



# Falling For Who

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**Category:** Romance, Lesbian Romance

**Description:** Marjorie Madden has it all. She's been out since middle school, is the most popular person in her grade, and according to her friends could get any girl she wants (even the straight ones).

Marjorie isn't interested in dating, though. All of her focus is on becoming a starter on the varsity basketball team and leading her team to victory. That is, until an anonymous note appears in her locker from a secret admirer. The person writing the notes is like no one she's ever met, except apparently, she has met them.

Falling for this mystery girl has Marjorie's feelings going haywire, and soon she finds herself falling for someone else as well.

Should she continue living in this fantasy world with her mystery girl or should she take on the real world with the girl who's right in front of her? Suddenly, there is a lot more to eleventh grade than just basketball.

**Total Pages (Source):** 72

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 6:38 pm*

## Chapter 1

### \*Love Interest\*

Marjorie Madden can never find out I'm in love with her. There are so many reasons, one of the big ones being that I'm not out. Of course Marjorie is. She has that confidence that makes you unsure whether you want to be her or be with her. The confidence that sometimes makes you want to slap her but also makes you want to kiss her. Right now, it's all the latter for me, as I watch her lips move while she speaks to me. Shit. I hope she didn't notice. I force my eyes away from those lips as she continues to speak.

I look up just in time to see her toss her perfectly straight, long blonde hair behind her back and laugh at something she just said. Was it a joke? Who knows. Certainly not me. "Well, I'll see you tomorrow. Have a good night."

And just like that, she's walking away from me. I can't tear my eyes off her backside as she sashays away. Marjorie Madden knows she's popular. She knows everyone wants her. She would never speak that out loud though, because that's not the kind of person she is. She's not like other high school students who become popular by being cutthroat. She didn't become popular because people felt threatened by her. She's popular because she's so nice. So fucking nice. Almost to the point that it's infuriating. Is someone really that nice? I've always wanted to believe the best in people, but I can't help but think most things people do are to benefit themselves, even if what they're doing appears nice. I wish I didn't believe that, but years of experience have taught me otherwise. Sure, I'm only a teenager, but I've seen enough shit to show me the world can be pretty crappy.

I sigh out loud. I hate when I get in my own head like this. My mom calls me a pessimistic optimist. I want to see the best in people. I want to believe the best about the world, but I can't. I'm a realist stuck in a dreamer's body.

My mind drifts to Marjorie as I drive home. The way she laughs—so loud and bold. The smile that never leaves her face. Her overall zest for life. I can't help but wonder if she's truly as happy as she always seems to be. I hope she is. I hate the thought of her ever being sad. God, I'm pathetic.

When I get home, I lock myself in my room and begin to write. After spending time with Marjorie, the words flow easily from my pen to the paper.

Do you know how beautiful you are? Do you know that the way your eyes shine brings a light to my life that I didn't know before I met you? I bet you don't. How could you?

I'm gay. Not many people know that about me, and I don't dare tell anyone else. You don't have that same reservation though. You are so unapologetically yourself that it makes me want to be the same way. I'm not brave like you though. I'm not sure I ever will be.

I want you to know how amazing you are. I know you hear that all the time, but I want you to hear it from someone who wants absolutely nothing in return, except to see a smile on your face. Too often, we wonder if people mean the words they say to us. At least, I do. If you are like me and you wonder this too, know that my words are true. Writing these words to you does nothing for me. I'm not even brave enough to sign my name. I'll probably never even be brave enough to give this to you. It will remain locked away just like all of the feelings I have for you.

I promise I'm not crazy. I'm just a girl who admires so much about you. A girl who dreams about a life where I have enough courage to be like you. Having enough

courage to ever speak these words out loud to you is something that could only happen in another world, galaxies away. But just know, because of you, I wake up with a smile on my face. I look forward to the moments I get to see you and cherish the time I spend with you. There's a light in you that makes this world a better place. Please don't ever lose that.

I rip the note from my notebook, fold it as if I'm actually going to hand it off, then shove it into the pocket of my pants. When I change for bed, I move the note into the pocket of my pajama pants. For some reason when I wake the next day, I do the same, transferring it from my pajamas to the jean shorts I'm wearing to school. It burns a hole in my pocket throughout the day. When I see Marjorie and talk to her, it seems to burn even hotter. It sits there, tempting me. Screaming for me to let the words be free.

When I get home later that night, my mom is in the kitchen making us a late dinner. "Hi, sweetheart," she shouts, not turning away from the food on the stove as I sling myself into one of the kitchen chairs.

It's just my mom and me. My dad is one of the shitty things that I learned about this world at much too young of an age. He was around for the first five years of my life, but barely. I, along with my mom, thought that was because of his busy work schedule, but we later found out it was because he was having an affair. An affair that eventually led to a pregnancy that led to him leaving us. Apparently, a younger woman and a son were much more appealing than a woman his age and a daughter. Last I heard, he had two more kids, both boys, but I only know that because I live in a small town surrounded by even smaller towns, and he's only fifteen minutes away. Fifteen minutes, yet he still hasn't talked to his only daughter in almost ten years. Whatever.

Just thinking about my dad causes my anxiety to rise, so I chew on my nails, a habit that started not long after he left. My mom notices and comes over to slap my hand

away from my mouth. “Stop that,” she scolds, but the smile on her face tells me she isn’t actually mad.

Since my hand is no longer occupied, I move it to my pocket to make sure the note is still there. I let out a breath when I feel it.

My mom watches me and lifts an eyebrow knowingly. “You know, you could just tell her.”

My mom knows I’m gay, which makes sense, since I share everything with her. She also knows about my crush on Marjorie and the notes that I write her that I wouldn’t dare actually give her. The only other person who knows is my friend, Bug. That’s not his actual name, but it’s what I’ve called him from the time we met when we were little. Bug goes to a different school so we don’t have any of the same friends anyway.

I shake my head in response to my mom’s suggestion. “Absolutely not.”

My mom crosses her arms over her chest and stares me down in a way that only a mom can. “And why not?”

I roll my eyes because we’ve been through this. “You know why not.”

“I know the excuses you’ve given me, but none of them make any sense.”

I shrug. “You have to say that. You’re my mom.”

As she turns around to continue making dinner, a part of me wonders if she’s right. Not that I have the guts to ever actually tell Marjorie how I feel, but I wonder if I should give her the note. Not directly. Just the thought of that makes me want to throw up. But, I could always sneak it to her. She deserves to know how special she

is, even if the person who sees her that way is too much of a coward to do anything about it. I touch the note in my pocket one more time. We'll see.

## Chapter 2

Marjorie

“Mar! Wait up!”

I turn around to see my best friend, Lydia, running after me. When she catches up, she's taking big, heaving breaths. Knowing Lydia, that run down the hall was probably the most she's run in weeks. Even though we resemble each other with our blonde hair and tall, skinny builds, that's where the similarities end. I love Lydia, but the girl doesn't have an athletic bone in her body (and wouldn't use them if she did). She's never missed a home basketball game since I started playing in middle school though. She has no idea what's happening, but she still sits in the stands, cheering me on.

“Are you going to the soccer game tonight?” she asks as she walks beside me.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 6:38 pm*

“Guys or girls?”

I ask the question even though I already know the answer. Lydia laughs as though I’m crazy. “Guys, obviously. I’ve been single way too long. I need to scope out my next target.”

I roll my eyes at Lydia. Her definition of way too long is much different than mine. She broke up with her summer fling a few weeks before school started, and we hadn’t even been back for a month. “Maybe I want to scope out my next target.”

Lydia stares at me for a long time, and I wonder what could possibly be going through her mind. Normally, I know exactly what she’s thinking, but right now, I’m unsure. She tilts her head slightly as a smile comes to her face. “Since when were you looking for a girlfriend? I thought your focus was on basketball and basketball only.”

Lydia knows me way too well, because she’s exactly right. I’m not looking for a girlfriend right now. At the end of the last basketball season, I finally started to see some time on the varsity team. Now that I’m a junior and four out of the five starters from last year graduated, I’m pretty sure I have a good chance of starting this year. I just need to put all my attention on basketball. Hence, why I’m not looking. “Okay. You’re right,” I conceded, “but that doesn’t mean I can’t enjoy the view.”

Always one to be super touchy, Lydia loops her arm through mine as we continue through the hall. “Fine. We can go to the girl’s game, but don’t blame me when I’m up your ass because I’m bored and don’t have a guy to entertain me.”

How sweet. “I’m just messing with you. I can’t go to any games tonight. I work.”

Lydia groans and drops my arm. “You work all the time.”

“I have to. Once basketball starts, I can barely work at all. Gotta make the money now.” I’ve explained this to Lydia multiple times, but she can’t seem to get it through her head.

Lydia pushes her lip out in an exaggerated pout, causing her to resemble the girl I met back when we were in first grade. “Fine. But you better call me when you get home, so I can update you.”

She slaps my ass and walks backward away from me, throwing me a wink before turning around. The bell rings just as I walk into my first period English class and my friend, Jazmin Hunte, taps the desk next to her in the back of the room, as if there was a chance I would sit anywhere else.

I immediately direct my attention to the front of the room, but I’m distracted by another tap on my desk. I look down to find a note from Jazmin.

Wanna stay after school and do some shooting drills?

I smile at the note. I love my friendship with Jazmin because we have the exact same goals. Being on varsity is all either of us care about right now. I try my best to pay attention to my teacher, who is talking about how we are about to start *Lord of the Flies*, while writing back to Jazmin.

Can’t. Work :(

It doesn’t take long for Jazmin to write back. Apparently, she isn’t as worried about paying attention, which could have to do with the fact that we’ve both already read *Lord of the Flies*. After becoming obsessed with the first season of *The Wilds*, we decided to read it since we heard there were similarities. Jazmin loved it. I really



enjoyed it, but it could never compare to The Wilds since there were no lesbians.

You always work!

I laugh quietly before responding. You sound like Lydia.

Must be true then. When do you get off? Want to come over to my house afterward to shoot hoops? My mom can make snacks.

Jazmin certainly knows the way to my heart. You had me at snacks. I'll be over around 8. I just need to stop at home quick after work.

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As soon as school ends, I swap my T-shirt for my blue polo that sports the name of the small ice cream shop I work at. I grab the matching blue visor from my locker but refuse to put that on until I absolutely have to. To say that thing is an eyesore would be the understatement of the century.

I clock into work just before 3:30, which means I'll get about three and a half hours tonight. The shop is owned by an older couple, and they insist the high school students working there leave by seven if they come right from school. The only way you're allowed to work later is if you do your homework first and promise them that it's all done before starting. It's a bit extra, but I like it. It's kind of like having another set of grandparents. I'm lucky enough to have two sets living within a half hour of me, but I'd never complain about more.

As soon as I'm standing at the front, my visor now in place, Delilah Howard slides up beside me. We don't run in the exact same social circles at school, but there is some overlap, and she's my favorite person in the world to work with. "Lydia tells me you were talking about checking out the girls' soccer team. Have any prospects in mind?"

I stop myself from rolling my eyes. Lydia is such a gossip, and if I didn't love her so much, it would probably annoy the shit out of me. I know that's just Lydia though. "Lydia told you that?" I asked instead of addressing the actual question.

As if picking up on my unspoken question, Delilah nods in response. "We have physics together. We're partners for a project."

"Well, Lydia is getting you excited for no reason at all. I just said I wanted to go to a girls' game for the eye candy. I'm not looking to date anyone."

Delilah nods once again. "I feel that. My focus is on my AP classes right now. Dating is the last thing on my mind."

Delilah is by far the smartest person at my school, and the only reason she isn't number one in our class is because of Genesis Brimstone. She's taking the easiest class load just so she can be on top. I get along with pretty much everyone and although I don't dislike anyone, there are two people who rub me the wrong way, and one of them is Genesis. She's on the basketball team with me and actually requested to stay on the JV team throughout her high school career. She says it's so she can be a guide for the younger players, but we all know it's because she thinks if she plays JV long enough, she eventually will be the best player. On top of that, she's also ridiculously religious, hence the name her parents gave her, so she's always had a problem with the fact that I'm gay. She's never said it directly, but she's asked me to come to church with her multiple times, making comments about how she thinks it could be beneficial for me. What else could that possibly mean?

The last thing I want to do is get angry thinking about Genesis, so I crane my neck to try to peer around the corner. When I realize there is no hope of figuring out who is over there, I turn my attention back to Delilah. "Who is on the outside window tonight?"

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 6:38 pm*

The ice cream shop has a little inside area with a few tables that allow it to be open year-round, but there is also a window that people can walk up to from outside. This window tends to be much busier at this time of year when it's still nice outside. I always feel bad for the people who get stuck working over there.

“Eli is over there by himself right now. Payton should be joining him soon.”

Eli Dubs is a year behind me in school and mostly sticks to himself at work, so I don't know too much about him. Payton Benner is also somewhat of a mystery since she goes to a different school than the rest of us. Her school is fifteen minutes from ours and one of our biggest rivals in most sports, but since she doesn't play any sports, all I know about her is what I've learned from working with her. That isn't much since she's pretty shy most of the time. In fact, the only person she really seems to open up to ever is Eli.

Between working with Delilah and visits from other classmates, the next three hours seem to fly by. I remember to take my visor off and put it into my work locker before leaving this time. Thank God. I hate taking that thing to school because my friends make such fun of it.

The drive back to my house is less than ten minutes, and as soon as I walk through the front door, I'm greeted by my little sister, Morgan, and her best friend, Jocelyn Raemer. Little is a bit of an exaggeration though, given that my sister is just slightly more than a year younger than me and only a grade below me in school. That still doesn't stop me from seeing her as my annoying little sister though, so I have to stop myself from rolling my eyes when they run to the door as soon as I walk in.

“Want to go for ice cream?” she asks as she bounces from foot to foot. I know that’s actually code for do you want to take us for ice cream since they don’t have their licenses yet. “Both JV and varsity girls won tonight and Joc scored three goals, so we want to celebrate.”

“You want me to take you to get ice cream...” I draw out my words for dramatic effect. “From the place I work... that I literally just left.”

Jocelyn shakes her head. “You really don’t have to.” Jocelyn is a year younger than my sister, which makes her just two years younger than me, but that age difference is glaringly obvious. This is probably because Jocelyn is still so shy around me even though we have known each other most of our lives. I have no idea why that is since I’ve always tried my best to make her feel comfortable and wanted, even when my sister is on my last nerve.

“Three goals though?” I sigh because I know I’m about to give in.

Jocelyn’s face turns red as she looks toward the ground and shrugs. “Yeah, but just for JV.”

I reach out and squeeze Jocelyn’s shoulder. “Still amazing. Plus, it won’t be JV for long with the way you’re killing it.” I’m not just saying that. I’ve seen Jocelyn play and if I had to guess, I’d say she’ll see some time in a varsity game by the end of the season. “I’m going over to Jazmin’s house soon, but we can go.” I hitched my thumb toward the stairs. “Just let me ask Marcus if he wants anything.”

“Yes!” Morgan puts her hand up to high five Jocelyn then looks back at me. “Fair warning. Abby is here. Make sure you knock first.”

Abby is my brother’s girlfriend. They’ve been dating since their freshman year and are now seniors. Even after three years together, they still act like a new couple. I

love the two of them together, but it's a little much how they can't seem to ever be apart. I never want to be like that with someone, but I guess I can't blame them since Abby doesn't have the best home life. I don't know the extent of it. I just know my brother said that's why she likes spending so much time with our family.

Taking my sister's advice, I knock on Marcus's door. It's not like I wouldn't have done it anyway, though. It only takes walking in on one steamy makeout session to never make that mistake again.

"What?" Marcus yells at the same time Abby's sweet voice tells me to come in.

"Is it safe?" I ask as I slowly open the door, making sure to keep my eyes closed as I do.

"It's safe," Abby says with a giggle.

When I open my eyes, I find the two of them sitting on Marcus's bed fully clothed, thank God. "I just wanted to see if you two want to come for ice cream with me, Morgan, and Jocelyn."

Marcus lifts an inquisitive eyebrow at me. "Didn't you just get home from working at The Fairfield Family Freeze?"

"Yes, but instead of texting and asking me to bring stuff home, Morgan decided to wait until I got here to tell me she wants ice cream." This time, I don't suppress my eye roll.

Marcus laughs and shakes his head. "Typical. We're good though."

"Speak for yourself," Abby says as she stands from the bed. "I'm always down for ice cream."

Marcus groans but stands from the bed as well. “Looks like we’re all going.”

When we get to the ice cream shop, I’m surprised to find that Payton is still working. “What are you still doing here?” I ask when it’s my turn to order.

Payton readjusts her visor, which somehow looks natural over top of her long brown hair that is currently pulled back into a ponytail. “I convinced Mrs. Fairfield to let me work longer since I finished all of my homework during my free period.”

“I’m jealous. I could use that extra cash.”

Payton laughs and adjusts her visor once again. “Tell me about it.”

I order a milkshake then say goodbye to Payton and join the rest of my group at a picnic table. I’m about to tell them we need to make it quick when a text comes through from Jazmin.

Don’t kill me, but Samara is here.

Samara Lynn. She’s a shooting guard just like me and seems to think there isn’t room for both of us as starters, therefore apparently making us mortal enemies. My only problem with her is the problem she seems to have with me, which she makes very obvious.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 6:38 pm*

It doesn't come as a surprise that Samara is there since they live in the same neighborhood, but I'm suddenly not in a hurry to get over there. I listen as Jocelyn describes the soccer game then let Marcus and Abby go on and on about the homecoming dance next month. Since they are high school royalty, it's no secret to anyone that they are going to be homecoming king and queen. Aside from being the it couple, Marcus is the quarterback of our football team and Abby is the cheerleading captain. They are so perfect it's ridiculous.

"What about you, Marjorie?" Abby asks before taking a long lick of her ice cream. "Any prospects for the homecoming dance?"

Why is everyone trying to get me to date? I shake my head and give Abby a sweet smile. "I'll probably just go with my friends."

Abby looks oddly happy about this answer, her already wide grin growing even bigger. "That's great. That will be a lot of fun." She looks at Marcus as if she's asking him a silent question and when he subtly nods, she focuses back on me. "We're getting a limo if you'd like to come with us. There are five of us going as of now."

It surprises me that my brother is actually cool with me crashing a time for him and his friends, but with Abby watching me expectantly, I can't say no. "That sounds awesome. I'd love to."

Abby excitedly claps her hands together as if this is the greatest news in the world. She's so sweet.

We stay at Fairfield's for about fifteen more minutes before all piling back into the car. I drop everyone off at our house, then head over to Jazmin's since I can't avoid it any longer.

As soon as I get close to the house, I find that Jazmin and Samara are already in the driveway shooting hoops. I park on the street to leave plenty of room in case we end up playing a pick-up game. God knows Samara will most likely suggest it.

As soon as I'm out of my car, Samara sneers at me. "Think fast, Madden."

She throws the ball without any more warning than that, but luckily my reflexes are quick, so I'm able to catch it. Samara clearly isn't happy about this and her sneer becomes a frown. Maybe this was a bad idea.

"Let's go inside and have a snack," Jazmin says before I can turn around and leave on the spot. "My mom made chocolate chip cookies."

Jazmin really does know my weakness. There's no way I'm leaving now. "Sounds wonderful."

When we get inside, Jazmin's mom has just pulled another batch of fresh cookies out of the oven. Her mom is a literal superwoman. I grab one of the cookies and moan as it melts in my mouth.

When I open my eyes from enjoying this delectable delight, I realize everyone is staring at me. "Sorry. These are amazing," I say with a giggle.

Miss Hunte smiles and winks at her daughter, before looking back at me with the same wide grin. "I'm really glad you like them."

Now she practically shoos us out of the kitchen, insisting we get back to practicing.



As soon as we're outside, Samara unsurprisingly suggests a game. She proclaims Jazmin as the full-time point guard, essentially making it a competition between the two of us. Shocking.

I make sure she regrets that decision by faking her out and taking the ball in for an easy layup. After just ten minutes, I'm up by twenty points, and Samara decides that she needs to go home. Also shocking.

As soon as she's far enough away not to notice, I glare at Jazmin, who immediately puts both hands in the air in surrender and backs away from me. "I know, I know. I'm sorry. She saw me outside and came down. It's not like I could tell her to leave. Plus, she's really nice when it doesn't come to basketball." Jazmin starts to laugh. "Correction. She's really nice when it doesn't come to you and basketball. She was fine before you got here."

"I've literally done nothing to make her hate me though."

Jazmin shrugs. "You play the same position as her, but much better. She's just jealous." Jazmin smirks and I can only imagine what's coming next. "Or she has a crush on you. It's so hard for her to suppress her feelings for you that she channels it into trying to be better than you at basketball."

What's everyone's deal today? "That's the dumbest thing I ever heard. Samara isn't even gay."

"Correction. Samara isn't out. There's no way you can believe that you're actually the only gay one on the basketball team. It's statistically impossible."

"Are you trying to tell me something?" I joke.

"That's... that's not what I meant. I... obviously I was talking about Samara."

That's weird. I was clearly joking, but Jazmin doesn't seem to have taken it that way at all. It makes me question if maybe she actually is gay. That doesn't make sense though. Obviously, Jazmin knows she could talk to me if that were the case. There's no reason to keep it a secret from me.

Jazmin looks at the ground then back toward her house, doing anything possible to avoid eye contact with me. "I should actually probably get inside and see if my mom needs any help with the dishes. I'm sorry."

"I didn't mean to upset you." I take a step toward Jazmin, but she takes a step back. "I'm sorry if my question offended you."

"Why would it offend me?" Jazmin asks with a laugh that sounds a little too forced. "I obvi love the gays."

"Of course. I know. I'm sorry." This has become incredibly awkward, so I decide it really is for the best if I just leave. "Have a good night. See you tomorrow," I shout behind me as I walk away.

I'm hopeful that this will all blow over and things will be back to normal in English the next morning. When I get to school and find that a note has been shoved through the slats in my locker, I assume it must be from Jazmin.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 6:38 pm*

When I open it up, I realize it's not. At least, I don't think so. I have absolutely no idea since there is no name signed to it. I look around, but there is no one in sight. What the hell?

### Chapter 3

*\*Love Interest\**

I can't believe Marjorie Madden actually knows how I feel about her. Well, I assume she knows. That is, if she found the note in her locker. I have no way of knowing since she has no way of writing back to me, since she doesn't actually know it's me who has these feelings.

Why did I do that? How did I somehow convince myself that it was the right thing to do? I remember exactly what did it though. It was that smile. A smile that deserves to be on that face as much as possible.

Did my note make her smile though or did it just freak her out? Oh God, I hadn't even thought of that before now. What if she just thinks I'm a creep? What if she's worried that she has a stalker?

I sit down at my desk and begin writing again.

I hope my note didn't freak you out. I promise I'm not some creepy stalker. I'm not even sure why I gave you that note other than the fact that I wanted to try to put a smile on your face. I want to make sure you know how special you are. That really doesn't make me sound any less creepy though, does it?

Anyway, I just wanted to let you know that. I promise I won't bother you anymore. Stay beautiful, Marjorie Madden. This world can use more people like you.

I put the note in my pocket, so I can show Bug when he comes over in a few minutes. It's Friday night and neither of us feel like doing anything, so we decided to have a scary movie marathon.

As soon as Bug arrives, I have him read the note to see what he thinks. He reads it slowly and carefully before folding it back up and focusing his attention on me. "It looks good. You know I support you no matter what you decide, and I'm always willing to help."

That's Bug. He always has been and always will be my biggest supporter, aside from my mom, of course. Knowing I have his support is the only encouragement I need. "I want to give it to her."

Bug nods in understanding. "I got you."

We let the subject of Marjorie drop and discuss what movies we want to watch. After way too much deliberation, we decide on Halloween, starting with the original movie from 1978, then going on to Halloween (2018) and Halloween Kills. We also discuss going back to Halloween II if we still have energy, but I have no question Bug will pass out by the middle of the second movie. Since we've been friends forever and our parents clearly know there is nothing going on between us, Bug and I often end up sleeping over at each other's houses.

As predicted, we're not even an hour into the second movie when I hear Bug snoring beside me. I turn off the movie so we can continue to watch it tomorrow since neither of us work. I grab a blanket from our coat closet and throw it on top of him then head up to bed. I know if he wakes up and has enough energy, he'll join me since my queen bed is more than big enough for both of us.

When I wake up Saturday morning, Bug isn't beside me. I walk downstairs expecting to find him still snoring on the couch, but instead he's in the kitchen making bacon and eggs.

He turns around and waves the spatula at me with a big smile on his face. "I thought I would make breakfast for my two favorite women."

I can't hold back a yawn as I search around the kitchen. "Where's my mom? There's no way she's still sleeping."

Bug shakes his head and turns back toward the stove. "She's not. She had to run a few errands. Said she'd make us breakfast when she gets back, but since I was awake with nothing to do, I wanted to help out. She works too hard."

You're telling me. Bug is way too sweet. Sometimes I wish I could just make myself have feelings for him. He knows everything about me and still loves me just the same. He's the perfect gentleman and the kind of guy a parent would love for their kid to bring home. I'm also extremely comfortable around him. But that's exactly the problem. I'm comfortable around him in the same way I would be around a family member (if I had any good ones other than my mom). He doesn't make my heart beat faster and my palms sweat the way Marjorie does. I wouldn't say these reactions are the most comfortable, but it's an exciting kind of discomfort. The kind of discomfort I want to keep feeling. A discomfort that I want to bathe myself in.

