried to go to sleep around two, knowing that Emily had a long drive ahead of her in the morning, but they couldn't get enough of one another. It must have been around four when they finally drifted off to sleep.

In the morning, Quinn had struggled to stay positive, but there was very little that either of them could say. They both knew that there was no future there, not without one of them uprooting their lives.

It was too much to ask.

So, Quinn didn't.

Emily gave her one last kiss goodbye in the early afternoon. She was going to stop by her parent's house and then keep going back to the city.

Quinn descended the ladder to put the ornaments in the cardboard box behind her. She shifted the ladder again, a little further to the right.

She'd had more than enough time to think about the last month, and she honestly didn't know how she could have handled it any differently.

*Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 3:21 am*

She didn't regret being with Emily.

She just hated that their lives wouldn't give them the opportunity to be together.

Quinn rested her hands on the cool metal, starting to climb back up the ladder again.

"Do you need a hand?"

Quinn whipped her head around, convinced there was no way that Emily could actually be standing behind her. Her gasp of surprise nearly sent her toppling off the ladder, and Emily's hands gripped her waist, keeping her from falling.

"Jesus Christ," Quinn said, her hand on her chest, her heart beating a mile a minute, whether it was from nearly falling or seeing Emily again, she didn't know. She took the last few steps down, and wrapped her arms around Emily, inhaling her familiar scent.

"Just me," Emily said, laughter in her voice.

Quinn pulled away, her eyes searching Emily's. "What are you doing here?"

"I volunteer here on Saturdays, just like you do."

"Not anymore!"

"Says who?"

“You’re driving back here every weekend to volunteer?”

Emily shrugged. “No. That’s too time-consuming.”

“Exactly.” Although Quinn’s heart sank. She would have loved to know that she’d get to see Emily every weekend.

Quinn took in Emily, her signature red coat buttoned up, her luxurious walnut brown hair falling across her shoulders. “When we said goodbye last weekend, I thought I wouldn’t see you again for months. Weeks at best. Yet, here you are.”

“What if I told you that I’m planning to move back here,” Emily said, her voice barely a whisper.

Quinn didn’t answer right away, her mind swirling with thoughts, wondering if she’d misheard her. She wanted Emily to stay more than anything in the world but also knew her life was in New York. She worked for one of the best marketing agencies in the country. Was she just quitting?

Finally, Quinn asked, “How?”

“Well, I happen to own a home here.”

Quinn held her gaze. “But your job.”

“I talked to Maya before I left about renting her office space at the studio.” Emily smiled as she explained. “I told my boss I wanted to leave the company, and he offered me more money to stay. I asked him for flexibility rather than financial incentives. So, I can work remotely now. From home for the next few weeks until Maya’s renovations are done.”

“You’ve been thinking about this? About figuring out a way to stay?”

Emily nodded. “From the first night I stayed at the cabin, I had this strange sensation come over me. It felt like home. And when I thought about how I was going to say goodbye to you... I just felt sick.”

“So, that’s why I was the only one crying?” Quinn asked with a chuckle, wiping away a tear now that tricked down her cheek. “You knew you’d be back.”

“I wasn’t one hundred percent sure, but it was close. I had enough in savings that I could have quit and since I don’t have a mortgage, I would have had a few months to figure something out. But I didn’t want to tell you unless I was sure that I could do it.”

Quinn raked a hand through her hair. “I don’t know what to say. I can’t believe it.”

“Look, I don’t know... Maybe, you don’t want this as much as I do, but I—”

Quinn silenced her with a kiss, her lips crashing into Emily’s. She snaked a hand underneath Emily’s silky smooth hair as she deepened the kiss, not caring who saw.

When Quinn eventually pulled away, Emily’s lips curved into a smile.

“You know how I feel,” Quinn said with a shake of her head. “Did you seriously doubt it? I barely kept it together until you drove away last week. And I’ve been a mess these last few days.”

*Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 3:21 am*

“I thought so, but I didn’t want to assume...”

“I want this.” Quinn found Emily’s hands. “I want you.”

Emily’s smile was infectious, and Quinn leaned in again, kissing her slowly now, relief washing over her.

This was real.

And it didn’t have to end.

“I’m so glad you’re coming home,” Quinn said as she met Emily’s eyes. “You have no idea.”

“Me too.” Emily kissed her again before wrapping her arms around Quinn and hugging her, holding her tight. “Me too.”