"You're right about that," I say as I take a seat at the kitchen table. "Need any help with that?"

"Nope, I'm good. Almost done." Bug doesn't even turn around as he answers my question, clearly in the cooking zone. "Want to shoot some hoops after we eat?"

"Sure." The truth is, I actually don't want to for multiple reasons, the main one being

that I'll end up thinking about Marjorie the whole time. "Didn't you want to finish the movies though?"

Bug carries a plate of bacon and a bowl of eggs over to the table. "Of course. I figured we could watch a little while we eat then go out and move around a bit before coming back in to watch the rest. Sound good?"

"Sounds great."

As if sensing the hesitation in my voice, Bug tries (and fails) to lift an eyebrow at me. "Are you still thinking about that note?"

I nod, which isn't a lie because I've been thinking about it ever since I wrote it.

Bug puts everything down and holds his fist out to me. "Don't worry. We've got this. Okay?"

"Okay." I knock my fist against his. I sure hope he's right.

Chapter 4

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 6:38 pm*

Marjorie

I stand at my locker and read the two notes that were snuck in there for what has to be the fiftieth time. The words are so damn beautiful, I can't stop myself. I can't believe someone actually feels this way about me. Sure, plenty of people have had crushes on me in the past, but it wasn't like this. This is definitely different. Whoever wrote this is different. I just wish I could figure out who it is, but they left absolutely no clues whatsoever.

After the second note, I have a feeling I won't be getting any more. It seemed very final. I wish there was a way to tell this person that I don't think they're a creep. I have no idea how I'm supposed to do that though since I don't know who they are.

I want to talk to someone about it, but not knowing who it's from even makes that awkward. What if it's from the person I'm talking to or someone they're close to? I can't think of anyone in my life who would feel this way about me, but I could have just missed the signs somehow. I have been very focused on basketball. Maybe I'm not seeing what's right in front of me. But does that mean it's someone I'm really close to? I wouldn't know how to react to that. I don't have any feelings for anyone right now and have never crushed on any of my friends, so that could be very awkward.

Not for the first time, my mind drifts to the awkward conversation I had with Jazmin a few weeks ago. A conversation that came the night before I got the first note. Could it be her? She does love *The Wilds*, especially the storyline with Shelby and Toni, but that doesn't mean she's gay. It just means she has good taste.

I try my best to wipe these thoughts from my mind as I walk into English class because I don't want to make things weird between us. That's hard to do though since as soon as I'm sitting, Jazmin passes a note to me. The handwriting is different from the note I've been studying, like it's a piece of evidence in some unsolved cold case, but that's not to say that the person who wrote it didn't disguise their writing.

The message is a simple, "How was your weekend?" but what my eyes focus on are the hearts drawn all around the paper. Clearly, that was just a coincidence. Jazmin probably just grabbed a sheet of paper she had been doodling on before.

It was good. Just worked, did homework, and relaxed. Nothing crazy.

I put the note on Jazmin's desk and within no time at all, it was back on mine. Speaking of crazy, are you going to Thalia's party on Friday night after the football game?

I don't particularly want to go to a party, but I also know that once basketball starts, I won't be going to any parties since I don't want to risk losing my spot on the team. Plus, while Thalia McSweeney isn't one of my very best friends, we're still pretty close, so I know she is expecting me to go. She throws a ton of parties since she has the house to herself a lot, and since I have to miss all of the parties during basketball season, I make a point to go to her other ones. I'll be there. Are you going?

Of course! Want to go together?

Anxiety rushes through my body. What does she mean by together? Certainly she doesn't mean together together. She couldn't, right?

As if somehow reading my mind, Jazmin grabs the note back and scribbles something else onto it then hands it back to me. I was thinking we could pre-game with some of the other basketball girls and all go together.



I let out a breath I didn't even realize I had been holding then close my eyes and rub my forehead. I need to stop thinking like this. Sounds good to me. Is it okay if Lydia pre-games with us? That is, if she doesn't have a guy to go with by then.

Of course! The more the merrier.

I look up from the note and the smile on Jazmin's face tells me she means it. Clearly, I'm the one being crazy right now.

\*\*\*

"Great game, bro!" I say as I give Marcus a big hug.

Marcus ruffles my hair as if I'm much younger than him than I actually am. "Thanks, Marjorie. Give me a call if you want a ride home from Thalia's later."

"You're not going?" I thought it was some sort of unwritten rule that all football players have to go to the after-party.

Marcus waves his hand. "Nah. Abby and I just want to stay in tonight."

"You two are like an old married couple."

Marcus scoffs. "I wouldn't go that far. She has the house to herself tonight. You know what that means."

Ew. "Yeah. Unfortunately, I do."

"Unfortunately, you do, what?" Abby says as she walks up to us and wraps her arm around Marcus's waist.

“Know what you two have planned for tonight.”

Under the stadium lights, I see Abby’s face turn red. Her lips dip into a frown as she looks at my brother. “You told your sister?”

Marcus shrugs, the smile never leaving his face. “It’s not like she doesn’t know we have sex.”

I watch Abby drop her arm and worry I may have gotten my brother in trouble. Not that he didn’t have anything to do with it. “I’m going to let you two work this out,” I say before quickly slipping away. I want no part of their lover’s quarrel.

I feel an arm slip around my own waist and look over to see Lydia next to me. She leans so close that I can smell her mint gum mixed with a hint of vodka. “Jazmin says the basketball girls are pre-gaming behind the middle school. Wanna head that way?”

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 6:38 pm*

I scrunch up my nose at the smell. “Why do I get the feeling you already pre-gamed?”

Lydia laughs and shakes the large water bottle she’s been carrying around all night. “Just a little mixed drink to help make the game more bearable.”

“You’re too much,” I say with a laugh as we exit the stadium together. That’s my best friend, though. I love her exactly as she is.

It only takes us a few minutes to walk to the middle school, and once we get there, we find the other basketball girls in an area behind the middle school free of any lights.

“There they are,” Jazmin says as we walk over, her words slurring together in a way that makes me wonder if everyone started drinking early.

I steal the flask that Jazmin is holding right out of her hand and take a big gulp. I don’t drink very often, so the alcohol burns like crazy as it goes down. “I need to catch up to all of you.”

Lydia laughs and shakes her head as she watches me force down another sip from the flask. “It’s not going to take much, Miss Lightweight.”

“Whatever.” She’s not wrong. My head is already starting to feel spinny and it’s been all of thirty seconds. That has to be some sort of placebo effect because no one actually gets drunk that fast.

We stay at the middle school for about fifteen minutes before making the collective

decision to head to Thalia's house. It is luckily just a few minutes walk away, making it the perfect party house.

As soon as we walk in the door to her house, Thalia greets us with a tray of Jell-O shots. The different colored Jell-O matches the array of colors in her shoulder-length hair. I believe her natural hair color is brown, but she changes it so much that I'm not sure at this point.

I grab just one shot, unlike my friends who all take at least two. That one shot is more than enough though, and less than a half hour later, I'm definitely drunk.

Thalia waves her arms at me from across the room where she's standing in front of a beer pong table. "Be my partner?" she asks once I'm close enough to hear her. "I figure who better to ask than a basketball player with a killer shot."

I rest my hand on the table to try to stop myself from wobbling so much. "That's when I'm sober. No promises now."

Thalia puts a hand on my arm and laughs as if I just told a joke. "No worries. I'll take what I can get."

Out of pure luck, I somehow make my first two shots. When I get the balls back, my one shot is too short and the other goes way too long. Luckily, the people we are playing against are even drunker than me and can barely stand, let alone throw a ping pong ball. The game seems to go on forever since no one can make a shot, but finally, I get the ball into our final cup.

Thalia jumps up and down in celebration then pulls me into her arms. Has she always been this touchy? Is there a chance that...? I try to shake these thoughts from my head because there's no way. Unfortunately, between the note, the alcohol, and how good it feels with Thalia holding me, I'm suddenly thinking about kissing her. Oh,

hell no. I'm way too drunk. I should not be thinking about kissing one of my friends. I'm going to be sick.

No. Literally. I break away from Thalia and hurry to the nearest bathroom, making it just in time to empty all of the contents of my stomach into the toilet. As soon as I say a prayer that no one walks in and finds me like this, the gods decide to have a laugh at my expense.

"Everything okay in here?" a sweet voice asks.

I look up from where I'm gripping onto the toilet and find my classmate, Felicity Jax, standing by the door to the bathroom. Great. As if puking isn't bad enough, now my hot, older chemistry lab partner is watching me do it. Felicity looks just as amazing as usual, her black hair styled in loose curls, her jeans hugging her small frame in all the right places, and that low-cut red V-neck T-shirt leaving nothing to the imagination.

Not going to lie, I've had quite a few fantasies about meeting up with Felicity at a party and having my way with her. None of those fantasies started with me clinging onto the toilet though, so tonight is not that night. Really, no night will ever be that night since Felicity is very straight. She has a boyfriend who is a senior in college, or so I hear. I've never actually seen him before. Apparently, he never comes back for anything. I guess I wouldn't either if I was a college guy dating a high school senior. But then again if that high school senior was Felicity Jax... STOP, MARJORIE.

"I'm just hanging out." I have no idea if my answer makes sense since I can't even remember what the question is anymore.

The way Felicity laughs tells me she didn't ask me what I was doing. "That's cool." She nods her head toward the toilet. "Make a new friend? Looks like a lot of fun."

"Tons." For some reason, I decide it's a good idea to point at my puke in the toilet.

“Just concocting my own little science experiment in here. I’m trying to see how many bad decisions it takes to create this liquid.” Ew. Why am I talking?

Luckily, Felicity looks amused. “Well... what did you find out?”

I hold up what I think is three fingers, but it honestly might be four. “Three. Jazmin’s flask, Jell-O shots, and beer pong.”

“I see.” Felicity nods in mock sincerity. “I’ll be sure to avoid Jazmin’s flask.” She looks around the bathroom as if she’s either searching for something or buying time as she thinks of what to say next. “I would offer to give you a ride home, but I’ve had a little bit to drink. Wouldn’t want to risk the precious cargo.”

Is she flirting? She can’t be... right? I’m so drunk. What the hell did Jazmin have in that flask? “I can call my brother. He said he’d pick me up.”

Felicity smirks and raises an eyebrow, and I have absolutely no idea what’s going on. “Marcus? Think he could give me a ride home?”

I shrug. “I don’t know why not.”

After about fifteen minutes of waiting outside and making small talk that I know I won’t remember tomorrow, Marcus pulls into the driveway. I immediately go for the back door because I assume Abby is with him. Probably unaware of this, Felicity opens the front passenger door.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 6:38 pm*

Much to my surprise, she slips inside. I peek my head into the front and look between Marcus and Felicity. “Where’s Abby?”

“She fell asleep while we were watching a movie, and I didn’t want to wake her.”

I can’t lie. I’m a little disappointed when Felicity strikes up a conversation with my brother rather than talking to me. The disappointment is replaced with confusion, and a few other feelings, when fingers tickle the bottom of my leg. Felicity is still talking to my brother, but when I look down, it’s definitely her hand reaching back from the front seat and stroking my leg. At least, I think it is. Could I really be so drunk that I’m imagining it?

I close my eyes and lean my head back because even if this is some weird drunken fantasy, I’m still going to enjoy it. Before I know it, the car stops and Felicity says goodbye. There’s a squeeze to my ankle and then she’s out of the car.

“I’m not going to lie, Felicity Jax has always given me weird vibes,” my brother says as he backs out of her driveway.

This causes me to open my eyes back up. “What do you mean?”

“I don’t know. She’s nice enough, but there’s something off about her. I can’t put my finger on it.”

“I have chemistry with her. She’s always seemed fine to me.” I try my best to keep the defensiveness out of my voice, but I’m not sure I succeed.

“Just be careful, okay?” Marcus lets out a long, frustrated sigh. “Whatever it is you’re thinking—don’t. She allegedly has a boyfriend in college. No one has ever actually seen him though. It’s weird.”

“I love when you play the protective big brother role.” I laugh off his worries because they are unnecessary. Am I pretty sure Felicity was touching me? Yes. Do I actually believe that means anything other than she was drunk and touchy? No. Marcus has nothing to worry about. I know he will though. That’s the kind of guy he is. It’s why I’m lucky that he’s my big brother. “She’s my chemistry partner, Marcus. I’m not having any thoughts.” Other than how good it felt when her fingers touched my skin. “Nothing to worry about.”

It was such a weird night that by the time I’m back in my room, my whole body is buzzing, and it’s not from the alcohol. The random thought of kissing Thalia was strange. Felicity’s secret touches in the car were even more strange. Still, the most strange part of it all, is that I’m not thinking about either of them right now. All I can think about are the two notes left in my locker. I want to write back to this mystery person. I want to tell her how much her words meant to me. Even drunk, I know this isn’t a possibility though. There is no way to get it to her since I have no idea who she is. My foggy brain can acknowledge this, but I still can’t stop myself taking a piece of notebook paper out of my backpack and writing back.

I sit down at my desk and scribble out a note that I’m sure will look like complete gibberish to me tomorrow. Right now, I don’t care. I need to get the words down.

To wHoM it MaY ConcerN,

uR note wAs not creepy at all. It was so FUCK\*NG sweet. SO. FUCKING. SWEET. aRe U a writeR? PRobS not since ur in high school. U should b tho. Words are harD. I’m drunk. I wonder if U were at the party tonight. I wonder if I talked to u. I wonder why I care so much. I bet ur HOT. U seem cool. wHo are u?



I stare proudly at the note I just wrote, my drunken brain keeping me from realizing I should be far from proud. I wish I had a way to give this note to my mystery girl. If only I knew where her locker is, like she knows where mine is. Wait... she knows where my locker is... Maybe if I let the note hang out of one of the slats in the locker, she'll realize it and grab it. I'm a fucking drunk genius. Maybe I should re-write the note once I'm sober though...

## Chapter 5

\*Love Interest\*

“What if this isn't for me?” I ask Bug as I stare down at the note in my hands.

“It was sticking out of her locker. Who else would it be for?”

I laugh at his ridiculous question. “Literally anyone. This is Marjorie Madden we're talking about.”

Bug nods his head toward the note. “Well, you'll never know if you don't look.”

“But, what if I look and it's not for me? I'm going to feel so guilty.”

Bug reaches his hand out toward the note. “Then I'll read it. I'm honestly shocked that I kept myself from reading it this long.”

“Don't you dare.” I hold the note to my chest as if it's something sacred because it very well could be.

Bug crosses his arms over his chest and narrows his eyes at me in a way that tells me he means business. “Don't make me.”

“Fine.” I groan and open up the note, my smile growing and heartwarming when I confirm that this note is indeed meant for me. I slowly read the words that I already know I’m going to read over and over again.

Hey you! First of all, I didn’t think your note was creepy at all. If you want to see scary, you should see the note I wrote you last night after having too much to drink (You never will. That note has been destroyed). Anyway, your note was so sweet. Has anyone ever told you that you have a way with words? Because you really do.

By the way, I wasn’t always this brave. It takes time. I obviously don’t know your story, but I know coming out is a long, scary journey. I hope you find the courage to be your true self, but just remember that you don’t owe anything to anyone. You can share as little or as much of yourself as you want.

If you need someone to talk to, you can always talk to me. I just wish I knew who you were...

“So, are you going to talk to her?”

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 6:38 pm*

I jump at the sound of Bug's voice coming from behind my shoulder. I had no idea he moved back there to, I can only assume, read the note. "I don't know, Bug. Why don't you tell me what I should do?"

"I think you should just tell her who you are." The nonchalant shrug of his shoulders matches his voice.

"You would say that. You're a guy."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"I don't know. Guys are just genetically predisposed to think they could have a chance with anyone."

"That's not true. I happen to know my biggest crush, Zendaya, would never go for me."

"Of course she wouldn't, but I bet if you somehow ran into her in public, you would still shoot your shot, wouldn't you?"

Bug shrugs once again. "Why not?"

Oh, I don't know. The fact that she's a huge star and has a movie star boyfriend might have something to do with it. Instead of saying this, I simply groan in response.

"I think you should write her back. It will be like you have a pen pal. That could be fun."

“That makes it sound like I’m five.”

“Well, lez be honest, bestie, you’re kind of acting like you are.”

I push Bug’s shoulder playfully. Being friends forever and always putting up with me has earned him the right to tease me. “Whatever. I’ll write her back, but I don’t want you to read this one.”

Bug puts both hands in the air and backs away from me. “Fine, fine.” I don’t miss how his eyes dart from my face to my desk and then back to me.

“I’ll write it later.” He doesn’t have to speak out loud for me to know exactly what he’s thinking. “In the meantime, do you want to go for ice cream?”

Bug furrows his eyebrows at me. “Seriously?”

“Yes, seriously. Let’s go.”

“Fine. I’m coming.”

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A few hours later, I’m back in my room, staring down at a blank piece of paper. The words came so easily when I wasn’t planning on actually giving the note to her. Now that I know I’m writing words for her to read, they won’t come. I put the pencil down and close my eyes. As soon as I do, I see her beautiful hazel eyes looking back at me. I see that smile shining as bright as the sun at the hottest part of the day. Now, it doesn’t seem so hard to think of the words.

Wow. I can’t believe you actually wrote back. Thank you so much for that, and thanks for being so kind about what I told you. Coming out is really hard. The world

has come a long way, but it's clear we still have a long way to go. Have you gotten any hate since coming out? From what I see, everyone loves you, but I know we don't see everything, even when we think we do.

I'm scared of coming out because I'm worried about people making me feel like I'm not good enough. I know from experience what a terrible feeling that is. Two people in my life know and that's good enough for me. At least for now.

Thanks again. I can't even begin to express how much it means to me that you found a way to respond to my letter. You really are amazing.

I cross out the last line and instead add, PS - I would love to see the drunk note! Sounds fun :)

I smile in satisfaction. Cool and to the point. I can't help but wonder if Bug is right. Will Marjorie and I continue to write notes back and forth and become sort of secret pen pals? Or will she just get bored of me and move on with her life? That option sounds much more likely.

Oh well. Either way, I will enjoy however long this lasts.

## Chapter 6

Marjorie

"So, who are you going to homecoming with this weekend?"

I look up from my chemistry book that is hiding the note I found in my locker a week ago. I still haven't written back since I'm unsure what to say. It's not that I don't want to write back. It's just hard to find the right words when I don't know who I'm talking to.

“What was that?” I ask Felicity.

Felicity hasn't said anything about the party that was now over a week ago, but she has been different since that night. She's more talkative when we're working together, but it seems to go beyond that. If I didn't know any better, I'd say she's flirting.

“Homecoming. Popular. Pretty. I assume you must have a date, right?”

“Oh.” I hesitate because I'm stuck on the fact that Felicity Jax just called me pretty. Most people at this school claim I could get any girl I want, even the straight ones. But this is Felicity Jax we're talking about. Felicity Jax. My hopeless crush. I shake my head. “No. I'm just going with friends. I don't want to date right now, because my focus needs to be on basketball.”

“You're going to kill it this year.” If I wasn't watching with my own two eyes, I wouldn't believe that Felicity is looking me up and down right now, while running her tongue along her lower lip. “I can tell you've been working out.”

What the hell? I clear my throat and try to tell my face not to turn red. I can tell by how warm it is that it's not working. “So, is your boyfriend coming back to go?”

Felicity pushes her lips out in an exaggerated pout. “No. He says school has him too busy, but I think he just doesn't want to go to a high school dance.” Her frown is much-too-quickly replaced with a smile. “Save me a dance?”

“Of course.” Obviously, she means a dance between friends.

When our teacher starts lecturing, I assume the conversation about the dance is over, but then I feel my phone vibrate from a text. I have to do a double-take because even though Felicity and I exchanged numbers when we first became lab partners, we've never actually texted each other.

What are you doing after the dance?

I remind myself, once again, that she's obviously asking as a friend. A friend that has a boyfriend. In college. Going to Trevor's house, you?

Felicity smiles at me as another text comes through. Senior party, huh?

Benefits to having a brother that's a senior.

So, I take it he's going?

Yeah. Not sure if I'd be invited if he wasn't going.

Of course you would. You're Marjorie Madden. As if that text from Felicity isn't enough, the next one completely blows my mind. I wasn't sure what I wanted to do afterward, but now that I know you're going to Trevor's, there's nowhere I'd rather be.

I simply smile at her and slip my phone back into my pocket because I'm seriously not sure what to say to that. I'm sure Felicity was just being extra nice, but this all seems to be coming out of nowhere. I guess I'll see her at homecoming. Gulp.

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The homecoming dance is almost over and I have yet to run into Felicity, which isn't unusual since we have two completely different groups of friends. Still, every time I

hear a voice that resembles hers, I look around as if she's going to be there.

For some reason, our school dances always end with a slow song, so when I hear the very first notes of said slow song, I head to the bathroom. I'm barely inside the bathroom door when a hand grabs onto my shoulder and pulls me back out. When I turn around, I find that my captor is none other than Felicity. She leads me down the hall away from the bathroom then around the corner to an even darker hallway.

Much to my surprise, she moves my hands onto her hips and clasps her hands together behind my neck. She brings our bodies close together as she begins to sway back and forth to the music. "I told you I wanted a dance."

Her whispered words have a sultry tone to them and goosebumps break out down my arms. Is this a dream? It must be a dream. "I'm glad you found me," I somehow choke out.

"I'm glad I found you, too." There it is. The tone is definitely still there. I wasn't imagining it. I want to ask Felicity what we're doing, but I also don't want to ruin the moment, so I just let it be.

When the song ends, instead of letting go, Felicity leans in closer to whisper in my ear once again. "Find me at the party." The way her teeth scrape across my ear isn't an accident. There's no denying that.

I can't remember how to form words so I just nod in response. This answer seems to satisfy Felicity, who winks at me before walking away. What the actual fuck?

Once we're at the party, I'm pretty sure my friends can tell I'm acting strange, but how couldn't I be? I'm on edge, repeating Felicity's words over and over in my head. I decide I need to find her as quickly as possible because not knowing what she meant by that is killing me.



I find her standing over by the beer pong table, next to my brother and Abby. Abby seems annoyed for some reason and my brother is wearing his fake smile. The only person who truly seems to be enjoying the conversation is Felicity, who is moving her hands around animatedly and laughing as she speaks.

She turns a little, which causes her eyes to catch mine. I look away but not quick enough to miss the smirk that forms on her lips at catching me staring. Shit.

I chance another look and she's still staring at me. My brother and Abby are caught up in their own conversation now, and Felicity nods her head toward the staircase. I furrow my eyebrows since I'm not sure what she's getting at, but she just winks before heading toward the stairs and walking up.

I assume that means she wants me to follow, so I wait a minute, then I do. I figure Trevor probably doesn't want people upstairs, so I quietly make my way up the stairs and down a dark hallway. Even though I know Felicity is up here, I'm still surprised when a hand grabs onto my shirt and pulls me into a dark bedroom.

## Page 11

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 6:38 pm*

I bring my hand to my chest, my heart beating even faster now. “Shit, Felicity. You scared me.”

“Do you like being scared?” Her voice has that same sultry tone it had at the dance, and she runs a finger down my arm that causes goosebumps to pop up again.

“Um...” Speak, Marjorie, speak. “Only when I’m watching scary movies.”

Felicity’s finger continues down my arm until her hand reaches mine, and she intertwines our fingers together. “You’re braver than me. I hate scary movies.”

I nod my head and gulp. What the hell is happening? “Noted.”

“You know what I don’t hate?”

“What?”

“Chemistry class.” Felicity blinks at me through the long lashes I’ve spent hours studying during class. She squeezes my hand. “Do you feel it?”

“Feel what?” I swallow hard.

“Chemistry isn’t just a class we have together.”

“Have... have you been drinking?” It’s not the smoothest response, but it’s a logical question.

Felicity shakes her head, not offering any other explanation.

“But... you have a boyfriend.”

Felicity looks toward the ground. “I don’t actually. He broke up with me over a year ago. I’ve just been too embarrassed to admit it to anyone.”

“Oh, I’m sorry.”

Now, Felicity looks up at me and smiles. “Don’t be. It helped me to figure out a lot about myself. He was right to dump me. I didn’t have the sort of feelings for him that I have toward other people.”

“You mean... you’re...” I can’t get the words out, but the way Felicity nods tells me she understands what I’m asking.

“You can’t tell anyone though. I’m not ready for people to know.”

“Of course. I wouldn’t ever do that.” I squeeze her hand to reassure her that what I’m saying is true.

We both jump at the sound of the party getting louder downstairs. Felicity drops my hand as if just remembering where we are. “Can we talk about this tomorrow maybe? At your place? Will your brother be home?”

Why does it matter if Marcus is home? “Yeah. Of course. I’m guessing he’ll be there. Probably working off a killer hangover. Why?”

Felicity cringes. “I...” She hesitates for a moment then blows out a long breath. “I just think he might be catching on to the fact that... I... I like you. So, can you please tell him we’re doing something for chemistry?”

“You like me?” This has to be a dream.

Felicity giggles, not addressing what I just asked. “You didn’t answer my question.”

“Your secret is safe with me.”

A relaxed smile surfaces on Felicity’s face. “Perfect. Don’t have too much fun tonight.” Felicity winks at me then floats out of the room as if she was never even there.

I wait a minute, mostly because I’m still trying to figure out what just happened. When I get to the bottom of the states, I run right into Lydia.

She looks me up and down, eyebrows furrowed as if she’s trying to figure something out. “Were you upstairs with Felicity Jax?”

“Felicity was upstairs?” I hope the crack in my voice doesn’t give me away.

“You’re a terrible liar.”

## Page 12

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 6:38 pm*

Well, there's my answer.

When I don't say anything, Lydia sighs and shakes her head. "I don't know what just happened up there, but be careful, okay?"

"Nothing happened." It's not really a lie. I'm sure whatever Lydia is imagining, didn't happen. "Felicity is straight."

Lydia stares me down, waiting for me to break, but somehow, I don't. "I realize I don't know Felicity, but I've heard some not-so-great things about her."

"You sound like my brother."

"If the two people closest to you are saying the same thing, maybe you should listen." When I don't say anything in return, Lydia groans. "Just don't be stupid, okay?"

Why is she being such a jerk right now? "Seriously, Lydia? You're telling me not to be stupid? How many guys have you made out with so far tonight?" It's a low blow since it's none of my business, but she started it.

"That's different. I don't have feelings for any of those guys." I'm glad the music is loud because Lydia is now raising her voice.

"Who says I have feelings for Felicity?"

"Seriously, Mar? You've been making heart eyes at her ever since she had the same lunch period as us freshman year. You were practically salivating when you told me

she was your chemistry partner.”

“Just drop it, okay? There’s nothing going on.”

“Whatever, Mar.” Lydia throws her hands in the air and storms away from me. With my best friend mad at me, the last thing I want to do is stay and party. Unfortunately, I don’t have a car since I just so happened to come with the person who is now mad at me.

I walk out the door to get some fresh air and run into the last person I expect to see at a party. “Genesis? What are you doing here?”

I don’t think I’ve ever seen Genesis at a party. Hell, aside from basketball, I don’t think I’ve ever seen her outside of school. I’m pretty sure she wasn’t even at the dance tonight.

Genesis looks down at her feet as if she’s embarrassed. “Lydia told me some of you guys were coming here tonight, so I just wanted to stop by and see if anyone needed a ride. I didn’t want anyone to drive home after drinking.”

That’s super sweet. Maybe I don’t give Genesis enough credit. Sure, she doesn’t like to push herself and her religion probably teaches her she needs to convert gay people, but she’s not a bad person. A little misguided? Yes. But she seems to mean well. “I haven’t been drinking, but I could use a ride.”

“Everything okay?”

Genesis looks genuinely concerned, so I try my best to smile. “Yeah, just not really in the party mood.”

“I get that,” Genesis says with a giggle that makes me laugh along with her. “Let me

just go in and see if anyone else needs a ride.” She tosses me her keys and points her chin toward the driveway. “It’s the beat-up gray Jeep.”

When she comes out of the house a few minutes later, I’m happy to find that no one is with her. Tonight has been a whirlwind of emotions, and I’m not in the mood to be around any more people than I have to.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” Genesis asks me as she gets into the driver’s side of the jeep and starts it up. “Lydia didn’t even know you were leaving.”

I stare out the window because I’m afraid if I look at Genesis and see any form of pity in her eyes, I might start to cry. This isn’t the first time Lydia and I have fought, but it will be the first time we go to bed without working it out, and that stings. It’s more my fault than hers since I didn’t stick around, but I can’t understand why she was acting that way. “We got in a fight.”

“I’m sorry.” The car is silent for a moment before Genesis speaks again. “I know we don’t see eye to eye on certain things, but if you ever want to talk about anything, I’m here.”

I want to tell her that disagreeing about whether or not I’m an abomination is a little bit different than disagreeing on our favorite food, but I don’t want to bring that up when she’s being so nice. Honestly, even if she wasn’t being nice, I probably still wouldn’t mention it. I don’t like to fight with people, hence why my argument with Lydia is bothering me so much.

“Thanks. I really appreciate it. Seriously.”

As if sensing exactly what I need, Genesis is silent for the rest of the car ride back to my house. The only other word I hear from her is a quiet, “Goodbye” as I get out.

I make a beeline for my bedroom and throw myself right onto my bed. I'm about to close my eyes, when the sound of my phone gets my attention. I grab it out of my pocket and look down to find a text message from Lydia. I don't want to fight with you. I'm sorry.

I smile at the phone, happy that we can keep up our track record of always solving our issues before we go to sleep. I'm sorry too. I shouldn't have gotten so defensive. I hate fighting with you.

Never go to bed mad, right?

My smile grows when I see that Lydia has typed out our mantra. She was clearly distraught over it as well. Never go to bed mad



## Page 13

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 6:38 pm*

Goodnight, bae. I love you.

Love you too, Lydia.

Now that I feel more at peace, I close my eyes so I can go to sleep. Like clockwork, another text comes through right when I start to drift off. I grumble to myself until I see that it's a text from Felicity.

Excited for tomorrow

Me too...

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It's 12:00 on the dot, the exact time Felicity said she would arrive, when there is a knock on our front door. Luckily, my parents are out to lunch with my grandparents and neither Marcus nor Morgan have made it home from their post-homecoming activities, so there is currently no one home to ask questions.

I open the door to find Felicity standing there in tight high-waisted jeans and a green hoodie. Even in a simple outfit like this, she looks drop-dead gorgeous. I still can't believe she's standing on my front porch. I spent years being told by my friends and family that I could get whoever I wanted, but I never thought there was a possibility that whoever included Felicity.

I step off to the side and motion toward the hallway with my hand. "Come in."

As soon as Felicity is inside, she looks around as though she is searching for something. “It’s quiet in here.”

I can’t stop the goofy grin from coming onto my face as I take a tentative step closer to her. “Yeah. There’s no one else home.”

“Oh.” Felicity’s smile drops slightly. “I thought you said your brother would be home.”

Is that disappointment I sense in her voice? It can’t be, right? Why would she be disappointed that we’re alone? Then, it hits me. “You’re nervous, aren’t you? You obviously don’t want anyone to find out, but it’s nerve-racking that it’s just the two of us here, isn’t it?”

Felicity pushes out a long breath. “That’s exactly it. You scare me.”

“I do?”

Felicity laughs as if this is a dumb question. “Of course you do. You’re hot, athletic, and nice. That’s the ultimate trifecta. It’s intimidating.”

“You think I’m hot?”

Another laugh. “Could you stop asking such silly questions? Of course I think you’re hot. I swear your family hit some very insane, and kind of unfair, genetic lottery.”

“Should we go up to my room? I have a feeling my brother and sister will be getting back any minute.”

“Your room sounds great.”

We are both silent as we make our way upstairs, and when I close the door behind us, I'm overcome with nervousness. "So..."

"So..." Felicity repeats before biting her bottom lip. God, that's sexy.

I sit down in my bed and pat the spot next to me. "Do you want to talk about anything?"

Instead of sitting down, Felicity floats around my room. "It's hard to say it out loud."

Wait... if it's hard for her to say it out loud... Maybe that means... I jump from the bed and run over to where my backpack is sitting by my desk. I rummage through it until I find the notes from my mystery girl. "It was you, wasn't it?" I say as I pull them out.

"What was me?"

Before I can answer, there's a knock on the door that startles me so much that I drop the notes.

"Who wants hangover pizza?" Marcus shouts as he opens the door to my room. He stops short when he sees Felicity standing there. "Sorry. I didn't realize you had company."

"Felicity is here to work on a chemistry project," I answer quickly. "We'd love to come but probably should keep working."

"There's always time for a pizza break though, right?"

## Page 14

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 6:38 pm*

She must be hungry if she's willing to risk Marcus suspecting something. Shit. I should have offered her a snack. "Yeah, totally. We'd love to. We'll be down in five."

My brother tries to send me a silent message, but I'm too overwhelmed to comprehend it, so I just push him out of the door. When I turn back around, Felicity is holding the notes in her hands.

Her eyes light up as she switches her attention from the notes to me. "Of course it was me. I didn't know how to say it in words, so I had to write it first. That helped me find the courage to actually come out to you."

I can't believe it. Really. It almost seems impossible that it would be her, but she has no reason to lie. And the timing was just too perfect for it not to be her. "You could have just told me. I mean, come on, you're Felicity Jax. I've had a crush on you for years." I rub at the back of my neck. I can't believe I actually just admitted that.

Felicity drops the note and closes the space between us. She brings a hand to my face and runs her finger along my cheek. "You make me brave."

Then something happens that I never in a million years thought would. Felicity Jax kisses me.

## Chapter 7

\*Love Interest\*

It's been almost a month since I wrote my third letter to Marjorie and I have yet to hear back. She seemed so sincere in her reply to my first two letters, that I really thought she meant it when she said I could talk to her. I rack my brain about what I possibly could have said wrong. Maybe I didn't cross out the part about her being amazing well enough and she saw it and got freaked out. I'm an idiot.

As I'm standing by my locker chastising myself for this, Marjorie walks up to me with a piece of paper in her hands. With the way she's holding it, I can't tell for sure, but it looks like it's my handwriting. Oh, God, what if it's my note?

As if reading my mind, she asks, "Is this yours?"

I'm afraid to look because if it is my note that means she knows I'm her secret admirer and the fact that she didn't write back isn't a good sign. When I finally grab the paper, I find that it is mine, but luckily, it's not my note to her. Instead, it's notes for an essay I have to write for my history class.

"Oh yeah, that's mine. Where did you get that?"

She points her thumb behind her. "Found it over there."

As she studies the piece of paper in her hand, I'm so happy that the chicken scratch I use to take notes looks so much different from my handwriting on the notes to her. Still, I grab it out of her hands before she can look any closer.

"Sorry," I say when I realize how rude that was. "This is just really important. It would suck if I lost it."

"No problem. I get it." Marjorie plays with her blonde ponytail. "So, how was your day?"

“It was great.”

The smile on her face is so pretty that it lights up the whole room. “That’s great.” She pulls her phone out of her pocket and stares down at it, then she looks back at me with apologetic eyes. “Sorry. I have to go. Have a good night.”

Before I can say anything else, she walks away.

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I let out a long sigh as I sit down for a late dinner with my mom.

“Still haven’t heard back?” she asks knowingly.

“No.” I shrug as if it’s not a big deal, even though we both know it’s killing me. “I’m just happy I was honest. Well, kind of.”

“What if you turned that kind of into a completely?” My mom lifts an eyebrow as if she’s challenging me.

My stomach immediately goes into knots. “Just thinking about that makes me want to throw up, so how about no?”

“I just don’t want you to be sad or disappointed. You’ve had too much disappointment in your life.”

We both know she’s talking about my father even though she doesn’t say it out loud. “I’m fine, Mom. I promise.”

“If you say so.” She watches me as if she’s waiting for me to crack, but that’s not going to happen. I really am fine. At least, I will be. “Maybe you should call Bug or

one of your other friends and see if they want to come over and watch a movie or something.”

I shake my head. “I think I’m just going to go to bed early so I can get up and go to the Senior Acres before school tomorrow.”

## Page 15

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 6:38 pm*

Senior Acres is a retirement home I volunteer at when I have the chance, which unfortunately hasn't been much lately.

"You should tell Marjorie you volunteer there." My mom points her fork at me as she speaks. "What girl wouldn't swoon over that?"

"I'm in high school. Plenty of girls wouldn't swoon over it."

"The ones who are worth it would." She winks at me then goes back to eating.

The next day, I wake up early enough to have an hour at Senior Acres before going to school. After signing in, I head directly for the cafeteria because I know that's where most residents will be at this time.

I frown when I see my favorite resident sitting at a table by herself. I've told her approximately one million times that she needs to be more social, but she refuses ever since her husband died a year ago.

"Hi, grandma," I say as I take a seat at the table with her.

"You need to stop calling me that or you're going to make the others jealous." She's trying her best to stay serious as she lectures me, but a smile still comes to her face.

"You love it. Don't deny it."

"You're right. I do. Are you hungry? I can add it to my tab."



I laugh because I know that she doesn't actually have a tab. Every resident can have a guest for one meal a day. Plus, since I'm a volunteer, I don't actually count. "I ate before I came, but thank you. Have you read anything good lately?"

Grandma reaches into her purse and pulls out the latest Emily Giffin book. "Another winner. She's a gem."

"I'll have to check it out." I mean it. I've enjoyed every book suggestion Grandma has given me.

She slides the book across the table and winks. "Take it."

"You need to stop doing this or you're going to make the other volunteers jealous."

"What other volunteers? You're the only one who comes consistently." She waves her hand. "That's nothing to concern yourself with though. Do you have any suggestions for me?"

I shake my head. "The only books I've read lately were for school." That's a lie. I've been devouring sapphic romance books lately, but I don't dare say that to Grandma. God knows how she would react if she knew I was gay.

"That's too bad. Reading for pleasure is important, you know."

I hold up the book she just gave me. "I'll read this right away. Don't worry."

Just like that, all of my worries are pushed to the side, and I feel happy again. I hope that whatever Marjorie is doing right now, she's happy too.

Chapter 8

Marjorie

“Thank you so much for suggesting breakfast.” I can’t stop the wide smile that comes to my face as I get into Felicity’s car. “And coming inside to get me? Such a gentlewoman.”

“I think your brother would disagree.” Felicity laughs and it fills the whole car with her positive energy. “He didn’t seem too happy when he came out of the bathroom wrapped in a towel and found me standing there.” She reaches across the center console and takes my hand in hers. “Thanks for telling him that we’re busy working on a big chemistry project. It’s not that I’m ashamed of this... us. I’m just...”

“Not ready,” I finish for her. “I get it.”

I’m fine with where we’re at. The last thing I want is to rush into something, especially when I wasn’t planning to get into a relationship this year. We haven’t kissed since that quick one in my room, and that kind of sucks, but I’m not going to push anything. This is all new for Felicity. She doesn’t need added pressure from me to make it even harder.

“So, where are we going?” I ask in order to change the subject from our not-so-little secret.

“I thought we could pick up Starbucks and just park somewhere and eat it.”

“Yeah. Of... of course.” I guess we’ll never be able to escape the fact that we’re sneaking around.

Felicity removes her hand from mine and puts it on my thigh, running her fingers along it in a way that has my body going into overdrive. “I’ll make it worth your while. I promise.”

## Page 16

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 6:38 pm*

“You... you don’t have to do that.” I mean it, but I also really want her to keep that promise.

Felicity throws her head back in laughter. “Are you sure? Because your face is telling a different story.”

Busted. “Sorry. I’m just incredibly attracted to you. It’s hard to control my reaction when you say things like that.”

“When the time is right, I hope you don’t control yourself at all.”

Is she talking about sex? The tone of her voice tells me she is, but that seems to be skipping a lot of steps. Right now, I’d be happy to stay in this car for hours making out. The only reason I’m not suggesting it is because I’m trying to take things slow for Felicity. Sex on the other hand... that’s a whole other story. Sex isn’t something I ever want to rush into, especially since I’m still a virgin. I want to make sure my first time is with the right person at the right moment.

Luckily, I don’t have to respond since we’re now in the drive-through at Starbucks. We put in our orders then park in the back of the parking lot, away from all the cars. “I’m going to miss this when basketball starts in a few weeks,” Felicity says before taking a sip of her venti white chocolate mocha.

“I’ll still be around.”

“Not as much though.” She pushes her lip into the pout that I find so incredibly cute. My mind is preoccupied with the thought of kissing those lips until Felicity slaps her

hand to her forehead. “Shit. I just remembered I had homework for my pre-calc class. Rain check?”

“Of course.” My lips will have to wait, apparently. It’s fine. I can be patient for my literal dream girl.

When we get to school, Felicity says a quick goodbye before practically jumping out of the car. She must be really worried about that math homework.

As I walk up to the building, I’m surprised to find Abby outside. “You’re here early.”

“Yeah, I did some volunteer work this morning.” Abby looks around and lowers her voice slightly as if she’s telling me a secret. “Did I see you get out of Felicity’s car?”

“Yeah. We were supposed to be working on something for chemistry, but it turns out she had another assignment that’s due sooner.”

“I’m not dumb, Marjorie. I’ll admit I didn’t believe Marcus when he first told me he thought there was something going on between the two of you, but I see it now.” I try to avoid eye contact with Abby, but she dips her head down so I can’t. “Am I right?”

I shake my head. “You can’t tell anyone. Not even my brother. Please.”

“Are you free after school? Can we get together?”

“I think you might have the wrong Madden sibling. I know the resemblance is uncanny.”

Abby laughs and playfully pushes my shoulder. “Shut up.”

“Ouch.” I rub my shoulder as if she hurt me. “I’m actually off tonight. What did you

have in mind?"

Abby shrugs. "Whatever. Doesn't really matter. Want to just meet me at my car after school?"

"Promise I won't catch you making out with my brother?"

Abby holds two fingers in the air. "Scout's honor. Just for you, I'll make sure Marcus is nowhere to be seen."

"Perfect. I see enough of that face."

"Me too, honestly." Abby sticks out her tongue to show she's clearly joking.

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After a long school day, I'm more than ready to spend some time with my future sister-in-law. As promised, it's just Abby standing by her car when I get there. "I thought maybe we could go mini golfing," she says as she opens the passenger door for me. "Enjoy this fall weather before it gets freezing again."

"I love when it's freezing because that means it's officially basketball season."

Abby snorts and walks over to her side of the car. "You're such a nerd."

"Says the girl who just snorted." I bump my shoulder against hers before putting on my seatbelt. "Plus, can I really be considered a nerd if I'm nerding out over a sport?"

"Yeah, you totally can. Now, why don't you put your money where your mouth is and try to beat me on the mini golf course, Miss Athlete?"

## Page 17

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 6:38 pm*

Things are fun when we first start playing, but the longer we play, the more it feels like Abby is holding back what she really wants to say. By hole ten, I can't take it anymore. "Just say it, Ab."

"Say what?"

"I don't know. You tell me." I have a feeling I know what's coming. It's going to be the same thing I heard from Marcus and Lydia. She's going to tell me that she gets a bad feeling or has heard negative things about Felicity, but no one knows what I know. No one understands what she's been struggling with.

"I think Felicity likes Marcus."

Okay... definitely not what I expected to hear. "What are you talking about? I told you there's something between me and her. You called it yourself."

Abby rests her body weight on her golf club and stares down at the ground. "I know, but I'm afraid she's playing you."

"Playing me?" No. That isn't what's happening at all.

"I think she might be using you to get to your brother."

I shake my head. "No. She wouldn't do that. Why would anyone do that? That's crazy."

Abby still can't make eye contact with me. "People do crazy things when they like

someone.”

It takes everything inside of me not to lash out at Abby. I know she’s just trying to look out for me, but she couldn’t be more wrong. “It’s not like that.” An idea pops into my head. “Actually, I can prove it.”

Felicity’s letters are proof enough that she is into me and not Marcus. She wasn’t even willing to give her identity in those. If it was really her who wrote those letters, which it obviously was, she would know where to find another one. “I can’t tell you how I can prove it, but I promise I can. Do you trust me?”

Abby finally looks at me now, her eyes heavy with sadness. “Of course I trust you, Marjorie. This isn’t an issue of trusting you at all. And you can obviously trust me too. If you say this is real, I’m not going to tell anyone. Actually, no matter how it turns out, your secret is safe with me. I might be dating your brother, but through the years, you’ve also become one of my best friends. I would never do anything to hurt you.”

Her words are so nice and sincere, they almost make me cry. Ever since Abby started dating my brother, she’s been like a sister to me. It’s nice to know that she feels the same way.

The rest of our time together is a blur because all I can think about is getting this note written. As soon as I’m home, I sit down at my desk and quickly scribble out a short note.

Meet me at the football field by the bleachers after school on Friday.

I choose Friday since it’s the next time I don’t have to go to work right after school. A few hours after placing the note on my locker, it’s gone, so I assume Felicity must have gotten it. Even though we see each other in chemistry and send texts back and

forth, Felicity doesn't mention the note at all on Wednesday or Thursday. When I get to school on Friday though, I find a note inside of my locker.

I smile as I open it, sure that Felicity must not have mentioned it because she wanted to answer with her own note instead. When I read the words, my stomach drops.

I'm really happy you wrote back to me. I was starting to worry that I said something wrong in my last note. I'm sorry, but I can't meet you after school. I know you are wondering who I am, but I'm not ready to tell you. If you don't want to write back and forth, I completely understand.

Also, if that note on your locker wasn't meant for me, I'm soooo sorry. It just hit me that it could have been put there for someone else (or maybe someone else left it there for you) and here I am rambling on like an idiot.

I'm sorry. I'm going to end this note before I make myself look like even more of an idiot. Thanks again for everything.

I continue to stare at the note in disbelief. It can't be true, right? It has to be some sort of sick joke. I know it's not though. I've read those other two notes more than I'd like to admit. This is the exact same handwriting.

Sticking to my original plan, I text Felicity and ask her to meet me by the bleachers after school. When I see her walking toward me, I have mixed feelings. Part of me wants to believe there's a reasonable explanation for all of this and the girl I'm falling for is actually who I think she is. The other part of me knows if she lied about the notes, she most likely lied about other stuff too. Maybe all of it.

"What's up, beautiful?" Felicity whispers when she's close enough for me to hear.

"I have a question for you."



Felicity tilts her head and smiles at me, almost making me forget what I need to talk to her about. “Sounds serious.”

“Did you get the note I left for you?”

“Note?” Felicity shakes her head. “Where did you leave it?”

“The same place we’ve left all of our notes to each other.”

Felicity’s eyes dart around. She knows she’s been caught. “Someone must have stolen it. You didn’t write my name in it, did you?”

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 6:38 pm*

“No, but something funny did happen.”

“Oh yeah? What’s that?”

“You wrote me back, or I assume it must be you since you told me you were the one to write the notes.”

“I can explain.” Felicity reaches out and tries to grab my hand but I pull it away. “I didn’t write the notes. When I saw what you were talking about, I worried you were falling for someone else, and I know it’s not right, but I wanted you for myself. I was worried you would choose her over me.”

“I don’t even know who she is. If you had just been honest with me, I could have explained that all to you. Now, I feel like I can’t trust you.”

Felicity throws her hands in the air. “Whatever, Marjorie. If that’s how you feel, there’s nothing I can do.”

“So, that’s it? You’re not even going to try?” Even though I now know I can’t trust Felicity, I still want her to prove me wrong. I want her to say something that shows me that I saw the real her. That she’s not the person Lydia, Abby, and Marcus claim she is.

“You’ve made your choice.” Tears come to Felicity’s eyes, but there’s something off about them. “Just leave me alone, Marjorie.”

She walks away from me and I’m left by myself, completely dumbfounded. I’m not

sure what I'm supposed to do, but since I had gym last period and am still in my workout clothes, I walk a few feet to the track and start to run. I run until my legs and lungs are both burning.

Once I catch my breath and stretch, I walk to my car. I'm so thankful I didn't ride to school with Felicity today, because I don't want to explain to anyone how I ended up stranded. All I can think about when I walk into the house is stripping out of my clothes and taking a nice, long shower. Only, when I walk past Marcus's room, I hear voices that stop me in my tracks.

"What the hell are you doing?" Marcus asks, his voice more angry than I've ever heard it.

"Oh, come on. Don't act like you don't want this."

Felicity?

"You kissed me. Of course I don't want this. I have a girlfriend."

"We're in high school. People break up all the time."

Before I can think better of it, I barge into Marcus's room and find him sitting on his bed with Felicity hovering above him, a scene that would have looked very bad for him if I hadn't just heard their conversation. "What the hell is going on here?"

Marcus jumps to his feet and puts both hands in the air, slowly backing away from me as if he's worried what I might do. "Marjorie, I swear this isn't what it looks like."

Instead of addressing him, I turn my attention to Felicity. "You kissed my brother?"

“Whatever.” Felicity rolls her eyes and laughs, and it amazes me that someone can be such a snake. She walks over to me, putting her hand on my arm and leaning in the way she always does when she’s flirting with me. Fake flirting? I don’t even know at this point. “By the way, I’m not actually gay, but for what it’s worth, you’re a much better kisser than your brother.”

She walks out of the room without another word, and I’m left wondering what the hell just happened. I don’t know whether to cry at the fact that my dream girl completely played with my feelings for her own selfish pleasure or laugh because it’s all so ridiculous.

“Shit, Marjorie.” My brother throws himself back onto his bed and runs his hand over the little bit of facial hair he has.

I sigh and sit down next to him. “You can say it. You told me so.”

“I wasn’t going to say that. I was just going to ask if you want to go to Abby’s with me and get wasted with us tonight.”

“Just the three of us?” I’m surprised Marcus is willing to let me interrupt their alone time.

Marcus shrugs. “Why not?”

“I told myself I was done drinking until after basketball season. Especially after getting sick at Thalia’s party.”

“First of all, basketball hasn’t even started yet. Second of all, I feel like you could use this.”

My brother is saying so much without actually saying it, and for the first time today,

I'm happy. "Can Lydia come?"

Marcus puts his arm around my shoulder and pulls me close. "Let's do it."

Chapter 9

## Page 19

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 6:38 pm*

\*Love Interest\*

Hi! I just wanted to start off by saying I'm so sorry for ghosting you then leaving you the most cryptic note in the entire world. To make it up to you, I've included the note that I wrote to you when completely wasted (a new one, not the one from before). That note explains what happened. It's kind of all over the place, but I think you'll be able to figure it out. Ha! Also, I'm trusting you not to show this note to anyone. People actually somehow believe I'm cool and this is sure to ruin that. **TURN OVER AT YOUR OWN RISK ->**

HellOoooooooo! Im drink drunk. I'm also a big **FUCKING** idiot. I'll try to keep this short, but I tend to ramble when I'm drink **DRUNK**

But yeah... she suckS, buT I'm drunk (

I promise I'll write back faster this time.

P S - Don't worry about mE. I'm chill wit wut happened. Refer to One whole day by the greaT Dixie D'Amelio if you want to know my stAte of mind.

Marjorie's note makes me laugh out loud but also makes me feel awful. I can't believe someone used my notes as a way to bait her and hurt her. Sure, according to the song she referred to, she was only sad for one day, but I hate the thought of her being sad at all. God, I'm pathetic. What other teenager thinks like this? This is exactly why Marjorie would never go for me.

I know I need to write her back, but I'm not sure what to say. I go back between

making it light and funny or making it deep and heartfelt. My mom isn't home right now for me to ask her advice, but I know she would tell me to "write from the heart," so that's what I'm going to do.

Hey! I want you to know that I feel so terrible about what happened. I would completely understand if you didn't want to write letters back and forth anymore since I'm not willing to tell you who I am. I promise I won't hurt you, though. I never could.

Your note made me crack up. You're a hilarious drunk. Are you excited for basketball season? I'd never admit this out loud, but I love watching you play. You're so in the zone.

Something I've never told anyone... This is surprisingly easy even though I tell my mom everything. No one knows that my dream is to be a writer. School counselors are always talking about "Good, stable careers" and people seem to think full-time authors somehow lucked into it. It's like one day a book becomes a best seller and THEN you're a writer. Like you're suddenly in this small, elite club that no one else is allowed to join. If you ask me, that takes away from all of the hard work authors put into their books. Society seems to think people pick up writing as a hobby and then get a lucky break and are suddenly a writer. Sorry. Now I'm going off on a rant. I don't talk to people about this, because I don't want them to think I'm crazy. So now you're the unlucky recipient of all of my innermost thoughts. You're welcome.

Anyway, what's something no one knows about you? That is, if you're willing to share it with someone who is essentially a stranger. I promise I'm not though. A stranger, that is. You know me.

I'll stop bothering you for now. I hope you have the best day today and find a million reasons to smile.

I reread my note and I'm satisfied. At least as satisfied as I'm going to be. My words are never going to seem good enough for Marjorie. I fold the note and put it into my pocket at the same time I hear my mom open the front door.

I skip down the steps and greet her with a hug. When I pull back, she studies me as if she's trying to figure something out. "Someone's happy." It sounds more like a question than a statement. The smirk on her face tells me she's waiting for me to fill her in.

"I got a note back! It was really nice."

"That's great, sweetie. What now?"

I shrug. I guess I didn't really think about that part. I was so excited about the prospect of sending letters back and forth with Marjorie, I didn't take the time to consider what it means or how long it will last. "I don't know. Can't I just be happy about it for now?"

"Of course you can." My mom pulls me in for another hug. "I just don't want you to get hurt."

"I'm not going to get hurt, Mom. I promise." I seem to be making a lot of promises lately. I hope I can actually keep them. "I need to go see Bug, though."

"I see how it is," my mom jokes. "I haven't even been home for five minutes and you're already leaving me."

I know she's kidding, but I still feel bad. Even if she doesn't admit it, I know my mom gets lonely. I wish she would date. I wonder if the reason she doesn't is because of me. "I won't be with him long," I promise. "Grandma at the retirement home gave me a new book. If you're not reading anything else right now, we can read it



together.”

It might be childish, but I still read books with my mom. It’s our special thing. Some kids watch movies or TV shows with their parents. We read.

“That sounds perfect.” My mom gives me a warm smile. “Have fun with Bug. I’ll bake some cookies for us to have while we read.”

“Awesome! Thanks! Bye, Mom.” I walk to the front door and open it up but turn around before leaving. I figure I might as well put this out there now while I’m thinking about it and let my mom marinate on it while I’m gone. “Maybe after we read, we could set up a dating profile for you. It’s about time you put yourself back out there.”

I’m out the door before she has a chance to fight me on it. Good deed for the day—done.

## Chapter 10

Marjorie

“What are you smiling about?”

I jump at the sound of Lydia’s voice and quickly shove the note from my mystery girl into my math book. “Just thinking about something funny Marcus said this morning. Hey, want to hang out once I get off work tonight? We won’t have as much time when basketball starts, so I need to see your cute face as much as possible until then.”

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 6:38 pm*

Lydia looks toward the ceiling as if she's thinking. "What time? I have plans after school."

"With a boy or with your other bestie?" I mock disgust whenever I talk about the fact that Lydia has two best friends and act like it bothers me when we both know it doesn't.

Lydia looks back at me and rolls her eyes, but the smile on her face tells me she's not actually annoyed. "First of all, my other bestie is a boy, so that question doesn't even work. Second of all, stop being so jealous. You know you're my number one girl."

"So..." I raise my eyebrows since she didn't actually answer my question.

"Yes, I'm hanging with my other bestie. No boys for me right now. I got my fill after homecoming, trust me."

She wiggles her eyebrows and it makes me want to throw up. I don't want to think about hooking up with any guys, let alone multiple in one night. I honestly don't know how she does it.

"Don't make that face. It's all in good fun."

"What face am I making? I'm not making a face."

"You look like you're going to throw up."

I laugh since she's exactly right. "Alright, fine, I was making a face. Guys are just

so..." I wiggle my whole body to show my disgust.

Now Lydia laughs. "You're not wrong, but they're also easy."

"Anyway... I'll be home a little after seven. I'm guessing you'll still be with your bestie at that point. Want to just come over whenever you're done and we can have a sleepover?"

Lydia puts her hand on her chest in mock surprise. "A sleepover on a school night?" she asks sarcastically. "Just kidding. You know my mom won't care. Sounds great."

"Awesome. I'm going to need it after today. We're doing work with our partners in chemistry for the first time since the Felicity Volcano erupted."

Lydia reaches out and rubs my arm. "I'm sorry, babe. You have Mr. Byers, right? He's super cool. Ask him if you can switch partners. I'm sure he'll let you."

"You really think so?"

"Totally. He did it when I had him. Not for me, but for someone else."

"Okay, cool." Now the only question is what lie I can make up about why I need to switch partners. The truth is not an option.

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"I could really use a partner that's on the basketball team. It will be easier to coordinate our schedules and stuff." I hope my explanation is good enough for Mr. Byers. I literally missed the end of my lunch just so I could get here early and try to make this happen. As if that's not all bad enough, my excuse doesn't help me much, seeing as how there is only one other person in this class who plays basketball.

“As long as Samara, her partner, and your partner all agree, we can definitely make that happen.”

Samara’s lab partner is a guy who I work with at the ice cream shop, and even though I don’t know a ton about him, he seems to go with the flow so that should be fine. Felicity would have to be a masochist to put up a fight. So, my only worry is whether Samara will agree.

I get my answer when everyone files in and Mr. Byers immediately asks. Felicity’s resounding yes takes no time at all. My coworker looks between me and Felicity a few times then shrugs and agrees. Samara takes a little bit longer. She studies all three of us as if she’s weighing her options then sneers at me. I don’t know if this is a good sign or a bad sign, but she eventually mumbles “Sure,” which is good enough for Mr. Byers.

“Why did you ask to work with me?” Samara asks as soon as we sit down next to each other.

“I thought it would be easier with our basketball schedule.”

“But you hate me.”

Where the hell did she get that idea? “I don’t hate you. You hate me.”

“It’s semantics.” I don’t know what to say so I simply stare at Samara, causing her to giggle. “Do you know what that means? Or do you need the smarter of the two of us to spell it out for you?”

What the hell was I thinking? I should have said I needed to be with my coworker because we have similar work schedules. This is going to be a long year.

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## Page 21

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 6:38 pm*

By the time I get to work, I'm exhausted. I'm happy to find that I at least work with Delilah, Frank, and Payton today. They all take their jobs seriously unlike some of the other kids our age who just seem to work whenever and however they goddamn please.

"How's it going?" I ask Delilah when I stand next to her by the outside windows.

"It's going."

"Everything okay?"

"Yeah, I'm good. My AP classes are just killing me."

"You work too hard." I playfully elbow her in the side. "You should take a lesson from our current valedictorian."

Delilah groans and rolls her eyes. "Don't even start with that. Genesis Brimstone is going to be the death of me."

"There she is!" Our conversation is cut short by the sound of my dad's booming voice. He walks up to the window with my mom by his side and Morgan and Jocelyn right behind them. "Looking good in that hat, sweetie." He knows I hate this hat. He's just being a jerk. A silly jerk, but still a jerk.

"Ha. Ha. Very funny. What can I get you?"

"We are all craving milkshakes." He holds up his fingers. "Four chocolate

milkshakes, please.”

Delilah gets to work on their milkshakes while I scan his credit card. Soon, Delilah is walking back over with two milkshakes in hand. I slip past her and grab the other two. Delilah gave my parents their milkshakes so Morgan and Jocelyn are standing at the window now waiting for theirs.

Morgan grabs hers right out of my hands and I glare at her before smiling over at Jocelyn. “I’m sorry my sister is so rude. I would have given you yours first.”

Jocelyn looks toward the ground, and I’m pretty sure the slightest bit of blush comes to her cheeks. “It’s no big deal.”

“You know what is a big deal though?” I try my best to catch her eye. “That varsity game you played in at the end of the season. I’ve been meaning to say something but forgot the few times I saw you. You looked awesome.”

“Wow... you... umm... you were there?”

Why is she so surprised by that? Honestly, it’s probably because I work all the time. “Yeah. I was off that night so I went to the game. I’m surprised you didn’t hear me shouting when you went in. I was going crazy.”

A wide grin spreads onto Jocelyn’s face and she finally looks me in the eyes. Between the fact that she’s younger and I’ve known her forever, I somehow missed how pretty she had become. Looking at her now, with that curly brown hair and the matching brown eyes, I finally see it. I shake these thoughts from my head though because this is my sister’s best friend, she’s allegedly straight (that’s definitely still up for debate), and I’m never dating again after what happened with Felicity.

Dramatic? Probably. But that situation was proof enough that I need to stay single at

least until high school is over. Maybe I'll let myself find someone in college in two years.

"That's really cool. I'm glad you were there."

Jocelyn's voice shuts up the voice inside my head, which I'm very thankful for. "I'm glad I was there, too."

"You're coming home directly from work, right, honey?" my mom asks.

I bring my attention away from Jocelyn and focus on my mom. "Yep. Lydia is sleeping over later, but those are the only plans I have."

My mom claps her hands together as if she's the one having a sleepover. "Do you girls need any snacks for tonight? I'll have your father stop at the store on the way home so we can get some. We'll also get stuff to make a big breakfast for all of you kids to eat before school. This will be great."

Before I have a chance to answer, she turns around and starts talking to my dad at a mile a minute. I laugh as they both go back and forth excitedly before joining Morgan and Jocelyn at one of the picnic tables. "My parents are so extra sometimes," I joke to Delilah.

Delilah stares at them for a long time, a look in her eyes I can't identify. "It must be nice having two parents to go home to, though."

Shit. I'm an idiot and an asshole. "I'm sorry, Delilah."

Delilah waves her hand. "Don't be. It was a long time ago." She smiles at me, but the smile doesn't reach her eyes.



I can tell she doesn't want to say anything else about it, so I drop the subject. The rest of work luckily goes by without any issues. I stick around to chat with Payton for a few minutes then head to my car. As soon as I'm inside, a call comes through from Abby. It's weird for her to call me instead of my brother, so I immediately pick up.

I hear sniffles on the other end. "Marjorie? Could you come over? I need someone here."

"I'm about to leave work, so I definitely can, but why don't you call Marcus?" I have no issue being there for Abby when she's clearly struggling with something, but I also know she would (understandably) rather have Marcus.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 6:38 pm*

“He has plans with his friends tonight, so I don’t want to bother him.”

“You could never be a bother to him. If you need him there, you know he’ll drop everything.”

“I know. I... I want you.”

Her voice cracks, which tells me she’s really struggling right now, so I turn in the direction of her house. “I’ll be there in five.”

As soon as I park my car in front of the modest, one-story house, Abby walks outside. I expect her to wait on the porch, but instead she walks right over to my car.

“Sorry. My mom is just drunk right now, which means it’s only a matter of time before...” Her voice trails off. “I just really wanted someone here with me.”

“Should we go somewhere?” I can only assume Abby would like to get as far away from the house as possible.

Much to my surprise, Abby shakes her head. “When she gets like this, I worry that she’ll hurt herself. I don’t like leaving her alone.”

I nod. Even though I can’t relate to having a parent show up at home completely intoxicated, I would never leave one of my friends alone if they were completely drunk. “Of course. Let’s go.”

As soon as we walk inside, Abby’s mom greets us at the door. She has a shit-eating

grin on her face, her eyes are glassy, and she smells like beer. “You must be Marcus’s sister, Marjorie. It’s great to meet you.”

“Nice to meet you too, ma’am.” I don’t point out the fact that I’ve actually met her multiple times in the past.

“You can call me Sandra, darling.” She’s also told me that, but it feels wrong to me to call her anything other than Mrs. Crayden.

“I don’t think she’s eaten anything,” Abby leans close to whisper in my ear. “Will you come to the kitchen with me so I can make something?”

I nod. “Of course. Whatever you need.”

Abby looks toward her mom. “Hey, Mom, how ‘bout you have a seat at the kitchen table while we make some food.”

“Sure. Sure. You girls can tell me stories about what it’s like to be young and hot since I can’t remember that anymore.”

Abby ignores her mom’s comment and walks her into the kitchen, holding onto her arm as she sits down as though she’s scared she might fall. It’s a logical fear. Her mom can barely stand at the point.

Abby grabs a few things from the refrigerator as her mom rambles on about who knows what. “Thanks again for coming,” she whispers in my ear as she slips past me. “I know this isn’t the most fun place to be right now.”

I’m about to ask her why she wanted me here instead of my brother, but before I can, the front door opens. “I’m home,” Abby’s dad shouts.

In any other house, I would assume he's just getting home from work, but I know that's not the case. His bloodshot eyes and wobbly gait as he comes into the kitchen tell me I'm correct. He looks to where Abby is standing by the stove. "Whatcha making?"

"Spaghetti," Abby says softly as she stares down at the pot in front of her.

Her dad pounds his fist on the table and laughs. "My favorite."

"I know. That's why I'm making it."

I stand by Abby as she cooks, not really sure what I can do to help. I hope my presence will help enough. Her parents aren't mean or angry drunks, but they are still drunk... on a Wednesday night... expecting their teenage daughter to make them dinner. I honestly can't imagine what it feels like to be Abby. No wonder she spends so much time at our house and only has Marcus over here when her parents are out.

When she's done cooking the spaghetti and sauce, she combines them, then separates the meal into two bowls for her parents. She sits the bowls down at the table in front of them and motions for me to follow her into the family room. Even from the next room, I can still hear her parents slurping down their spaghetti, and the sound is nauseating.

Unfortunately, Abby must notice the look on my face because she moves her eyes to the floor. "I can't thank you enough for coming over here. I know it's far from a good time. They're fine... I guess. It's just hard to be alone with them when they get this drunk."

"You don't have to thank me. I'm glad I can be here for you." I put my hand on top of Abby's and squeeze. "If you don't mind me asking, though, why did you want me here instead of my brother?"

Abby continues to look away from me. “I know we’ve been together for a long time and your brother knows how my parents are, but I still don’t like him to see it. It’s embarrassing and I... Well, I worry if he sees it enough, he won’t want to be with me anymore. I know we’re young, but I’m so in love with your brother and don’t know what I would do without him and your family.”

I squeeze her hand once again. It makes me sad that she’s that scared of losing all of us. “I obviously can’t speak for anyone else, but I can promise, no matter what happens, I’ll always be here for you. I also know my brother, and he’s madly in love with you, so I don’t think you have much to worry about.”

“Thanks, Marjorie. You're the little sister I always wanted.”

## Page 23

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 6:38 pm*

“You’re the sister I always wanted, too.” I shake my head and laugh. “Well, the cool, big sister I always wanted. I already have the annoying little one.”

Abby laughs along with me. “Take it easy on Morgan. She’s wonderful, too. Your whole family is.”

“Do you want to come over? If Marcus isn’t home yet, you can hang out with Lydia and me until he gets home.”

“I should probably stay here and make sure they don’t do anything stupid to hurt themselves. They suck, but they’re still my parents.”

“Are you sure?” I hate the thought of leaving Abby here alone with them.

“Definitely. They’re harmless. They’ll pass out soon enough and then I’ll just go to bed, too. I’ll be fine.”

I take my phone out of my pocket to check for a text. “I still haven’t heard from Lydia. Want to watch TV or something until she texts me?”

“Sounds perfect, little sis.”

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It’s another two hours before Lydia texts me and in that time, just as predicted, Abby’s parents pass out.

When I get to my house, Lydia is waiting on the front porch for me. “You know you could have just gone in,” I shout to her as I get out of my car.

Lydia jumps off of the porch and walks over to my car. “And miss the opportunity to greet my bestie as soon as she arrives? Never.”

“Suck up.”

“You’re right. I am sucking up because I feel bad that I’m actually very tired and will probably fall asleep right when we get inside.”

“But my mom bought you snacks,” I say as if I’m offended.

“I take it back. I can definitely stay awake for snacks.”

Lydia can’t stay awake for much more than snacks, and less than an hour later, we’re lying in my bed together.

Lydia moves closer to me, throws her arm over my stomach, and rests her head on my chest. “Snuggles?”

“You’re so weird,” I say with a chuckle. “Maybe you should have gotten your snuggles from your other bestie.”

Lydia is weirdly silent for a minute before speaking again. “You know you’re my number one.”

## Chapter 11

\*Love Interest\*

I love being close to Marjorie. As I stand here listening to her talk, I wish I could be even closer. She has no idea that the note she left me, that I still haven't had a chance to read, is currently in my pocket.

"Well, have a good weekend. I'll see you on Monday." Marjorie fixes her ponytail then turns away from me.

I don't mean to watch her walk away, but I can't help it. She's so good-looking. It's honestly unfair how good-looking she is. And she doesn't even know it, even though she totally should.

Somehow, I have enough restraint to wait until I'm home to take the note out of my pocket and read it. As soon as I open it up, a smile comes onto my face.

Hey, you! Yesterday was such a long freaking day. It wasn't bad, just long. That's why I didn't have a chance to write back though.

I'm really glad you enjoyed my drunken ramblings. You don't have to feel bad about what happened AT ALL. It's totally not your fault. Honestly, I was an idiot. I should have known something was up.

I think it's AWESOME that you want to be a writer and can tell just from your notes that you would be an amazing one. What genre do you want to write?

I'm trying to think of something no one knows about me. This one definitely isn't as much fun as yours, but I'm super insecure. I act confident, but that's all it is. - an act. I always worry that I'm not good enough. Not pretty enough. Not smart enough. Not athletic enough. I have people telling me that I am, but there's a voice in my head that tells me I'm not. I'm worried I'm going to be one of those people who peaks in high school. What if ten years from now I'm sitting in a bar, talking about my glory days that no one wants to hear about?



## Page 24

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 6:38 pm*

Anyway, I'm sure the last thing you want to read is me complaining about stupid stuff as though I'm not extremely lucky. I have a great family. I have awesome friends. Now I have YOU. Life really is pretty great.

Back to you. Have you written anything (aside from school essays and beautiful notes)?

I hope you have the best weekend.

PS - You were my reason to smile yesterday.

I was her reason to smile. Me. I was Marjorie Freaking Madden's reason to smile. My heart can barely control itself, and I feel like it's going to beat out of my chest. I can't get the smile off of my face as I skip down the stairs to see my mom.

It surprises me to find her staring into the coat closet where we keep our nicest coats. As if that's not weird enough, she's wearing a knee-length black dress. That's definitely not the kind of outfit you wear to stay in. That must mean...

"Mom, are you going on a date?"

When she turns to look at me, there's a shy smile on her face. "Guilty."

I bounce up and down because I'm so excited for her. "Seriously? The dating app worked? I'm so excited for you. This is great."

"Actually..." She rubs the back of her neck as if she's nervous to say whatever is

about to leave her mouth. “It’s someone I’ve been talking to before this. We developed a little bit of a friendship, but I didn’t want to take it beyond that since I didn’t know how you would feel. Once I knew you were okay with it, I took the next step. I actually asked him on this date.”

Now I feel bad for not saying anything sooner. I always assumed she knew I would be okay with it. “That’s awesome, Mom. Who is it? Do I know him?”

“He and I decided we want to see how things go before we say anything. Sorry. I know we tell each other everything. I just don’t want you to get hurt in any way.”

“It’s not Dad, is it?” My heart beats rapidly in my chest.

“Hell no! Come on, honey. Really?”

We both laugh together and I bring my hand up to my chest. “You can’t scare me like that, Mom.”

My mom puts her hand on top of mine and pulls it from where it’s resting. “I know how badly what your dad did hurt you. I know that’s why you’re so afraid of letting people in. I can’t help but feel like it’s all my fault, and I refuse to put you through something like that again.”

“You didn’t put me through anything. That man who helped make me did. You shouldn’t feel bad.”

“You are wise beyond your years.” My mom drops my hands and grabs my face then places a kiss on my forehead. “Don’t forget to be a kid every once and a while though, okay?”

“Okay.” I draw out the word, which makes my mom laugh. Once she’s out of the

house, I call Bug. “My mom says she wants me to act more like a kid. Want to get drunk tonight?”

“Seriously?”

“Unless you don’t want to.”

“Oh, I definitely do. I’ll have my brother buy us stuff, and I’ll be right over.”

It doesn’t take long for him to get to my house and within an hour, we are both laying on my bedroom floor giggling like idiots. “I don’t even remember what we’re laughing at.”

“I think it was something stupid you said,” I say between laughter.

“Probably.” More laughter.

Suddenly, my mind goes to Marjorie’s laugh. I sigh at the thought of that beautiful sound.

“You’re thinking about your lover-girl, aren’t you?”

“She’s just so pretty and so nice and so hot and so cool.”

“You’re so screwed.”

I ignore his negativity and scramble up onto my feet. “I’m going to write her another note right now.”

“That’s an awful idea.”

I bring my hand to my mouth and giggle. “I know.”

### Chapter 12

Marjorie

My legs burn for the best reason. It’s the first day of basketball tryouts, and this is the day the coach weeds out the people not willing to work hard by absolutely killing us. There’s almost no shooting or passing drills, just lots and lots of sprints. I love it because it shows me the work I’ve been putting in to stay in shape in the offseason is paying off.

I have to admit that I also enjoy the sound of Samara scoffing every time I finish before her, which is literally every time. I thought she annoyed me before, but now that we are lab partners, it’s even worse. It actually makes me wonder if I would be better off with Felicity. I shake these thoughts from my head. Samara might be annoying and turn everything we do in class into a competition, but she’s not a bad person.

Jazmin walks over to me and throws an arm around my shoulder. “A bunch of us are going to Fairfield’s after we’re done here. Want to come?”

I raise an eyebrow at her. “You want me to go to work on a day I don’t have to be there?”

“It’s ice cream.” She says it as if I would be crazy to say no.

“Fine. I’m in.”

We all freshen up after practice then split up into a few cars to go to the ice cream shop. Somehow, I end up in a car with both Samara and Genesis. Luckily, Jazmin and one of the senior girls from the team that I like are both in there too.

When we arrive, Payton is working the outside window and Delilah is working inside. Frank and Eli are running between the two spots as they prepare the orders.

Jazmin puts her hands inside her sweatshirt pocket and nods toward the entrance. “I’m going inside. It’s too cold to be standing out here, especially with ice cream.” Everyone else follows her, but I stay outside so Delilah has at least one less order to worry about.

“How’s it going?” I ask Payton when I walk up to the window.

“Terrific. No one wants to eat their ice cream outside tonight, so I’m off the hook.”

I raise my hand. “Not completely.”

Payton smiles the sweetest smile and leans forward out the window. “And what can I get for you, Marjorie?”

I tap my chin as if I actually have to think about it, even though I get the same thing every time. “Small twist in a cone...”

“With rainbow sprinkles?” Payton asks before I can say it.

“Impressive.” I peek my head around Payton. “Can you do me a favor and check

who's working with me on Sunday?"

"Don't have to." Payton points to herself. "It's me."

I tilt my head to the side, because I'm surprised by this information. "I didn't know you worked Sundays."

"They can't find enough people to work weekends so Mrs. Fairfield asked me if I would do it."

"Taking one for the team, huh?"

"Something like that," Payton says with a laugh. She shouts my order to Eli and he quickly brings it over to me.

"Thanks, guys!" I take a long lick, loving the fact that Eli knew to add extra sprinkles, then wave goodbye to them. "I better get inside with the team, but I'll see you both soon."

As soon as I walk inside, Samara eyes up my ice cream and smirks and I can only imagine what's coming. "What's wrong, superstar? Can't handle more than a baby cone?" She holds up her cone that has more ice cream on it than any human should ever eat in one sitting.

Is she really trying to start a competition over who can eat more? Two can play this game. "Can't eat too much if I want to keep winning those sprints."

Samara smiles, but I can see her gritting her teeth and know I hit a nerve. Serves her right. I normally don't like being rude and would never brag in any other situation, but Samara was asking for it. I don't even feel bad. Okay... So, I feel a little bad. This isn't the person I want to be. She just brings out the worst in me.

I don't want to make a scene here with the rest of our friends, but I make a mental note to take the time to talk to Samara and come to some sort of truce. This has gotten old, and if we want the team to be as good as possible, we all need to get along.

## Page 26

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 6:38 pm*

We make it through the rest of our ice cream without a fight, drive back to the school, and all go our separate ways. When I get back, I do my homework, then open up the folder I now keep the notes from my mystery girl in.

I pull out my favorite note from her. There's been a few since this one, but when I need to smile, I always go back to it. As soon as I start reading, that smile comes right back to my face.

I've gone back and forth about whether to include the attached note or burn it so no one ever has to be subjected to it. If you're reading this right now, it means that for some god forsaken reason, I went with the first option. Since you let me see your drunk note, I thought I owed it to you to show you the note I wrote you while drunk. There is no longer any reason for you to be embarrassed by yours because mine is one million times worse. Enjoy, you're welcome, and I'm sorry.

Wazzup?!!!! I'm very legitimately drunk right now. I was thinking about you so I wanted to write you a note. I hope you don't think it's weird that I'm thinking about you. You just have a really pretty face. And hair. And eyes. And body. Pretty doesn't even cover it though. Beautiful isn't good enough for you either. We should make up a new word for you, because no one that already exists in any language could do you justice. You're MarMad. It's like beautiful, but a bajillion trillion times more. It's MarMad because your name is Marjorie Madden. Get it?

Is the room spinning or is it just my head from thinking of you? HA! I just made that up. Can you believe it? I should write a drunk pick up line book.

OH! You asked me if I've written anything. Approximately 500 first chapters, 300



second chapters, and 5.5 third chapters. How do people write full books? Like, damn. I want to write romance, but it would probably help if I knew anything about romance. How does the girl get the girl?

Welp, this has been sufficiently embarrassing. BYEEEE!

I stare at the note for a long time after I'm done reading it. I memorize the way each letter of every single word looks and imagine my mystery girl sitting at home writing it. I have no idea who she is or what she looks like, but I can still somehow picture it. Almost as if I'm connected to her in a way that transcends the physical world.

That's when it hits me. I have a crush on my mystery girl. It's different from the crush I had on Felicity. Felicity was always this unreachable ideal. Even when I thought she liked me, it always felt like I was floating above and watching someone else's life play out. It's not like that with my mystery girl. Instead of feeling like I'm a bystander watching my own life, my mystery girl makes me feel like I'm more me than I've ever been. It's a weird sensation and I can't fully explain it, but I like it... a lot. God, I really am in over my head.

I wish there was someone I could talk to. I need someone who couldn't possibly be connected, but that's impossible. I can't even talk to my family members since they probably know this mystery girl, even if they don't know that they know her. Now my head hurts.

I close my eyes to try to make my headache go away, but as soon as I do, my phone goes off. I open my eyes to find that I have a text from Thalia.

Party at my house on Friday. Be there, bitch

Before I can answer and politely decline since it's now officially basketball season, I get another text from her. Don't give me some lame excuse about basketball starting.

It's just practice. Your first game isn't for another three weeks.

There goes that excuse. How did you know that's when my game is?

I have your schedule printed, but stop changing the subject.

I again don't have any time to respond before Thalia sends another message. Pleaseeeee! I really want this time with you before you completely disappear into basketball land.

It surprises me how much Thalia wants me there, and I don't want to disappoint her. Fine. I'll come, but I can't drink. Deal?

One beer?

I laugh out loud. She's persistent. I'll give her that. Isn't my presence enough?

Of course it is. Promise to be my beer pong partner, and I'll let it go. I'll do all of the drinking for us. I just need you to do the winning.

Deal.

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When Friday night rolls around, the last thing I want to do is go to a party, but I promised Thalia I would so I don't really have a choice. As soon as I'm inside her house, Thalia pulls me over to the beer pong table. "Come on, basketball babe. I need you to help me win this."

I can smell the alcohol on her breath and can tell by how close she leans in to talk to me that she's very drunk already. I have a feeling this game isn't going to go very

well, but I'll do my best to carry the team.

When I line up to take my first turn, Thalia stands close beside me and puts her arm around my waist. "You got this," she whispers. Before pulling away to give me space to shoot, she runs her fingers up and down my arm.

Thank God I'm not drunk this time so I don't get the same thoughts I did the last time we played beer pong. That's the last thing I need. I refuse to fall for any more straight girls after what happened with Felicity.

I get lucky and sink my first two shots just like the last time. Thalia congratulates me by giving a sloppy kiss on the cheek. How long has she been drinking?

As we continue to play, this is Thalia's response whenever I make a shot. When we win the game, she plants the biggest and sloppiest kiss yet just inches from my mouth. As if that isn't weird enough, she leans close and whispers, "I've always wondered what it would be like to kiss a girl."

I act like I have a call because I know she's too drunk to tell I'm lying. I hold the phone to my ear and walk away from her. After a minute, Thalia makes her way over to where I'm now standing.

I act like I'm hanging up the call and shrug. "That was my sister. She's at a friend's house and needs a ride but can't get ahold of our parents. So, I have to go. I'm sorry."

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 6:38 pm*

Thalia pushes her lip out in a pout. “Aw. Okay. Thanks for helping me win beer pong, champ.”

She gives me a long hug, and I’m thankful she doesn’t try to kiss me again, even on the cheek. When I walk out of the house, I take a deep breath. Thalia was clearly very drunk, but that’s still not a situation I want to get myself into.

When I get home, all I can think about is writing another note to my mystery girl. Since I won’t be able to leave it on my locker until Monday and it normally takes a day or two for her to leave a note back, I know the response won’t be quick. But I also know just writing the words to her is going to make me feel better.

Hey there! It’s Friday night right now, but by the time you read this it will be Monday, so I hope you had a good weekend.

You asked me in a previous note whether I’ve gotten much hate for being gay. Honestly, I’ve been really lucky in that I haven’t really gotten any hate. I’ve had a few people “nicely” tell me they would pray for me, but that was the worst of it.

I’ll tell you one thing that does kind of suck about being one of the only out lesbians at school. I feel like I’m kind of a spectacle in a way. I used to think I was lucky because I was popular in spite of being gay. Now I wonder if I’m popular because I’m gay. I guess in a way it’s a good problem to have. I’m thankful people didn’t push me away after I came out. I just want to know that they like me for me and not because of who I fall for.

This is probably dumb to complain about. I just had a weird night. Thanks for letting

me vent to you though. I really appreciate it. I can't wait to hear back from you

As expected, just writing the note makes me feel better. I rip it out of my notebook and put it right into my backpack so I don't forget to take it on Monday. I'm not in the mood to do anything else so I close my eyes and let myself drift off to sleep.

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When I arrive at work on Sunday, I'm surprised to find Thalia waiting outside of the shop. "Craving ice cream for breakfast?" I ask. "You do know we don't open for another hour, right?"

Thalia holds up the Starbucks cup in her hand. "I knew you were working today, so I brought you a pick-me-up." She cringes as she hands it to me. "It's also an apology drink. I was so drunk on Friday night. I didn't mean to make you uncomfortable."

I know she means it. I can see the sincerity written all over her face. I figure there's no need to make her feel any worse. "I wasn't uncomfortable," I lie.

Thalia laughs and shakes her head. "Has anyone ever told you you're an awful liar?"

"A lot of people, actually." I grab the drink from her hand and take a long sip. "This is wonderful. Thank you."

"It's the least I can do." Thalia sighs. "I don't know why I was acting that way. Apparently, too many Redbull vodkas turn me into a total dude. A creepy dude at that."

"It's okay. Seriously." I think for a moment because there is something I want to know. "Can I ask you something though?"

“Of course.”

“Have you really always wondered what it’s like to kiss a girl?”

She throws her hand over her eyes. “Is that really what I said?” She parts her fingers slightly and stares at me through them. “I want to just because I hear girls are much better kissers, and I want to know if it’s true. Not because I’m actually interested.” As if realizing how that might come across, she moves her hand from her eyes to her mouth. “Shit. I didn’t mean it like that. I’m sorry. I’m really sticking my foot in my mouth.”

I put my arms in the air and laugh. “No harm here. I’m not interested either.”

It takes her a moment, but then she smirks at my jab. “Ouch. Thanks.”

“You kind of deserved it.”

“Touché.” She leans on her car and stares down at it as if she feels awkward now. “I really am sorry, though. I can’t say that enough.”

I shrug. “I think it just bothered me because it felt like my sexuality was a joke to you. Almost like I’m a joke.” I’m normally not this honest when things bother me. I let them roll off my chest to avoid drama. Something about writing that note to my mystery girl helped me gain the confidence to be real right now. And it feels good.

Thalia pushes herself off of her car and stands up straight. “Oh my God, Marjorie, it wasn’t like that at all. You’re amazing. I have so much respect for you and the fact that you came out so early. I’m such a jerk, but I’m really sorry. Forgive me?”

She sticks her arms out and I accept her hug. I feel so much lighter than I have the past twenty-four hours. “Of course I forgive you. I mean, come on, how will you win

beer pong without me?”

This finally makes Thalia laugh. “True. Well, have a good day.”

I lift up the drink she gave me. “I will now that I have this to get me through.”

When I walk into the ice cream shop, Payton is there, but Mr. and Mrs. Fairfield are nowhere to be found. “Where are the bosses?” I ask as I look around for them. It’s not like them to not be there on the weekends.

“Mrs. Fairfield was here a few minutes ago, but they’re going to something for one of their grandkids today, so it looks like it’s just the two of us for most of the day. She said we should stagger our lunch breaks and keep the outside window closed for the day. It’s the coldest day of the season so far, so she doesn’t think we’ll be too busy.”

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 6:38 pm*

“Works for me.” I go to the back of the shop and grab one of the stools that I know the Fairfields keep back there. When I come out carrying it, I notice Payton staring at me. “My legs are killing me from running a ton at basketball practice,” I explain. “They are trying to whip us into shape.”

“Makes sense.” There is a short awkward silence before Payton speaks again. “So, what’s new?”

“Not much.” When I think about my notes to and from my mystery girl, that feels like a lie. Everything seems new right now. “Life has been... strange... lately. A good strange, though.”

“Yeah?” A small smile parts Payton’s lips.

“Yeah.” I smile too, and the silence grows between us again. It’s my fault. I’m stuck inside my own head thinking about the girl that I know so well, yet don’t know at all. Or do I actually know her better than I think? What a mind fuck.

“Looks like there’s a lot going on inside your head right now.”

Payton’s voice pulls me from thoughts, but I shake my head. “No. I’m—” Wait a second. I’ve wanted to talk to someone on the outside, and Payton is exactly that person. She doesn’t go to my school. The only mutual friends we have are the people we work with at the ice cream shop. It’s actually perfect. That is, if Payton doesn’t mind listening. “Actually, can I talk to you about something?”

Payton perks up a bit at my question. “Of course. You can talk to me about anything,



Marjorie.”

I take a deep breath, because I know this is going to be a very long-winded explanation. “Well, I’ve been exchanging notes back and forth with someone at my school through my locker, and the thing is, I don’t know who it is. She doesn’t want me to know, and as much as I like what I’ve learned about her through the notes, I’m not sure if I want to know either. The thing is, she’s made it clear that we interact beyond these notes, and I don’t know the extent to which we do, but I do know there’s no one in my real, physical world that I have a crush on right now. There was one person, but that crashed and burned. I’m just confused how I clearly don’t feel the same connection when we’re physically together as I do when reading these notes. I’m afraid if I find out who the person is, the magic will be lost. But what if the magic’s there and I’m just missing what’s right in front of me?” I shake my head. “No. That’s crazy. That only happens in the movies. I don’t know. I’m just slowly losing my mind, but I also don’t think I care.”

Payton blows out a long breath as if she was holding hers the whole time I was rambling. “Wow. That’s... a lot. I’m really sorry. It sounds like a ton to have on your shoulders. Shit. I’m sorry. I’m also sorry I can’t seem to form words right now.” She laughs and it causes me to laugh along with her. She probably thinks I’m completely insane right now.

“You don’t have to be sorry. I might be confused, but this is also the happiest I’ve ever been. I’m really content with where I’m at.” Now, I’m the one to laugh first. “Even if it doesn’t sound like that.”

“Well, I’m glad. You deserve that.”

“Thanks. Now that I’ve aired my current life story to you, is there anything you need to get off your chest?” I point to the empty parking lot. “It looks like we have plenty of time.”

I'm not sure if Payton is looking at me or beyond me as she furrows her eyebrows.  
"Delilah?"

What about Delilah? "You want to get Delilah off your chest?"

"No." She points behind me.

I turn around in my stool and jump about five feet in the air when I see Delilah standing right behind me. I was so caught up in my conversation with Payton, I didn't even hear her come in. "What are you doing here? I didn't see your name on the schedule."

Delilah strips off her jacket and puts on her visor. "Mrs. Fields called and asked if I could come in since they aren't going to be able to at all. When she told me it was you two working, I thought it would be a fun girls' time."

"Girls' time it is then." I rub my hands together mischievously, because I know exactly how to make Delilah blush. I might not see her as anything more than a friend, but that doesn't mean I can't enjoy how cute she looks when her face turns red. "So, Delilah Howard, any guys from our school lucky enough to catch the eye of the smartest girl in eleventh grade?"

As predicted, her face turns the cutest shade of red. Before she answers, there is a chime indicating that someone is coming in the door. Delilah nods her head in that direction. "I better help them."

I smile to myself because she may have avoided the question, but she gave me exactly what I wanted.

Chapter 13

\*Love Interest\*

I'm in over my head. The longer this goes on, the more I feel like I'm living a double life. I'm starting to feel really guilty, but there's no turning back now. I know the notes mean a lot to both me and Marjorie, but I can't let her know who I am, so what am I supposed to do? All I can do is enjoy this and keep trying to convince myself that I'm doing the right thing. That I'm not a terrible person for playing one role in the notes and a completely different role in real life. I don't have any other choice. I had no way of knowing it would become this way between us.

I shake all of these thoughts from my head as I stare down at the newest note from Marjorie.

It's Thanksgiving day, which means I won't be able to put this note on my locker for you for another four days and probably won't hear back for five or six. I equally love and hate the wait. Okay... maybe it's not equal. I love talking to you, so waiting to hear back is torture. But when I find a note from you in my locker, it's totally worth the wait. I think the wait makes it that much more exciting.

Have you written more than a chapter yet? You know I'm going to ask you that in every single note. I don't care if it's annoying. This world deserves to see your words in print. You know? No, they actually don't. But YOU do. That's what really matters.

First game as a varsity starter in two weeks. I'm freaking out. I wish you could be there. Maybe you will. Will you?

Anyway, I'm freaking out. I've worked so hard for this and now this is my chance to prove myself. What if I mess up? What if I fall flat on my face or do something stupid that loses the game for us? I'm not sure if you know this or not, but our first game is against Griffin Hill. Of course. Even more pressure starting out with a game against our BIGGEST RIVALS. It's fine. I'm fine.

I hope you're having the greatest day. Tell me something about your Thanksgiving that I wouldn't already know.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 6:38 pm*

In the spirit of Thanksgiving, I want you to know how thankful I am for you

I stare at the note for a long time. Marjorie adds a heart to every note now, and my heart soars every time I see it. I rip a piece of paper out of my notebook and I'm about to start writing back when there is a knock on my bedroom door.

Before I can even stand from my desk, my mom walks in. She sits down on my bed and pats the spot next to her. "Can we talk?"

She sounds serious, and that worries me. "It depends. Is something wrong? If so, I don't think I want to know."

My mom smiles and shakes her head. "This is a good thing. At least, I think so."

"What's up?" I ask as I sit down beside her.

"So, as you know I've been on a few dates..." She says it slowly like she's talking to a toddler.

"Mom, you do know I'm in high school, right?"

My mom laughs. "You know, sometimes I think I forget that. There's times all I can see is that little girl, and then other times I swear you're more mature than me."

"So..." I say to remind her of the conversation she started.

"Oh yeah. Sorry. I got sidetracked there." She takes a deep breath. "Chuck and I

decided we are ready for all of us to get together.”

“All of us?” Does she mean the three of us or does Chuck have kids? I hadn’t thought of that before, but I guess it shouldn’t be surprising.

“Delilah.”

“What?”

My mom closes her eyes and shakes her head. “Sorry. I don’t know why I’m so nervous about this. You know Delilah Howard, right?”

“Yeah.”

“I’m not sure if you know this, but her mom died when she was very young. It was around the same time your dad left. Chuck, whom I’m dating—Chuck Howard—is her dad.”

I still don’t understand why my mom is so nervous to tell me this. “Does he treat you well?”

My mom stares down at my comforter for a few seconds and when she looks back at me, there are tears in her eyes. “So well. I honestly didn’t know it could be like this.”

I pull my mom into my arms and hold her tight. I hope the way I hold her makes it known how much I support her. My mom has dedicated her whole life to taking care of me and making sure that I’m happy. She’s way past due for her own happiness. “You couldn’t possibly understand how happy that makes me, Mom.”

“Really?” Her eyes shine through her tears.

“Really. I can’t wait for us to all get together.” Without meaning to, I move my eyes to my desk.

“I interrupted something, didn’t I?”

I focus my attention back on my mom and squeeze her hand. “It was totally worth it.”

She stands from the bed and gives me a kiss on the forehead. “Still, I’ll leave you be.” She’s just about at the door when she turns around one more time. “Tell Marjorie I said hello.”

I laugh as she closes the door behind her then head back over to my desk. When I sit down, the words come easily. They always do when it comes to Marjorie, though.

Happy (belated) Thanksgiving! I had a great day. I ate so much Turkey I threw up... no, seriously... that actually happened. My mom (who says hi by the way) laughed so hard that mashed potatoes came out of her nose. It was a messy day, but fun.

I haven’t written anything lately, but it’s kind of your fault. I’ve been too busy writing you notes to work on a story.

You’re going to do amazing in your basketball game. I have no question. Griffin Hill doesn’t stand a chance against you. Stop doubting yourself. You’re going to be the reason the team WINS. Not the reason they lose. And you’re not going to fall on your face (but even if you do, I’m sure you’ll find a way to make it look good).

The fact that you said you’re thankful for me made my whole day. That’s actually a lie. It made my year. I’m so thankful for you. You’re the light this dark world needs. Don’t ever stop shining.

PS - About your game... I'll be there

### Chapter 14

Marjorie

I can't believe it. My first game as a varsity starter is finally here. As I stand out on the court stretching my legs, Jazmin walks up to me and drapes an arm over my shoulder. "We've got this."

"Hell, yeah, we do." I put my hand up for a high five, which she readily accepts.

We are about to start our warmups, but I need to do something first. "Yo, Samara," I shout across the court. When she looks (or maybe I should say glares) over at me, I nod my head toward our bench. "Can we talk quick?"

She sighs but walks in that direction. "If we must."

She sits down, and I take a seat beside her. Her legs are bouncing up and down like mine so I know she's just as nervous as me.

"We need a truce," I say after a minute of silence. I've been meaning to talk to her about this for weeks, but every time I'm about to, she says something that pisses me off and I change my mind. It needs to be done though. We're teammates, and we need to work together if we're going to win this game. "I'm not sure why you hate me so much, but you need to push that aside. This game... this whole season... is really important to both of us, and we're not going to get anywhere if we can't work



together.”

“I don’t hate you.”

I scoff. Who is she trying to kid? “In what world?” I force a laugh to try to keep things light between us.

“This one, Madden. Sure, you drive me nuts, but it’s not because I dislike you. You’re so good at everything you do. I’m pretty sure you’re perfect. You drive me nuts in a good way. It causes me to push myself. Makes me want to do better. Does that bring out my competitive side? Hell, yeah. But, that’s only because competing with you forces me to be better.” She laughs and shakes her head. “I can’t lie. It does piss me off that no matter how hard I try, you’re still better than me, but that’s just more reason to work even harder. I refuse to let you be our best shooting guard.”

I didn’t expect to hear any of this, so now I feel completely stunned. “So, we’re cool?”

“Of course we are. Listen, everywhere else, you’re the competition and my biggest foe. We play the same position, and I have a need ingrained in me to be the best. But out there—” She points out at the basketball court where the other team has started to warm up. “We have a common enemy. With the two of us and Jaz, there is no way we’re not going to kick their ass. You don’t have to worry about that.”

“So, we’re good?”

“For now.” Samara stands up but turns around and sticks her fist out for me to bump it. “Let’s go make Griffin Hill our bitch.”

“Let’s do it.”

With that taken care of, I'm ready to go. As we do our shooting drills, the stands start to fill up. I tell myself not to focus on that, but I can't help it. My whole family is here and Jocelyn and Abby are also sitting with them. Lydia sits with a big group of our friends, all of them decked out from head to toe in our school colors. Even Frank, Payton, and Eli are at the game. They are sitting in a neutral zone since Payton goes to Griffin Hill. If someone didn't know any better, they wouldn't be able to tell since she isn't wearing any Griffin Hill clothes anyway. She probably doesn't want her school friends to think she's a traitor for sitting with the Capital Creek fans though, hence their spot away from everyone else.

All of the JV players are sitting in the row behind the varsity bench. Genesis smiles and gives me a thumbs up when she sees me looking over at them. I have to admit that I like her a lot more ever since she drove me home from the party that night. I still don't understand why she refuses to push herself, but to each their own. She hasn't tried to invite me to church lately, so maybe she's done trying to convert me now.

Coach calls us over to the bench and my heart rate picks up because I know that means it's time. He looks around at all of us as we huddle around him. "All right. For most of you, this is your first time starting in a varsity basketball game. After losing so many seniors last year, no one is expecting anything from us. It puts us in the perfect position to shock them. I have no question that this team can do just as well as the team from last year. You all just need to believe it. So, let's go out there and show them that Capital Creek doesn't need to rebuild. We're here. We're just as strong. We're not backing down. Let's do it." He puts his hand in and we all put ours on top of it. "Creek on three. One... two... three..."

We shout "Creek" all together and I hope it sounds as intimidating as I think it does. I shake out the last of my nerves and head out onto the court. It doesn't take long to find our rhythm, and by halftime, we are winning twenty-eight to twenty-two, eight of those points coming from me. All we have to do in the second half is keep our

lead, which is exactly what we do, winning the game with a score of forty-two to thirty-six. I end the game with thirteen points, which is more than anyone else on my team.

Lydia sprints onto the court as soon as the game ends and wraps me into a tight hug. “I always knew my bestie was amazing, but damn. You killed it, girl.”

“You really did,” my brother says from where he is standing behind Lydia.

Abby has her arm around his waist and is nodding enthusiastically. My sister and Jocelyn make their way up to us next, and Morgan pulls me into a hug that’s somehow even stronger than Lydia’s. “You were amazing. I don’t know if you heard us, but Joc and I were screaming so loud. I don’t think I’ve ever even heard Joc yell before, so you know you were killing it.”

Jocelyn’s face turns red and she stares down at the ground. I don’t know why she always seems to get so nervous around me. She’s known me forever at this point. “You did awesome. It was so cool to watch,” she says as she continues to look everywhere but actually at me.

My parents are close behind and congratulate me next, followed by a bunch of my other friends from school. As I’m finally making my way back to the locker room to change and get my stuff, I hear my name being called.

I look over to see Eli waving his hands at me. Frank is no longer with him, but Payton is. I smile when my eyes meet hers. In the few weeks since I opened up to her about my mystery girl, we’ve been talking more at work. It’s not that we didn’t talk before, but opening up to her brought us closer and it feels like there is a friendship forming there. There’s more to her than I realized.

I stop right in front of the two of them and place my hands on my hips. “Thanks for

coming, guys.” I focus my attention back on Payton. “Even if you were rooting for the losing team.”

“You lost?” Payton smiles and there’s a weird flipping feeling in my stomach. What the hell? Maybe I should have eaten more for lunch. I’m starving now.

Speaking of which... “Have you guys eaten yet?” I ask them. “I’m starving.”

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 6:38 pm*

“You want to get dinner with us?” Eli asks, sounding more surprised than I would expect.

I laugh as I nod. “Is it against the rules to hang out with work friends outside of work?” I point between the two of them. “Was my game the exception?”

Eli smirks. “Nah. We’d love to. Just surprised you don’t have plans with all your other adoring fans.”

I shake my head. “I’ve been too psyched up to make any plans. I couldn’t even think about eating before, but it suddenly caught up to me.”

Eli’s smile grows even bigger. “Lucky us.”

“You’re in too, Payton?” I ask since she’s been pretty quiet throughout our conversation.

“Of course.” She points her thumb at Eli. “I’m his ride home, so it would be pretty awkward if I said no now.” She laughs and a small snort escapes.

“I’m going to go get changed. Meet you out in the parking lot in ten or so?”

“Sounds great.”

By the time I get down to the locker room, most of the team is already gone. A voice cuts through the silence and catches my attention. “No, Mom, that’s okay. Don’t worry about it. I can just do homework or something until you get here.”

“Genesis?” I ask as I walk toward the voice.

Genesis looks up at me with a sad smile. “Hey, Marjorie, what’s up?”

“Just getting changed to go get some food with two of my work friends.” The conversation I just heard mixed with the sad look on Genesis’s face leads me to ask my next question. “Do you want to come with us? I could drop you off at home afterward if you need me to.”

“Really?” Genesis perks up. “If you don’t mind, that would be great. My car is in the shop so my mom was supposed to be picking me up, but she got caught up with something and isn’t able to get here for a bit. I don’t want to intrude though.”

“No intrusion.”

A sincere smile comes onto Genesis’s face. “Thanks. Seriously. It means a lot.”

“Just give me five, and we’ll head up.”

Genesis stays at the back of the locker room while I go up front to change, and when I’m done I yell back to her, and we head out to the parking lot together. Eli and Payton are waiting by Payton’s car, which is an older red Honda Civic.

I hold my keys up in the air and point to my car that’s a few down from hers. “I can drive, since I’m obviously more familiar with the roads around here.” I nod my head at Genesis. “This is Genesis. Genesis, not sure if you know Eli, but he’s in the grade below us, and this is Payton. She’s from the dark side, but we’ll try not to hold that against her. I work with both of them at Fairfield’s.”

Genesis smiles sweetly. “I’ve definitely seen you both there. My church youth group goes there like once a week in the summer.”

With the introductions complete, we decide to go to a small burger joint that's only a five-minute drive away. We make small talk along the way, and there's no awkwardness at all, which is surprising for this being such a random group.

Once we sit down to eat, that remains the case. "So, Payton, what made you start working at Fairfield's?" I ask before I take a bite of my burger. It's so good, I let out a soft moan without meaning to. I giggle and wipe the juice off of my face. "I know it's probably not too far from you, but I'm sure there's also stuff that's closer."

Eli raises his hand as he finishes chewing a bite he just took of his own burger. "That would be me. I got her the job."

"You guys knew each other before you started working together?" This is news to me. I had no idea.

Payton smiles at Eli, then back at me. "Unfortunately." She elbows Eli in the side. "I've been putting up with him for much too long."

The way they are talking makes me wonder if they're more than friends. They seem comfortable enough around each other to be. I can understand why they wouldn't want to make a big deal about it at work, but now that Payton and I talk more, I wonder why she wouldn't feel close enough to share with me. I'm really overthinking this. For all I know, they really are just close friends.

"Do you like Griffin Hill?" Genesis asks Payton, her voice showing genuine interest. She really is sweet. I think I need to be easier on her.

Payton shrugs. "It's fine. I kind of keep to myself. My teachers are cool though, and my classmates are nice enough."

This surprises me. I know Payton is quiet, but if she went to Capital Creek, I'm sure

she would be popular. The rest of the meal is a lot of fun, and I find out that on top of being nice, Genesis is surprisingly funny.

When we get back to the school, Genesis stays in my car while I get out to say goodbye to Payton and Eli. I give them both a hug and thank them for coming to the game.



*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 6:38 pm*

“You know...” Eli reaches into his pocket and pulls out his phone. “Now that we’re real friends and not just work friends, we should all exchange numbers. Well, Payton and I should exchange numbers with you. We already have each other’s, obviously.”

“That sounds great.” It really does. I had a lot of fun hanging out with the two of them and am excited by the prospect of spending more time with them outside of work.

Once we’ve exchanged numbers, I get back into the car with Genesis. “They’re really nice,” she says quietly as soon as I get in.

“They are. That’s the first time I’ve hung out with them outside of work. They’re cool.”

“I think this was the first time we’ve hung out outside of school and basketball too.”

I have to think about this since it seems strange that we wouldn’t have, but Genesis is right. It’s probably because she’s normally busy with church activities and doesn’t go to any parties. “Except when you gave me that ride home,” I remind her. “I still can’t thank you enough for that. I was having a weird night and needed to get out of there. That was clutch.”

“I felt bad because you seemed really upset, but I didn’t want to force you to talk about anything you weren’t comfortable discussing. When I got home, I prayed that whatever was bothering you would work itself out.”

Wow. “That’s super nice. I’m not really sure what I believe, but I still really

appreciate it.”

“That’s why I’ve invited you to church a few times.”

We’re going there? Weird. “What do you mean?”

Genesis stares out the window as she speaks to me. “I can’t remember if you were talking to me or if I overheard you talking to someone else, but a few years ago, you said you weren’t sure what you believed. That’s why I invite you to church. I thought maybe if you went, it would help you figure it out.” I’m silent as I try to process what this means, and Genesis must notice it. She turns her attention from the window over to me. “What’s wrong?”

Might as well be honest. “I always thought you invited me to church to help me pray the gay away.”

“What?” Genesis practically screams. “You really thought that?” Her voice is quieter now. “Shoot. I’m so sorry. That’s the opposite of what I was doing. My church is open and affirming.”

“Open and affirming?”

“The church is fully accepting of gay people. We don’t believe it’s a sin or anything. The most important thing to God is love and He wants us to have that love, no matter who it’s with.”

“I—” Honestly, I’m speechless. “I really had no idea. All this time, I thought you were trying to convert me.”

Genesis gasps. She honest to God gasps as if I just said the craziest thing in the world. “That’s the last thing I want.”

It feels like a weight has been lifted off my shoulders that I didn't even realize I was carrying. Tonight has been perfect, and I'm so happy right now. "In that case, the next time I'm off on a Sunday, I'll go to church with you."

"Really?" The way she says the word makes it sound like I offered to buy us tickets to see her favorite singer in concert, not go to church with her.

"Yeah. I'd really like it."

We are both silent for the remainder of the drive, but it's a comfortable silence I would never have expected with Genesis Brimstone.

When I finally get home, I feel like I'm buzzing. Between the game, dinner, and learning what Genesis really thinks of my sexuality, I'm practically floating. There is one person I want to talk to more than anyone else right now, though, so I get out a pen and paper and I start to write.

Hi!! I just got back from my basketball game and I can barely contain my excitement. I've been working so hard, but I still never expected it to go so well. I can't believe I was the high scorer. Something like that always felt like a pipe dream and now it's a reality... **IN MY FIRST GAME OF THE SEASON.** Sorry, I'm super pumped.

Can I admit something kind of strange? I don't know where you were sitting tonight, who you were with, what you were wearing, and whether or not you said something to me after the game, but I do know that you were there. Not because you told me you'd be there, but because I could feel you there. I could sense your presence. I think it's part of what helped me have such a good game. I wanted to do that for you. I really hope you enjoyed watching it.

I'm essentially intoxicated from the game, so I better go before I say something stupid (or at least more stupid than I already have). Thanks for being there

I look over the note once I'm done writing and decide I'm satisfied with it. I look around my room for something to do and contemplate bothering my siblings. I almost wish I had homework because I'm so jacked up from my game, I need something to do and sleep isn't an option. As if sensing my unrest, Jazmin texts me at that very moment.

I'm on such a high from that game. I need to talk to you about something. Could we get together now or are you too tired?

Even if I had been tired before, there's no way I would be now because her text has me intrigued. Of course. Do you want to come to my house or should I come to yours?

It only takes a few seconds to get a text back from Jazmin. I was actually hoping we could just go for a drive. I'll pick you up in 15?

Now I'm a little worried. Jazmin only asks to go on drives to talk when something is really bothering her. I hope she's okay. Sounds great! I'll be ready.

## Page 33

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 6:38 pm*

I tell my parents what I'm doing then wait downstairs for Jazmin to arrive. I'm pacing the floor thanks to my pent-up energy and worry over what she needs to talk about.

"What's up?" I ask as soon as I'm in her car, not able to take it any longer.

"I..." Jazmin puts her car in reverse and backs out of my driveway, the silence becoming more deafening with each second that passes. "I need to talk to you about something. Tell you something."

"Okay..." I let my voice trail off, hoping that helps lead her into whatever she needs to say. "Jaz, you can tell me anything."

She nods quickly. "I know. I know. It's just hard to say out loud sometimes."

I know exactly how that feels, so I don't push anything even though I'm dying to know. "No problem. I'm right here. Whenever you're ready, go ahead and say it."

Jazmin nods more slowly this time then stares straight ahead at the road. I'm not sure whether a few seconds or a few minutes go by before she finally speaks, but either way I feel like I'm about to burst by the time her words finally come out. "I like girls."

## Chapter 15

*\*Love Interest\**

"I like girls." Oh my God. I feel like I'm going to throw up. I can't believe I just said

that out loud. I can't believe I told her.

Delilah Howard is super nice, but I barely know her. I'm not sure what it is about our parents dating that made me word-vomit that, but here we are.

It all started a few hours earlier when the four of us went to dinner together. The whole night was actually perfect. It's obvious how happy Mr. Howard makes my mom, and he's a really nice guy that is easy to get along with. I can picture him filling in that father role that I've gone so long without very well. Shit. I guess this is why my mom didn't want me to meet him right away. So much for not getting attached. Anyway...

After dinner, Mr. Howard suggested we all go back to their house and watch a movie. It's not that I don't think he meant well, but the four of us sitting around the TV together like a family as they cuddle on the couch, seemed like a bit much for our first meeting. Luckily, Delilah must have felt the same way, because she said she didn't want to watch a movie and suggested the two of us hang out in her room instead.

Which brings us to the current moment. Delilah asked me if I had a boyfriend and as if I'm someone who's completely out to the world, I blurted out that I was gay.

Now, Delilah is staring at me with wide eyes. I really hope I didn't completely ruin the evening. When a smile parts her lips, I finally breathe again. "You know, I always kind of wondered."

"Really?"

Delilah shrugs. "There's a vibe."

I laugh cheerfully, feeling good that my third time coming out is going well. "Not

sure if other people are getting that vibe too, but just in case I am actually tricking them, could you keep this between us? Only two people know.”

“Of course.” Delilah crosses her heart as if we’re back in elementary school. I love it. She’s my type of person. “I would never.”

I’m happy when Delilah leaves it at that and doesn’t try to ask who I like. “What about you? Do you have a boyfriend? Or girlfriend?”

Delilah laughs and shakes her head. “I like guys, but even at the mention of a guy I start to turn red.” She points to her face, which is, indeed, turning red. “Exhibit A.”

“Don’t worry about it. I’m super awkward too. I would never even dream of telling a girl I liked her.”

“Is it nice, though?” Delilah stares down at her comforter and plays with a loose thread. “I mean... having your mom to talk to. My dad tries, but I feel like I could never talk to him about who I’m crushing on or dating. He would turn even more red than me.”

“It is.” I try to hold back my smile because I don’t want to make Delilah sad, but it’s hard when I talk about my mom. “My mom is my best friend. For a long time, all we had was each other, so that made us really close.”

“I understand that.”

I know she does. Probably more than most people. “For what it’s worth, I’m willing to share my mom. She’s a great listener.”

“Can I admit something?” Delilah finally looks up from the comforter and makes eye contact with me. Her eyes are heavy with something I can’t quite place. “I’m scared

of getting attached to your mom, mostly because after this one dinner, I think I already am. That probably sounds crazy.”

I don’t hold back my smile this time. It’s so nice to have someone who understands. “It doesn’t sound crazy at all. I feel the same way about your dad. My dad is a grade-A asshole, and from what I can see, your dad is everything he’s not. I think maybe that’s why our parents were worried about us all getting together. I think they knew.”

“Do you think they’re in love?”

“If not yet, then soon. They’re disgustingly cute together.”



*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 6:38 pm*

“They really are, aren’t they?” Delilah laughs and I laugh along with her.

I’m tempted to tell her that I’ve always wanted a sister, but that’s too much. I don’t want to scare the poor girl away with we’re going to be a big happy family talk.

The rest of the time flies by and before I know it, our parents are knocking on Delilah’s door saying it’s time for me and my mom to head home. I always thought it would be weird to see my mom be affectionate with someone, but when she gives Mr. Howard a kiss goodbye, there is nothing strange or uncomfortable about it. It’s easy for me to see already that the two of them are right for each other.

“So, what did you think?” my mom asks as soon as we’re in the car.

“I think your taste in men has increased immensely.”

My mom laughs, but I can tell she’s still nervous. “So, you really like him?”

“I love him, Mom.” I smirk at her. “I don’t think I’m the only one.”

“Let’s keep that between us for now.” My mom brings her finger up to her mouth in a shh motion.

I reach out and grab her hand. “I’m really happy for you.”

“I’m really happy too. I truly think...” My mom takes a deep breath then blows it out.

“I’m just really happy.”

“I know.”

We are both quiet for the rest of the drive home and I’m sure my mom’s mind is busy replaying the night just like mine is. It makes me think of my own person. Okay... so, Marjorie isn’t really mine, but in this world we’ve created with our notes, I can almost make myself believe that she is.

As soon as we get home, I say goodnight to my mom then go up to my room to write to Marjorie.

Hey! How are you? I hope you’re smiling right now. I know I am. Every time I write a note to you or read one from you, I can’t help but smile.

I can’t believe we’re only a few weeks away from Christmas. How crazy is that? Any big plans for Christmas break?

I can’t make this note long, because it’s late, and I still have some homework to do before bed. But I have one very important question. What is your perfect date? Think. Money, time, and space are limitless... What would you want to do?

I tried to think of what my answer would be, and I couldn’t come up with anything. I put no cap on it, and the only thing that comes to mind is a picnic in the park. lame, I know. I hope yours is better.

Have an amazing day/night/whatever time it is when you’re reading this. Keep smiling that beautiful smile

Thinking about a picnic with Marjorie has my heart beating extra fast. I wish what was happening between us wasn’t a fantasy. All I want is to make it real, but I know I can’t. At least once I hear about her date idea, I can imagine what it would be like to take her on it. As I drift off to sleep, Marjorie’s face floats into my mind.

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Two nights later, I'm back in my room reading the note that Marjorie wrote back to me. As expected, it's absolutely amazing. Honestly, she could probably say her perfect date involves spreading manure with our bare hands and I would somehow find it romantic, but luckily, her answer is much better than that.

Hey, you! Of course I'm smiling. How couldn't I when I get a note from you? You seriously don't understand how much your notes brighten up my day. I can't believe Christmas is coming up either!! I'm actually not overly excited for break because it means we won't be passing notes back and forth :( That's 2.5 whole weeks without any notes! Is it pathetic how sad that makes me?

Anyway, on Christmas Eve, we just hang at home. My sister, brother, his girlfriend, and I will most likely spend that day eating way too many Christmas cookies and watching a bunch of cheesy movies. It's perfect. I love it. On Christmas Day, we open presents in the morning, then go to my grandma and grandpa's house. Is there a Christmas tradition you have that no one else knows about? I'd love to hear about it (if you're willing to share).

Perfect date, huh? You really are asking the hard questions here. Before I answer I just want to say that I don't think your date sounds lame at all. A picnic sounds super romantic. I'm kind of like you, because even without a limit, the first thing that comes to my mind is spending most of the day at an arcade. It would need to have a bball shooting game obvi, so I can impress my girl with my skillz (totally kidding... Well, about the impressing part. I do love those arcade basketball games). After that, we would go out for milkshakes (food is optional, but always a plus). Oh! Just thought of something. We would drink the milkshakes outside while bundled under a blanket and looking up at the stars. After that, we would obviously jump in our private jet and fly to Paris to visit the Eiffel Tower.

I'll keep smiling as long as your notes keep showing up in my locker... no pressure

I sigh as I read her letter. I thought I was in deep before, but now I'm so deep there's no way I'll ever be able to dig myself out. I'm so screwed.

## Chapter 16

Marjorie

"So, now that I know that you're bisexual, that means we can talk about hot girls together, right?" I ask Jazmin as we sit in my car after practice one night.

It's been a few weeks since she came out to me, and I'm still giddy about it. Jazmin is the only girl I'm close to who also likes other girls. Or, at least, the only one I know about.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 6:38 pm*

“Obviously.” Jazmin points a finger at me as though she’s going to lecture me. “But our teammates are off limits.”

“You mean we’re not going to talk about how good-looking Genesis Brimstone is?” This is something I’ve taken notice of ever since I found she’s not trying to convert me. Her dark hair. That creamy skin covered with freckles. Those eyes that are as dark as the night. I can’t lie. Genesis is hot.

Jazmin scrunches up her nose. “Genesis? Really? Doesn’t she hate gay people?”

I slap the dashboard of my car as I laugh then wave my finger at Jazmin. “See, that’s what I thought too! But she doesn’t. Her church is accepting of gay people. So, if she tries to invite you after you officially come out to everyone, that’s why.”

Jazmin stares at me then lifts her eyebrow and smirks. “So, what you’re telling me is that Genesis Brimstone is off limits?”

“What do—?” Wait. She thinks I like Genesis? I quickly shake my head back and forth. “I don’t like Genesis. We’re just friends. In fact, I’m going to church with her before work on Sunday.”

“If you say so,” Jazmin says with a teasing tone that makes me want to slap her. She is so far off.

“I do say so.” I turn to face her more fully. “Now come on. I admitted who I find attractive. It’s your turn.”

Jazmin looks down at her hands then back at me. “Don’t judge me for this one, okay?”

I put both hands in the air. “Never.”

“Well, I know she’s obviously younger, but I think your sister’s friend, Jocelyn, is adorable. She’s got that whole shy, quiet thing going for her. It’s so cute.”

My smile widens at this news. “She’s also definitely gay. I guarantee it. She sets off like every gaydar alarm.”

“Yeah. Gay with a huge crush on you.” Jazmin playfully shoves my shoulder. “You must be dense if you don’t realize that.”

Consider me dense, then. There’s no way this is the case. “Absolutely not. Jocelyn is like a second little sister to me. I’m sure she feels the same way since she doesn’t have a sister. You’re just mistaking her looking up to me as a crush.”

“Okay, Mar, whatever you say.”

“You just let me know if you ever want me to work my magic and set that up. Once you’re both out, of course.”

Jazmin laughs. “I’m good. I don’t actually even know her other than the few interactions we’ve had at your house. I just think she’s cute. Kind of like you with Genesis.” It’s clear that Jazmin still doesn’t believe that I’m not actually interested in Genesis.

“Anyway, it’s officially Christmas break. Any plans?” I ask to change the subject.

Jazmin shrugs. “Nothing big. We better be hanging out.”

“We will—every day at basketball practice.”

Jazmin rolls her eyes while I laugh. “You know what I mean. I don’t want my only human contact to come at basketball practice.”

“Is your whole family going away for Christmas break?” I joke.

“No, but they don’t count. I’m not even convinced that the twins are human.”

That’s true. Jazmin’s ten-year-old sisters are crazy. Luckily, since they can’t sit still, most times when I’m over there, they are out with her dad somewhere.

“Well, I promise we’ll hang out.”

“Good.” Jazmin sticks her fist out for me to bump. “I better get home. I’ll see you on Monday.”

“See you on Monday. Don’t worry, I’ll put in a good word with Jocelyn for you.”

“Don’t you dare.” Jazmin flicks me off as she closes the door.

The happiness I feel as I drive away is unmatched. I’m excited for a basketball-free weekend. I’m also surprisingly looking forward to church with Genesis followed by work with Payton. Life is good.

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*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 6:38 pm*

Church is actually nice. I'm not ready to run out and buy myself a Bible, but it's enjoyable enough. Afterward, Genesis offers to give me a ride to work since she took me to church. I figure I can have Marcus pick me up after work, so I gladly accept.

I study Genesis while she drives. "Can I ask you something?"

"What's up?"

"Why did you ask to stay on the JV team?" It's something I've been dying to know, and I finally feel comfortable enough with Genesis to ask.

Genesis is silent for a minute as she appears to contemplate this question. "I like basketball because I like being part of a team, but I'm not willing to dedicate my whole life to it like some of you are. I think it's really cool how much work you put into it, but my main focus is my faith. I didn't think it would be fair to possibly take a spot from someone who puts in all of that hard work." She laughs and shakes her head. "Not saying I would. You guys are all much better than me. I don't know... it just seemed right. Plus, I really do like getting to be a role model to the younger girls. At least, I hope that's what I am."

"Makes sense." And it surprisingly does to a certain extent. I personally can't imagine not putting my all into basketball, but I think it's cool that Genesis doesn't want to take opportunities away from someone else.

The rest of the drive goes quickly and soon Genesis is dropping me off at work. I grab my extra work polo and visor out of my work locker then head to the bathroom to change.



When I come out, Payton is standing by the inside window and the stool from the back is next to her. She pats the stool. “Figured you would probably want this. You know, with basketball season in full swing.”

Even though the ice cream shop is always freezing, a slight warmth spreads throughout my body from her sweet gesture. “Thank you. That was really kind.”

Payton shrugs as if it’s no big deal. “You would do the same for me. You know, if roles were reversed.”

“I definitely would.”

We both stand there staring for a few seconds, and Payton looks like she wants to say something but doesn’t. I feel like I want to say something else but also have no idea what. Instead, I clear my throat and take a seat on the stool.

I take a look around at the empty shop. “Just us again today?”

“Mrs. Fairfield will be here later, but you’re stuck with me for now.”

“Definitely not stuck.” I clear my throat again as I think of what to say. “So, you know the girl from school I’ve been passing notes with?”

“Of course. Everything okay with that?”

“Oh yeah, definitely,” I answer quickly. “This is going to make me sound really pathetic, but I’m just having a hard time because we’re on Christmas break now, so I won’t get to talk to her for the next few weeks. At least through notes. I guess I’ll probably talk to her in person without knowing it, but...” I let out a low groan. “Sorry, it’s all just very confusing.”

“No, I’m sorry. Are you okay with it? The not knowing thing? I know you said before you didn’t want to know, but now you seem really bothered by it.”

“No, I am fine with it. It’s just weird to wrap my head around, you know. I feel like I’m crazy that I don’t want to know though.”

Payton nods slowly then looks toward the ceiling and bites her bottom lip as if she’s deep in thought. “I think it’s easy to get lost in a world where you don’t have to face reality.” She brings her eyes back to mine. “But I don’t think that’s a bad thing.”

“Do you wanna hang out over Christmas break?” I ask before I even know what I’m saying. “I thought it could help keep my mind off things. And then if I need to talk any of this out, you’re there. Not that that’s the only reason I want to hang out with you. I had a lot of fun with you and Eli after my basketball game. I just... I thought we could do that again.” Why am I rambling so much right now?

“Eli and I are going to the mall on Wednesday to do some last-minute Christmas shopping. Do you want to come?”

“That sounds awesome! I have basketball practice Wednesday morning and a game on Thursday, though, so I can’t do it too early or too late.”

Payton smiles sweetly. “Lucky for you we were planning on a late-afternoon trip.”

“Perfect! I’ll meet you there.”

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At the end of basketball practice on Wednesday morning, I feel like I could do fifteen more sprints around the gym because I’m so excited to go shopping with Eli and Payton. I can’t explain why. I think I’m just ready for a change from the same old

things, and spending time with new friends—it's the perfect change.

“What are you up to today?” Genesis asks as I gather my things.

“Going home to eat lunch then going to the mall later this afternoon for some last-minute Christmas shopping. Want to come?” Genesis had fun the last time she hung out with me, Eli, and Payton, so I feel like she would enjoy this.

“I have youth group, but thanks for the invite.”

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 6:38 pm*

“Did you say last-minute Christmas shopping?” Samara asks as she walks over to join us.

“Yeah. Wanna come?”

“Definitely. Who’s going?”

“Me, Eli Dubbs, and Payton Benner.”

Samara scrunches up her nose. “I know Eli, but not Payton. Who is she?”

“I work with her at the ice cream shop. She goes to Griffin Hill.”

Samara shakes her head so hard and fast that I swear it might fall off. “Nevermind. I’m not hanging out with the enemy,”

My blood boils from Samara calling Payton the enemy. How dare she when she doesn’t even know her? “Payton’s actually really nice.”

Samara takes a step back as if she’s afraid of me and puts her hands in the air. “Whoa. Chill. I didn’t mean anything by it, I promise. It was a joke. I just thought maybe the two of us could go. You know... team bonding and stuff.”

I cross my arms over my chest. “I already made plans with Payton and Eli.”

Samara smiles a crooked smile. “You said that’s later this afternoon.” She must realize I’m still pissed, because her face becomes serious. “I really am sorry for what

I said about your friend. I was just kidding. I didn't think it would upset you so much. I really wanna spend some time together... just the two of us... if... if you're down. I'll make up for my douche comment by taking you out to lunch first. Please." She brings her hands up in a praying motion.

I smile in spite of myself because she looks so ridiculous. "You had me at lunch."

We decide to go to a pizza place inside the mall, and Samara pays, as promised. We make small talk, which is surprisingly nice. After finishing the last bite of her pizza, Samara wipes her mouth, throws down money for a tip, then jumps to her feet. "Want to go to the arcade? There's a basketball game. We can find out once and for all who the best shooter is."

I'm definitely not backing down from this. I jump to my feet as well. "You're on."

Ten dollars later, we're still playing since Samara is pissed she hasn't won yet. I think about letting her win just so we can stop, but I know I would never hear the end of it.

"I thought you had Christmas shopping to do," I say as I touch the money in my pocket, praying I can save the rest of it for more important things.

Samara shrugs. "I'm all done. I just wanted to hang out."

"But why?"

Samara tilts her head to the side, and I have to admit it does make her look incredibly cute. "What do you mean?"

"You hate me. I know you claimed you don't, but you don't do a very good job of showing it."

Samara's smile dips into a frown and she drops her eyes to the floor. "I'm sorry." She rubs at the back of her neck. "I'm really bad at this."

"Bad at what?" I truly have no idea where she's going with this.

"Friendship. Hanging out with someone who's clearly cooler than me."

She thinks I'm cooler than her. I smile and push my shoulder against hers. "Well, you can start by saying that again."

"What? That I'm bad at friendship?"

"No. The other part." I grin and wiggle my eyebrows.

Samara groans, gaining the attention of the two other teenagers in the arcade. "Fine. You're cooler than me."

"Thanks. I don't actually think that's true, but it's nice to hear."

Now Samara looks up at me, and instead of the cockiness that I'm used to seeing, there are tons of questions in her eyes. "You truly don't realize that you're the coolest girl in our grade? Probably in the whole school?"

I shake my head. "I'm just nice to people."

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 6:38 pm*

A smirk finally returns to Samara's face. "You make it sound like that's so easy."

I kick at her foot with my own. "It is. Most of the time, at least. Some people make it harder," I tease.

"I'm sorry. I honestly can't promise I'll get any better, but I can try."

"That's all I ask. Just like Coach."

Samara cackles now. "Yeah, right. Mr. We-Won-By-Twenty-But-I'm-Still-Going-To-Make-You-Run-Until-You-Puke."

"Yeah, that sucked, right?"

"Royally."

This launches us into a conversation about things we like and don't like about Coach and eventually leads to an array of other topics. The time goes by quickly and before I know it, Samara is saying goodbye so I can meet up with Eli and Payton.

Much to my surprise, she wraps me in a tight hug. "I really am sorry," she says when she pulls away. "It probably doesn't seem like it at all, but I never meant to make you feel like anything less than amazing."

Before I can respond, she walks away, and as I watch her leave, I can't help but wonder what the hell that was all about.

I don't have much time to think about it because my phone rings with a call from Payton.

"Hey! Are you guys here?" I ask when I pick up.

"Yeah. Well, I am. Eli bailed on us."

I can't be sure, but I'm almost positive she sounds annoyed about that. I'm not sure if that's because she really wanted Eli here or because she didn't want to be stuck alone with me. For some reason, the thought of it being the second one, makes me extremely sad.

"We can still have fun though, right?" I hope my voice doesn't sound too desperate.

"Oh, yeah. Definitely. For sure. No doubt."

"No doubt," I tease. I can't stop the smile that comes to my face. Has Payton always been this awkwardly cute? I realize I haven't said anything in at least thirty seconds, so I clear my throat to make sure she knows I'm still here. "So, where should we meet?"

"By Santa Claus?"

"Sounds good. I'll be right there."

As I walk up to the area where Santa Claus is sitting, I see Payton already standing there. She's wearing dark jeans and a bright green Griffin Hill hoodie. I can't say I'm a fan of the hoodie, but I have to admit it looks really nice on her. I've always liked how she looks in her Fairfield Family Freeze polo, but she looks even better in jeans and a sweatshirt.



I don't think she notices me so I shout her name and wave my hand in the air. When she looks over at me, a shy smile parts her lips. I walk over and awkwardly put my hands into my pockets because I'm not sure what to do. I always greet my close friends with a hug, but I'm not that close to Payton. Or am I? She knows something about me no one else does.

"So, hi," I say as I rock back and forth on the balls of my feet. Why am I acting like this?

"Hello." Payton waves her hand at me and looks just as awkward, which is oddly comforting.

"We're being really weird, aren't we?" I ask with a laugh.

Payton smiles, her face turning the slightest bit red. "Sorry. I don't hang out with many people outside of school and work, so this is different for me."

"You're fine. It's not only you. I'm just trying to figure out what's wrong with me right now. I don't normally get shy around pretty girls." Shit. Way to make things even more weird, Marjorie.

"Oh. That's really nice of you to say." Now, her face turns even more red and I worry I made her uncomfortable.

"I'm sorry. I promise I'm not hitting on you or anything. I think... Ah, I think I'm just being weird because you know this one part of me that no one else knows. It's just a strange feeling, if that makes any sense."

Payton shakes her head. "Yeah. Of course. It makes perfect sense."

I bite my bottom lip and chuckle. "Are you sure? Because your words and that head

shake are saying two different things.”

## Page 39

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 6:38 pm*

“Did I shake my head?” Payton laughs with me. “I don’t know why I did. It’s seriously cool, and I completely understand.”

“Awesome.” I clap my hands together. God knows why. “Who are you shopping for?”

“Delilah.”

“Oh! I didn’t realize you two were that close.” Am I jealous? What the actual fuck, Marjorie? Chill out. “That’s cool.”

Payton shrugs. “We’re not super close, but I thought it would be nice. What about you?”

“Just my brother and sister. I never know what to get those two idiots.”

“I guess we better start looking then, huh?”

The air seems to get less thick around us as we begin to shop and soon all of that initial weirdness is gone. Once we have our gifts bought, I look at my phone and find that it’s already 6:30. No wonder my stomach is doing this weird flipping thing. “I can’t stay out super late because I need to get sleep for my game, but do you want to get dinner?”

“Only if we can get those burgers we got last time. Those were heavenly.”

I smile wide, because everything about that sounds perfect. “You’re speaking my

language.”

“So, what’s it really like at Griffin Hill?” I ask when we are at dinner. “I feel like you never really talk about school.”

“There’s not much to say. It’s school. I go, and I learn. Then I come home. Or go to work.”

I take another bite of my burger and chew it down before speaking again. “What are your friends like?”

Payton stares down at her burger, and I worry that I struck a nerve. “You pretty much know all of them. My classmates are just that. Classmates. I don’t really hang out with them outside of school.”

“That’s so crazy to me. You’d be so popular at Capital Creek. You’re pretty. You’re nice. Easy to talk to. My friends would love you.” I stop there because I feel like I’m starting to ramble.

Payton’s face turns that same light shade of red that it did at the mall. “You’re just saying that to be nice.”

“I would never say something just to be nice.”

Payton laughs and gives me a doubtful smile. “Oh, come on. You’re Marjorie Madden. You’re, like, the nicest person I know.”

“Really?” I don’t know why this information makes my whole body warm up, but it does.

“Yeah.” Payton’s response is soft and almost breathless. We stare at each other

silently before Payton looks down at her watch. “We better finish these burgers. You need to rest for your game.”

“Speaking of my game...” I take a deep breath as if I’m about to ask a girl to prom or something. “I know Capital Creek is your rival, but any chance you would want to come to my game tomorrow?”

“Really?”

“Yeah.” I point to her sweatshirt. “Just don’t wear that.”

“Maybe you could bring something for me that I can wear.”

When I realize I’m wearing my Capital Creek Basketball hoodie, I take it off and wave it at Payton. “Trade me.”

She points to her sweatshirt. “You want to wear this?”

“Only because I was an idiot and didn’t wear a coat in the middle of winter, so I’ll freeze if I don’t.”

“Wouldn’t want that.” Payton takes off her hoodie and hands it to me, grabbing mine at the same time.

When we say goodbye, I do give her a hug and I don’t let myself overthink it, especially since it feels much better to be in her arms than it probably should.

As soon as I’m in my car, my phone starts to ring with a call from Lydia. “What’s up, bestie?”

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 6:38 pm*

“I miss you,” she pouts. “I need best friend time.”

“Well, are you coming to my game tomorrow?”

“Obviously. What kind of question is that, biotch? I’m your biggest fan.”

“Let’s hang out afterward. Just the two of us. I could use some best friend time, too.” My mind goes to Christmas, which is only a few days away. “And you’re still coming over for a bit on Christmas Eve, right?”

“Again, obviously.”

“Didn’t know if you would be spending it with your other bestie,” I joke.

“I’m hanging out with him later in the day on Christmas.”

“Ouch.” I bring my hand to my chest in mock offense, even though I know she can’t see me. “He gets Christmas Day and I just get Christmas Eve?”

“That’s only because you’re busier on Christmas. Take it easy on me, okay? My therapist says I need to spend time with assholes like both of you on holidays to help with my daddy issues.”

“I thought you dated all those guys to help with your daddy issues.” I laugh so Lydia knows I’m kidding, which I’m sure she realizes. We always joke around like this.

“No. I date so many guys because of my daddy issues. Not to help them. Plus, I’m

done with that. I'm sick of dating and hooking up with people I don't like and never could."

"Aw, I'm proud of you." I'm no longer joking. This really is a big step for Lydia.

"Thanks, boo. I gotta go, but I'll see you tomorrow."

When I get home and walk inside the door, Morgan immediately jumps up off the couch and practically runs over to me. "I need to talk to you."

"Where's the fire, little sis?"

"Stop joking around. This is important."

I can tell by her voice, it really is, so I stop laughing and look at her with a straight face. "What's going on?"

"A friend of mine just came out to me today, and I want to know the best way to support her. Obviously, I'm cool with it, and it's not like I don't know how to act around lesbians. Thanks to my cool lesbian big sister. But I just want to make sure I'm doing what a friend should do. What did you expect from your friends, or at least, wish they would have done?"

"First of all, don't use phrases like 'It's not like I don't know how to act around lesbians.' It sounds like we're aliens or something. We're just people. Treat her the same way you'd treat anyone else. Make sure she knows she can talk to you if she needs to, and then talk to her the same damn way you always have. Except, instead of asking if she likes any guys, ask if she likes any girls. Also, give her some time, but once she's more comfortable with things, tell Jocelyn that I know someone who thinks she's cute."

Morgan shakes her head. “I didn’t say it was Jocelyn.”

Now, I do laugh. “You didn’t have to.”

## Chapter 17

\*Love Interest\*

Christmas is definitely different this year. It starts out with my mom and I exchanging gifts as usual, but then we go over to Delilah and Mr. Howard’s house. After exchanging gifts with them, we all watch a Christmas movie together. My mom and Mr. Howard cuddle on the couch, while Delilah and I spread out across the floor. I miss half of the movie because we are all joking around and laughing together. It’s not a big deal since it’s just a Hallmark movie, which isn’t hard to follow anyway. Plus, this feels right. Now I understand what holidays are supposed to be like. It’s almost like having a whole family. It’s not that I’ve been unhappy with just my mom, but now I feel complete. I try to shake these thoughts from my head. Don’t get attached. Don’t get attached. I’m starting to worry how I’ll react if something happens between my mom and Mr. Howard. I’m scared to get too happy. With comfort comes expectations, and with expectations comes disappointment.

When we get back home, I have about an hour before Bug is supposed to come over, so I sit down at my desk to get all of my thoughts onto paper. In the past, I would have written this in my journal, but instead, I pull a piece of blank paper out of my notebook and write to Marjorie.

Merry Christmas! I know you won’t get this for over a week, but I still wanted to write to you. When there’s something I need to talk about, you’re the person I think of to talk to. Today was weird... but not in a bad way. It was weird as in different, but in the best way possible. It was probably the best Christmas I’ve ever had, and it’s not even over yet.



Do you ever get scared when things are going too well? Or is that just me? I try not to let myself get too caught up in the happy times, because I always worry that if I do, they're going to get ripped away from me. My brain tells me if I care about something too much or hold it too tightly, it's going to fall apart. I wish I didn't think that way. I'm pretty sure it's kept me from getting things I want.

I don't know. Now I'm just going on and on, and you're probably so confused because you understandably have no clue whatsoever what I'm talking about.

Anyway, I hope you had a great Christmas with your family. Do you have any fun traditions? Here's something I've never told anyone because it's so weird. On Christmas Eve, my mom and I each hide a real pickle (in a ziplock bag) somewhere in the Christmas tree. We do it one at a time, then time how long it takes for each of us to find it. Whoever takes longer has to drink the whole jar of pickle juice. Confession? Sometimes I lose on purpose because I just really love pickle juice, so it's not like it's actually a punishment. Not sure if I should have just admitted that, but oh well. I'm happy. This is the happiest I've ever been. That scares the shit out of me. I already rambled on about that once though, so I won't do it again.

There was just a knock on my bedroom door. I better go. Miss you

## Page 41

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 6:38 pm*

I'm not really sure why I say "miss you" when I just saw her, but I miss this side of her. I miss the side that sees something more in me. I miss her letters.

Before I can get up to open my door, Bug bursts through it. "I was trying to be polite, but I could have freezed out there."

"In the hallway?" I roll my eyes at him.

"Let me guess—writing a note to your girlfriend?"

I quickly shake my head. "She's not my girlfriend."

Bug sighs as he sits down on my bed. "She could be."

"You literally have no idea what you're talking about."

"Whatever." Bug laughs and bumps his shoulder against mine. "So, how was your Christmas?"

"It was really good."

"Like the best you ever had?" Bug smiles knowingly.

"You know I don't like to think like that."

Bug is the one person who actually understands. I don't even talk to my mom about it because I don't want her to somehow blame herself. Which she absolutely would.

“Well, maybe you should start.” He stares at me with a serious look on his face that I normally don’t see from him. “Seriously. You’re the most amazing person I know, and you deserve all the best things. It’s about time you start believing that.”

“It’s not that I don’t believe it. It’s just...”

“You don’t think good things can happen to you.”

“Can you blame me? I run into my dad a few times a year, and he looks right past me. He treats me like just another stranger he’s passing on the street.” I scoff as I think about it. “Worse, actually. I’m sure he smiles at strangers.”

“You can’t let that prick get to you. If you do, he wins. Do you really want to let him win?”

“Never,” I say with a snarl. The last thing I want is for that asshole to win anything.

“Good. The best way to win is by being happy. I think it’s about time you do that.”

I nod slowly as I take it all in. It’s so much easier said than done. “I will be. Well, I am.”

“Wait a second. What did you just say?” Bug puts his hand up to his ear and smirks.

“I said ‘I am,’” I answer quietly.

“You are what? Spell it out for me, please.”

From the way Bug is staring at me, I can tell there’s no way I’m getting out of this. “I’m happy,” I say in a normal tone. When he continues to stare with both eyebrows in the air, I raise my voice. “I’m happy, okay? H-A-P-P-Y happy!”

“Damn. Your therapist is going to be so proud of you.”

I laugh and shake my head at him even though I know he’s right. “She really is.”

“For what it’s worth, I’m proud of you, too. Next step is telling Marjorie that you’re the person behind the notes.”

“You know I can’t do that.”

“I don’t know that.”

I groan because we’ve been over this multiple times. “I told you. She doesn’t—”

## Page 42

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 6:38 pm*

Bug puts up his hand to stop me. “I know what you’ve told me. I’m just telling you that you’re wrong.”

“Well, let’s agree to disagree. I’ve already made some big steps today. Don’t you think?”

“Now that we can agree on.” Bug puts his arm around my waist and I rest my head on his shoulder. At least, no matter what happens, I know I’ll always have a happy place right here with him.

## Chapter 18

Marjorie

“Do you think I could have some friends over on New Year’s Eve?” I ask my parents a few days before as we’re finishing up dinner.

“You’re not going to Thalia’s?” my brother asks.

“I’m not going to drink during basketball season, so it will probably just be annoying. I was going to see if some of the girls from the team want to come here instead.”

“I take it by that you mean you’re not going to drink because you’re not twenty-one, right, dear?” My dad uses his best stern voice, but the smile on his face tells me he’s kidding. Our parents realize we’re going to drink, so as long as we’re not stupid about it, they don’t really care.

“Obviously,” I joke. “Seriously, though, is it cool?”

“One less kid we have to worry about all night?” My mom laughs. “I think it’s a great idea.”

Morgan raises her hand. “Make that two. I didn’t want to do anything either, so I’ll just tell Jocelyn to come here.” She looks at me. “You don’t mind, do you?”

“Why would I mind? The more the merrier.”

“In that case, I’ll tell her she can bring her one guy friend if she wants to. They’re super tight, but I’ve never met him because he goes to a different school.”

“Griffin Hill?”

Morgan furrows her eyebrows. “No. Keaton Academy. It’s a private school. Why?”

“Oh, I think I’m going to invite someone who goes to Griffin Hill, so I was just curious.”

“A girl someone?” Morgan now raises one eyebrow and smirks. “Is this whoever you got the sweatshirt from that’s hanging on your desk chair like a trophy?”

Why is she being so weird about this? Does she actually think there is something going on with me and Payton? But, why? “It is a girl, and she’s the one whose sweatshirt I have, but she’s just a friend. We work together.”

“Well, I’m still going to Thalia’s,” Marcus says, cutting off our conversation.

For once, I’m thankful for him being in his own world and not listening to what’s going on around him. I’m not sure why Morgan thinks I like Payton, but there’s no

reason for us to get caught up in a crazy conversation.

“I bet Lydia is still going to want to go to Thalia’s too,” Marcus adds.

“That’s fine. Lydia is allowed to do what she wants.”

Marcus shrugs. “I just thought you would want to be with your best friend.”

When dinner is over, I text some girls from the basketball team, as well as Lydia, Payton, and Eli. Just as Marcus predicted, Lydia says she’s going to go to Thalia’s because she wants to drink, but Jazmin, Genesis, Samara, Payton, and Eli all say they will come. I can’t decide if I’m happy that Samara is coming. I invited her to be nice since I’m trying to get along with her better. While she was pretty fun to hang out with at the mall, I’m still weirdly pissed over the comment she made about Payton. I’m now worried about how she’ll act around her at my house. I decide if she’s not nice, I’ll ask her to leave. I’m not going to let anyone treat someone else poorly at my own party.

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On New Year’s Eve, people start to show up at my house late in the afternoon. Samara is the first to arrive, which I’m happy about because that means I can make sure to let her know Payton is coming so she doesn’t make a scene when she gets here.

“Who’s Payton?” Samara asks after I tell her.

Seriously? “She’s my friend who goes to Griffin Hill. The one I believe you referred to as the enemy.”

Samara laughs and rolls her eyes. “Are you still stuck on that? I said I was sorry.”

She crosses her hand over her heart. “I promise to be nice.”



*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 6:38 pm*

Her promise comes just in time since there's a knock at the door and when I yell to come in, it's Eli and Payton who enter the house. They both have overnight bags draped over their shoulders since my parents insisted everyone stay over because of the risk of drunk drivers. Payton is wearing high-waisted whitewashed jeans and my basketball sweatshirt. God, it looks good on her. Okay... where did that thought come from? It's not like me to get caught up on straight girls. I'm most certainly not starting now. Not when I already have someone. Well, kind of. Not in this life, but in this little fantasy world I'm living in I do, and noticing anyone else just seems wrong. Even if the way little wisps of hair falling out of Payton's ponytail is the cutest damn thing in the world... shut up, Marjorie. Morgan is not right about this.

"Hey," I say quietly, avoiding the temptation to push those pieces of hair behind Payton's ear as I walk up to greet her. Once close enough, I hug her tight, and lean in to whisper, "I'm so glad you're here."

When I pull away, I give Eli a quick hug too and thank him for coming. By the time these greetings are done, Genesis arrives. She looks extra cute tonight too, but I refuse to let my thoughts get away from me again.

"Thanks for doing this," she says as she hands me a bottle of sparkling cider. "It's nice to have somewhere to go and not have to drink."

"You don't drink?" I'm sure the answer is no, but I still ask anyway.

"I have a few times, but it's really not my thing."

"I feel that."

Before I can say anything else, Jazmin comes inside. She holds up her water bottle, which I know for a fact actually has water in it because she doesn't drink during basketball season either. "What's up? I'm here, I'm queer, and I'm ready to party."

I cackle at her entrance and give her a big hug. "You're really embracing this whole out, bisexual thing, aren't you?"

"Hell yeah. It took me way too long to admit this. I need to live it up now."

"You're only a junior in high school," I remind her. "Most people come out much later."

"Says the girl who's been out since middle school." Jazmin rolls her eyes playfully.

As if summoning all the gays, Jocelyn walks through the door at this time. She looks between Jazmin and me then down at the ground. "Is Morgan here?"

"Right here!" Morgan shouts from behind me. "Your friend didn't come?"

Jocelyn shakes her head. "He had other plans."

"Perfect. That means I have you all to myself." Morgan grabs Jocelyn's hand and begins to pull her away from the group.

I grab the back of my sister's shirt. "Not so fast. You guys are hanging with us tonight."

Jocelyn stares at me with wide eyes as if I just told her that her favorite singer is performing at our house tonight. "You... you want us to hang out with you and your friends?"

“Of course! Why not?”

Jocelyn still looks shocked, but she nods slowly.

We all hang out and eat snacks until the pizza arrives then watch random YouTube videos while we wait for New Year’s Rockin’ Eve to come on TV. Not long after it starts, my phone starts to ring with a call from Lydia.

“I’m so drunk,” she says before I even have a chance to say hello.

I pull my phone away from my ear to look at the time. “It’s barely past eight.”

“I don’t need a lecture, Marjorie. I came early to help Thalia set up, and welp, here we are.”

“Are you okay?” I ask her. Lydia likes to drink, but it’s not like her to get this drunk so early.

“I’m sad.”

I’m not sure if it’s the alcohol talking or something else, but it still worries me. “What’s wrong?”

“Thinking about hooking up with boys to make everything better.”

Make everything better? I’m so confused about what she’s trying to say. I just know she’s not acting like herself. “I’m coming to get you.”

“Really? You don’t mind?”

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 6:38 pm*

“No. Seriously. Just be safe until I get there, okay?”

“You’re the best, Marjorie. I love you so much.”

“I love you too, Lyd.”

“No. Like I really, really love you, Marjorie. Like so, so much. More than you know.”

I can’t help but laugh. Lydia always gets extra lovey when she’s drunk. “I’ll be right there.”

I tell everyone what’s going on and apologize for leaving then drive to Thalia’s house. My parents are out to dinner, but even if they were home, I know they wouldn’t care about me driving at this point.

When I pull into Thalia’s driveway, Lydia is already waiting on her front porch. Her face is in her hands and she looks like she’s either sick or sad, but when her eyes meet mine, a big smile parts her lips.

She does what I think is supposed to be a skip, but is more like a stumble, over to my car. She struggles with the door even though it’s unlocked, and when she finally gets in, she falls into the front seat. “What a night,” she says while holding her head.

“What happened?”

“Sebastian Cole was trying to have sex with me, and I was highly considering it.”

“Well, you guys have had sex before, right?”

“Yeah, and I’m so fucking sick of it.”

“Sick of sex with Sebastian?”

Lydia shakes her head. “Sick of sex. Sick of kissing. Sick of faking feelings.”

“Faking feelings? Is that what you’re doing?” I’m trying to follow the conversation, but I’m struggling to understand.

“It’s all I ever do. I’ve never had real feelings for anyone I’ve hooked up with.”

“No one?” This is definitely news to me. Lydia never told me she was in love with any of these guys, but I figured she at least had some feelings for a few of them.

“Nope.” Lydia dramatically pops the P. “It’s because I’m...” She cuts herself off and takes a few deep breaths. “I’m going to be sick.”

I reach into my back seat and dig around until I find an old fast food bag. Thank god I’m a mess. I hand the bag to her just in time. She immediately heaves into the bag, and the smell of barf fills my car. This girl is lucky I love her. “Doing okay, buddy?”

Lydia doesn’t answer with words and instead groans in response. That well, huh?

We don’t say anything the rest of the drive and when we get back to my house, I quickly get her out of the car and into my room. I say a short hello to everyone as I pass the family room and hope no one is offended. Once we are in my room, I help Lydia change into sweats then walk her over to the bed and direct her into it, pulling the covers over her once she’s laying down.

She yawns and smiles up at me. “You’re too good for me,” she says wistfully. She grabs my cheeks and pulls me close enough that our foreheads are touching. “I love you, Marjorie Madden. Don’t ever change.”

As soon as she lets go and I pull away, her eyes close and within seconds, she’s snoring. I grab the trash can sitting by my desk and put it next to the bed then place a quick kiss on her forehead. A light knock on the door causes me to jump in the air.

When I look over, Payton is standing in the doorway. “I’m sorry if I scared you. I just wanted to check if you guys are okay.”

“Aside from the fact that someone is going to have a massive hangover tomorrow, all is good here.”

Payton nods. “Just wanted to make sure. I’ll let you go.”

She turns to leave, but I reach out and grab her arm. “Since you’re here, I might as well give you a tour of my room, right?”

“Oh, yeah, sure.”

I’m not really sure what a tour entails since my room isn’t that big, so I move my arms in a circle. “Here it is. Payton meet room. Room meet Payton.” God, I’m a dork.

If she thinks I’m ridiculous, Payton doesn’t show it. She smiles as she looks around the room, taking it in one section at a time. “Very nice to meet you, room. You’re beautiful.”

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 6:38 pm*

Her eyes meet mine as she says those last two words, and even though I know she's not, it almost feels like she's saying them to me. I find myself wishing she was. "Thanks. So, are...?" I clear my throat. Where was I going with that? "So, are you having fun?"

"Definitely. This is great, and your friends are awesome. Thanks for inviting me."

"I hope Eli doesn't mind being the only guy."

Payton waves her hand. "Nah. He's used to it."

"He's really cool. I'm glad the three of us started to hang out."

"Me too. It's been fun."

More staring. Why is there always so much staring with us? "Should we go back down?" Secretly, I kind of wish Payton would say no, but she nods in response.

When we get back downstairs, Genesis and Samara appear to be having a heated discussion. "I'm just saying, I think it would be a really nice way for the basketball team to give back to the community," Genesis says. "Plus, this way, we could get money for new warm-ups. We'll split the profits 50/50 between charity and money for the team."

"And I'm just saying, that sounds like a lot of work to do in addition to practice and games," Samara argues.

“What’s up?” I ask as I walk over to them, hoping I can keep a fight from breaking out.

Genesis puts an arm over my shoulder. “I suggested we should do some type of fundraiser or volunteering as a team, but Samara thinks it’s a dumb idea.”

I put my arm around Genesis as well. “I think it’s a great idea. We could all spend a day at a soup kitchen or nursing home or something. I read about getting a group to make a meal at the Ronald McDonald House. That could be fun.”

Samara scoffs. “Those ideas are even worse than Genesis’s. At least with her ideas, we also get something out of it.”

“Why do we need to get something out of it? The whole point of volunteering is to help someone else without expecting something in return.”

Samara rolls her eyes at me. “And that’s exactly why I have never volunteered.”

“So, what you’re saying is you’re selfish?” So much for me stopping the fight.

“I helped at the Ronald McDonald House once. It was a really cool experience.”

All three of us turn at the exact same time to stare at Payton, who now seems embarrassed that she even said anything. “Sorry to intrude on your conversation. Just thought I would let you know.”

“No need to apologize,” I reassure her. “I’d love to hear more about that sometime.”

I’m pretty sure she said something to try to stop the fight that was about to break out, and luckily, it seemed to work. As I talk to Payton, Samara gets distracted by one of the performers on TV, and soon it’s like it never even happened.



The rest of the night goes by without issues and, when midnight hits, we all hoot and holler until my parents nicely tell us to shut the hell up. Soon, everyone finds spots to curl up around the family room and it's not long before I'm the only one left awake.

I head upstairs because I want to make sure Lydia is okay and I also prefer to sleep in my own bed. She's still snoring when I get into my room, so I quietly get changed then crawl into bed beside her. Within just a few seconds of lying down, Lydia's arms wrap around me from behind. I'm only surprised because I thought she was completely passed out. Lydia has been a snuggler since we were little.

"I love you, Mar," Lydia whispers into my ear.

"Love you too, Lyd."

I've never been much for praying, but before I drift off to sleep, I say a quick prayer that whatever caused her to reach this point tonight works itself out. No one in this world deserves to be happy more than my best friend, and I'll always do whatever I can to make sure she is.

## Chapter 19

\*Love Interest\*

"Big game tomorrow," Marjorie says as we stand in front of our lockers.

"And you're going to kill it. I'm going to be cheering so loud for you."

"Promise?" She looks at me with wide eyes, and it's so cute, I can't help but think about what it would be like if things were different. If this wasn't a secret crush. If Marjorie felt the same way. If I could simply lean in and place a kiss on her lips to reassure her.

## Page 46

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 6:39 pm*

“Of course. You can count on me.”

“You’re the best.” She leans in and gives me a hug, and it’s so hard to let go, but I force myself to.

It’s almost the end of January, so it’s getting closer to playoff time. I know Marjorie is nervous so I want to be there for her, but I still feel guilty. Here I am, standing beside her, promising to be at her game, while her newest note to me burns a hole in my pocket. Each note gets a little more real, a little more intimate. The hearts aren’t only at the end but are now dispersed throughout.

Standing here right now, I want to tell her it’s me. I want her to know. I don’t want to hide it. I can’t tell her though. No matter how guilty I feel, I can’t give in. She doesn’t want to know it’s me. I know she doesn’t.

Instead, I wave goodbye, walk out to my car, and drive home. I say a quick hello to my mom before running upstairs and taking the note from my pocket.

Can you believe we’ve been back in school for almost three weeks already? Between basketball, studying, and work, I feel like I’ve barely breathed. Not complaining though. This is my favorite time of year. What’s your favorite season? Why? Do I ask too many questions in these notes? If you ever think I do, you can just tell me.

Omg, when I read your last note I literally jumped up and down on my bed. I’m so excited you have three chapters of a book written! I know you don’t think that’s much, but it’s SUCH a good start. What’s it about? Will you ever let me read it? No pressure, but I would love that!

I can't help but wonder if you've been at any of my basketball games. I haven't asked because I don't want to overstep, but every game, I wonder if you're there watching. Sometimes, I swear I can feel your presence. I'm really sorry if that sounds creepy, but it's just the honest truth

No matter what, your notes always remind me how much you support me, and I can't even begin to tell you how much that means to me.

There's something I want to tell you, but I'm not sure if I should or not. You probably already figured it out, but writing it down makes it way too real. Okay... I need to stop writing because now I'm embarrassed. I hope you have an awesome day

My head is spinning as I think about what it is she wants to tell me. I do have a pretty good idea, but I don't let myself think like that because it's too good to be true. Plus, even if what I am thinking is right, it doesn't matter. Marjorie doesn't actually know who I am. I forget about all of this and focus on writing my reply instead.

Hey! I'm happy to hear that you are so happy. I can't lie though. School has been dragging for me. Winter is not my favorite. My favorite season is spring. There's just something about the newness of it all that I love. People think of January as a fresh start, but that's how I see spring. Flowers are blooming. The weather is getting warmer. People are losing the winter blues. Everything just feels... new. I also love sweatshirt weather and the beginning of spring has perfect hoodie weather. People always give fall the credit for that, but spring is just as good.

Anyway, no need to bore you with all the details about my love of spring. If you were excited about three chapters, just wait. Now I've written... four (happy dance). It's a romance book, and I definitely have a happy ending in store for my main character and her love interest, but it's even more so about self love. It follows the character's journey of learning to love herself and living authentically. No, this book is not based on anyone I know in real life. Certainly not myself. Nope. Totally not. I might work

up the courage to let you read it someday, but no guarantees.

As far as basketball goes, I can't tell you much, but I do want you to know that I'm your biggest fan. I'm so proud of you, and all you've accomplished this year. I see how hard you work, and I'm so happy it's paying off.

Do you ever feel like you get lost in this little world we've created together? I do. Not in a bad way though. In the best way possible. Here's my confession: I'd love to spend every moment lost with you.

I need to go because that was too corny even for me.

I read the note over and over and consider taking out my confession. It's probably too much. Way too much, actually. Marjorie could think I'm completely insane. But then again, what does it matter if she does? She doesn't even know who I am. This is my chance to put myself out there and say fuck the consequences. So, that's exactly what I'm going to do. Fuck it. If I want to say something to Marjorie, I'm just going to do it. Aside from getting to see a side of her that I otherwise wouldn't, that's the other great part of these notes. I get to see a different side of myself too. I get to put myself out there in a way I've always been afraid to. It feels good. It feels so good, I almost want to do it in real life as well. I'm not there, but I'm getting closer, and I can't even begin to express how good that feels.

## Chapter 20

Marjorie

Can you have your parents write a note saying they'll give you a ride home from your game but actually ride back with me? I need to talk to you.

I read Lydia's text over and over, trying to decipher the words she's not saying. I

know this has to be about what happened on New Year's Eve, but I'm shocked she wants to talk about it now. I was starting to think we never would since that night was over a month ago now. Barely, since February just started, but still. Lydia and I are normally very open with each other, so the fact that she told me to forget about everything she said when she woke up on New Year's Day was surprising. I've respected her wishes, but things have been weird ever since. It's almost as if she's embarrassed to be around me now, and I honestly can't figure out why.

Of course. I'm surprised you're coming to my game, though. It's almost an hour away.

Lydia's reply comes through almost immediately. Of course I'm coming. I'm your number one fan (even if I've been doing a shitty job of showing it lately).

Her message is sweet, and it makes me really happy that we're finally going to work whatever this is out. The message also makes me think of the note I got from my mystery girl where she told me that she was my biggest fan. Reading the words from her felt so much different than it does reading the same words from Lydia. When Mystery Girl said it, my heart practically ripped out of my chest and my stomach did approximately five million flips. Damn, I'm falling hard for someone I don't even know. How did I let this happen? Why don't I want to stop?

I'm really excited to finally have some best friend time, I write back.

Me too. You have no idea.

We write back and forth about nothing in particular, and I already feel better.

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After my game, I'm on a high from another big win. We've only lost five games so

far this season, so we are definitely going into the playoffs, and everyone is starting to predict that we're going to do really well. Some people are even saying we are going to get farther than last year's team who lost in the second round of the state playoffs. I think they might be getting a little ahead of themselves, but it's still exciting for people to have that much faith in us.

“Ready to go, superstar?” Lydia asks as she hugs me from behind.

## Page 47

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 6:39 pm*

I turn around and wrap her in a tight hug. “So ready. Can we blast JoJo Siwa when we get in the car?”

Lydia throws her head back in laughter. “What’s your obsession with JoJo Siwa?”

“She’s a total gaycon.”

“Gaycon?”

“Gay icon, obviously.” I realize we’re still hugging so I let go and take a step back. “I know you want to talk, so I’ll only make you play, like, two songs.”

“I never said I wanted to talk.”

I cross my arms over my chest and give her the look that only she understands. “So, you don’t want to talk?”

Lydia pushes me away playfully. “Shut up.”

“I’ll take that as a yes.” I put my arm out and Lydia links hers with mine.

We walk like this until reaching her car then separate so we can get in. Three JoJo songs play, and Lydia has yet to say anything. I turn down the music and turn to look at her. “So, what’s up?”

Lydia stares out at the road and chews on her bottom lip. “What exactly did I say when I was drunk on New Year’s Eve?”

I have to think since it was so long ago at this point. “Not much. You kept reminding me how much you loved me. You said that someone...” I rack my brain as I try to remember the details and snap my fingers when I do. “Sebastian Cole. That’s who it was. You said he tried to have sex with you and you didn’t want to, but you were thinking about it. Which I completely understand, by the way. Not the thinking about it part, but the not wanting to part. No offense, but Sebastian is gross.”

“Mar! Stay on topic, please.”

“Oh yeah. Sorry. Then you were just rambling about feelings and how you don’t want to be with people you don’t have feelings for anymore.”

“That’s it? That’s all I said?”

“Yeah. Why?” I’m still so confused about what she’s worried about.

“There’s something I haven’t told you. I’ve been keeping it inside for a really long time, but I feel guilty because you’re my best friend. We tell each other everything. I was worried I told you that night, and I hated the fact that I admitted something so big that I’ve been keeping in for so long when I was drunk. You deserve better than that.”

Um, what? “Lydia, I’m not going to lie, I’m so confused right now. What are you trying to say?”

Lydia takes a deep breath and pushes it out slowly. “I’m in love with someone I shouldn’t be, and it scares the shit out of me. If this person ever found out, it could ruin everything, but I’m sick of being with people to try to fill the void of the person I really want.”

“Who is it?” That’s when it hits me. The notes. The person who has a crush on me, but is too scared to tell me who they are. The person who doesn’t want to come out.



The one that I've been falling for right back. It can't be Lydia, right? Not my best friend since I was little. No. There's no way. Right? I need to process this. "You know what? If you're not ready to tell me yet, I completely understand."

"Really? Because I don't want to keep secrets from you, but once I speak this out loud, it's out there. It's real."

"Seriously. Don't worry about it." Shit. Shit. Shit.

"Cool. Thanks."

We're both quiet the rest of the drive back to the school to get my car. I'm not sure why Lydia is, but I know exactly why I am. When I get home, there are two people who immediately pop into my mind, so I get out my phone and text them both.

Are you free this weekend? I text Payton. I might need help processing something. Or I might just need pizza. Decision pending...

I leave that text thread so I can go into my chat with Genesis. Church on Sunday? I need Jesus.

They both agree, which is at least a little bit of a relief. This is fine. There's no way it's Lydia. No way it's the girl who's always been like family, the girl that I consider my second sister. It definitely isn't someone I've known forever that I could lose if I can't get myself to feel the same way. Lord... I really do need Jesus.

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"I'm really glad we both have off on a Saturday so we can hang out," I say as Payton and I sit down at a local pizzeria.

“Same.” Payton puts a shit ton of garlic salt on the pizza she just picked up from the front counter. “Everything okay? Your text sounded kind of desperate.”

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 6:39 pm*

I cringe when I think back on the text I sent her. It really did sound desperate, and it made it seem like the only reason I wanted to hang out with her was to take or get things off my mind. That's not it at all though. I really enjoy spending time with Payton. I actually crave more time with her. I didn't text her that night out of convenience. I texted her because I want to be with her. "Definitely. I had a weird night when I texted you, but that's not why I wanted to hang out. I just really like hanging out with you."

"Really?" She sounds much more surprised by this fact than she should. "I really like hanging out with you too. It's been great getting to know each other better these past few months."

My heart does this weird kind of jump thing and a goofy smile springs to my face. "It really has." I look down at my phone that reads 4:00 p.m. "I'm not sure if this is a late lunch or early dinner we have going on, but either way, I have the whole night. Any ideas of what we should do?"

Payton tilts her head to the side slightly, scrunches her nose, and furrows her eyebrows, and it's unfairly cute. "Didn't you want to talk?"

I wave my hand. "Like I said, I was just having a weird night when I sent that text. I'm seriously okay."

I'm definitely downplaying how I'm actually feeling. The truth is, I've been thinking about Lydia ever since the talk we had a few nights prior. I don't want to believe it's her who I've been exchanging notes with, but everything adds up. Everything except the fact that I never in a million years thought Lydia would like me. I know enough

about romance to know that people love a friends-to-lovers trope, but it's extremely unrealistic if you think about it. How do you spend a shit ton of time with someone then one day look at them and suddenly see them differently? I just can't even begin to see that happening. Lydia is my best friend. My sister. My confidante. I don't think I'm going to wake up one day and realize I'm in love with her. If the letters really are from her, I wish I could. Lydia is a catch. I could do a lot worse, and I really couldn't do much better. Still, I can't make my heart feel something it doesn't. No matter how much I feel reading those letters, I don't think I could get there in real life with Lydia.

"If you say so. If you need to talk though, just know I'm here." Payton takes a sip of her soda. "We could go bowling if you want to. I used to go to that one perfectly between Griffin Hill and Capital Creek. It was super rundown back then, so I can only imagine what it looks like inside now, but I think it could be fun."

Most of my friends would have suggested a movie, the mall, or one of our houses, but Payton is different. She's not like other people our age, and I mean that in the best way possible. Each time I hang out with her, I find more and more reasons to like her. "Bowling sounds great. I can't remember the last time I went."

"Me either. I think I was probably like eight. Not sure what made me think of it now, but it just seemed like the perfect activity to keep your mind off things."

"I couldn't agree more."

We finish our pizza, then I drive us over to the bowling alley together. When we walk inside, it's just as I remember it. It's rundown as Payton said it would be, but in a way that makes you feel nostalgic rather than disgusted. We rent old bowling shoes that probably smell like rotting feet if you get too close, but I like every part of this. Payton enters our names into the old computer system while I find bowling balls for both of us.

When Payton is done entering our names, I hand her the bowling ball I picked out for her. “How is it?”

She moves the ball up and down with her hands as if she’s mentally weighing it. “I think this seems good. I forget what it’s supposed to feel like though.”

I shrug. “I think it’s supposed to be heavy, but not too heavy.”

“Very specific and scientific way to figure it out.” Payton giggles and winks at me, and my mouth goes dry.

Why the hell does my mouth feel like the Sahara Desert? I’m really losing it. “Do you have a better way?”

“Nope. Your way is perfect.”

“Then maybe you should stop making fun of me and instead focus on bowling. You know, if you want any chance of beating me.”

Payton’s smile grows. “Oh, is that how it’s going to be? In that case, I guess I’m just going to show you how we bowl over in Griffin Hill.”

I gesture toward our lane. “Show me then.”

“Loser buys the winner dessert?” Payton asks as she walks over.

“Perfect. I’ll start thinking about what I want.”

“You might want to wait on that.” Payton turns around, rolls the ball perfectly down the center lane, and gets every pin down but one.

I scoff as I stare at that one pin in disbelief. “I thought you said you hadn’t been here in a while.”

“I haven’t.” Payton shrugs and a big smirk comes onto her face. “I just didn’t tell you how much I used to come here.”

“You don’t fight fair.”

“There’s dessert on the line. What do you expect?”

“Okay. Okay. I see how it is.” I grab my ball then walk up to the lane.

When I throw it, it goes straight at first, then slowly drifts from the center until it veers into a gutter just before getting to the pins. “Shit,” I whisper under my breath.

“Need any help?” Payton brings her hand to her mouth and giggles, and I realize how much she’s enjoying this.

“I’m fine.”

I grab my ball once it comes back to me, then walk up to my lane, determined to hit the pins this time. I stare at the pins for a long time like that will somehow make the ball go straight, then I roll it. It does the exact same thing as last time, and I once again get no pins down.

The next few rounds go by with me getting either gutter balls or one pin down and Payton getting all spares. She must feel bad because she eventually stands up with me when it’s my turn again.

“Do you want some help?” she asks.

I notice her question is free from any sarcasm or teasing. It’s completely genuine.

I nod and laugh. “You can try.”

Payton steps up beside me. “I’m no expert, but I can at least teach you what I’ve been taught. It’s apparently all in the wrist and the follow through. You want to keep your wrist straight the whole time, and when you let go of the ball, point where you want it to go.”

I follow her directions, and my ball still ends up in the gutter. When I grab it once again, Payton points to it. “Can... Can I help?”

When I nod, she closes the space between us and puts her hand on top of mine. An electric current seems to zip from where our hands are touching through my entire

body. I freeze because my body feels so uncomfortable. So on edge. It's absolute perfection and I don't want the feeling to ever go away. I want to find an excuse to make it last longer. I want a reason for her hand to stay right where it's at.

Clearly, Payton takes my silence the wrong way because she rips her hand away from mine, immediately making me feel like I lost a part of my own body. "I'm... I'm sorry. I shouldn't have done that."

"No!" I say much louder than I mean to. "Please. Don't stop." I clear my throat and force out a laugh. "I clearly need help."

Payton puts her hand back over mine and all of the sensations from earlier return. Every single spot our skin touches feels like a pinprick, but in a good way. I try not to think about what that means. I try not to consider the fact that this is the first time my body has reacted this much to someone else. I don't want to think about it. I just want to enjoy it.

"So, what now?" I ask, surprised I'm even able to find my voice.

"We slowly bring it back." Payton helps my arm move backward. "Then we let go."

Her touch makes me lose all control and letting go turns into chucking the ball much harder than I mean to. I watch as it barrels down the lane so fast I almost can't follow it with my eyes. It at least hits three pins this time, which is a step up from any of my other turns.

"That was great!" Payton says, sounding genuinely excited. "Maybe next time don't throw it so hard though."

"Can you help me again?" I ask softly. I really hope I'm not making it obvious how much I want her to touch me again. Shit. I'm such a creep.



“Of course. I’d love to.” The crack in Payton’s voice tells me that she’s feeling exactly what I am, but I don’t want to assume that’s the case. I don’t even know if she likes girls, let alone me.

This time when we let go of the ball more slowly, it actually makes its way down the center of the lane. All but one pin is knocked down. I jump in the air and pump my fist. It might be an overreaction for a game of bowling, but I can’t help it.

Much to my surprise, Payton appears to be just as excited. She even wraps me up in a tight hug. This hug. Oh my god. If I thought my body was reacting to her before, this is like that reaction on steroids. I know I should let go, but I don’t want to. Payton isn’t in a hurry either, so we stay like this for much longer than what’s considered normal.

When I pull away, Payton looks at me with wide, worried eyes as if she was just caught by her parents doing something she shouldn’t. She rubs the back of her neck and looks toward the floor. “Sorry. I might have gotten a little too excited there.”

“I think we both did.” I look at the score that is completely lopsided. “Obviously, I’m not coming back at this point, so you should probably start thinking about what dessert you want.”

“I actually already started thinking about it, no offense. I literally eat dessert all the time because of work. I’m craving something salty. How would you feel about going somewhere for chips and dip?”

“I feel like I’m not really the loser because that sounds like a great idea.”

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After my unsurprising loss, we head to a small Mexican restaurant in town that’s

known to have the best guacamole and queso dip. As I dip into both and shove the loaded chip into my mouth, I question whether to say what I'm thinking.

"So, they're predicting we're going to do pretty well in the playoffs." Okay, apparently I am going to say it. "I know some games will be too far to drive to and you might be scheduled to work or not even want to go because Capital Creek isn't even your school."

"Are you trying to ask me if I'll come to your games?" Payton asks before I can get it out. All I can do is nod in response, but her smile is wide now. "I'd love to. I'll ask Mrs. Fairfield if I can have those days off once you find out when they are. I think she owes both of us for how much we currently work. Plus, I can always ask Eli to work for me." She takes a deep breath since she's talking so fast. "Also, don't worry about the distance. I don't mind driving. If you want me there, I'll be there."

"I want you there. I definitely want you there."

"Then I'll be there."

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 6:39 pm*

Pure bliss. That's the only way I can think to describe this moment.

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"Thanks for letting me come to church with you," I say once I'm sitting in Genesis's car the next day.

"I was so happy that you asked." Her smile is sincere just like every other part of her. It makes me wonder how there was ever a time I didn't really like her.

Church starts out with what Genesis calls "worship time." That's when we sing from songs in the hymnal or ones that they project onto a screen at the front of the room. I use this time to pray over what to do about the possible Lydia situation. I'm still not exactly sure what I believe, but I hope throwing all of this out into the universe will help me in one way or another.

When the pastor comes to the front, she gives a sermon about taking a step back from things. She talks about how sometimes when we are too close to a situation or too invested, we can't see it for what it really is. She says that it's best to step away and let God take over. I'm not sure how much God will actually take over on this, but taking a step back might be a good idea. The thought of not passing notes back and forth with my mystery girl makes me so sad I can barely breathe, but if it is Lydia, I need more time to think about what to do. I need to figure out what it means to have certain reactions to her written words, but not to her. As the pastor said, I just need time.

After church, Genesis asks if I want to get lunch and I'm happy to oblige. Without

my letters from maybe-not-so-mystery girl, I'm going to need something to fill the void. Lunch with Genesis seems like a good place to start.

We choose a little cafe that is a few minutes away from the church and both get wraps. The conversation is so good, I almost let myself forget about all of my confusion. Almost.

When we're almost done, Genesis points down at her plate. "Do you want my pickle? I hate pickles. Everything about them grosses me out."

I accept, and as I eat the pickle, my mind immediately goes to the note I found at my locker after Christmas break. My mystery girl loves pickles. I've seen Lydia eat pickles but I've never heard her obsess over them. Wouldn't I know if my best friend since childhood was that obsessed with pickles? How could I miss that? Probably the same way I could miss that she's gay and has a crush on me. Once again, my head is spinning.

"Everything okay?" Genesis asks.

"Great. Sorry. Just got caught up in my own thoughts for a second."

"I get it. I'm the same way, especially after church." She looks down at her phone. "I didn't realize how long we've been here. I actually have to be somewhere soon. You okay if we head out?"

We get back into the car and I let my mind drift away as Genesis drives me back to my house. As soon as I'm inside, my phone vibrates inside my pocket. I pull it out to see a text from a number I don't have saved.

Hey! This is Jocelyn. Your sister gave me your number. Do you think we could get together sometime to talk? Just the two of us?

I smile at my phone. Maybe there is a God. This is another great way to distract myself. Just tell me when and where.

## Chapter 21

\*Love Interest\*

Two weeks. It's been two full weeks since I've gotten a letter from Marjorie. I have no idea what I did wrong. All I can think of is that I gave myself away and now that she knows it's me, she doesn't want to talk to me. The confusing part is that nothing has changed between us in real life. If anything, we've only gotten closer.

"What do you think I did wrong?" I ask Bug for the millionth time.

Bug sighs. I know he's so sick of this question. "Like I've told you every other time you've asked, I don't think you did anything wrong. I think you're overthinking it. It's playoff time. Marjorie is probably just really busy."

"That's true." I look over at the clock on my nightstand to check the time. "Speaking of which, I better get to her game."

"Have fun!" Bug yells after me. "Stop overthinking everything."

Believe it or not, being at Marjorie's game actually keeps me from overthinking the lack of notes. Right now, all of my focus is on how amazing she is at basketball. Watching her on the court is like watching a professional dancer up on stage. She's so smooth. So focused. She moves to the rhythm of a beat that's deep within her heart. She loves this sport and I can see that in every single pass, shot, and dribble. It's actually extremely beautiful.

I don't notice that as I'm watching the game, Delilah is watching me. "You like her,

don't you?" she finally asks.

"Wh-what?" Her question takes me by complete surprise.

"You like Marjorie. I can tell by the way you're watching her. I think you should go for it."

"Wh-what?" Apparently, I'm in so much shock, that's the only word I can form.

"I won't tell anyone, obviously. You don't have to worry about that. I've seen you two together though, and I think it works. You should consider being honest with her about it. I don't think it will go the way you've convinced yourself it would."

"Do you think our parents are getting to the point that they might want to move in together soon?" I ask the question to change the subject but also because I'm truly curious.

## Page 51

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 6:39 pm*

Delilah smiles and lifts an eyebrow. “Smooth.” She stares out at the court and nods. “I could definitely see it. I know they’ve said I love you and all that. I feel like maybe moving in is the next step. I don’t think they’ll do it until they make sure we’re completely on board though. I could see them waiting until we graduate to do it though, so we’ll see.”

“I hope they don’t.”

Delilah’s smile drops and she looks over at me with furrowed eyebrows. “You hope they don’t move in together?”

“No. I mean I hope they don’t wait.”

Delilah gives me a knowing smile. “I hope they don’t either.”

My eyes go back to the court as Marjorie steals the ball from the other team and breaks away to score a layup. The game is so lopsided at this point, there’s no way they’re going to lose. Still, I refuse to look away until that very last whistle blows.

When I meet Marjorie down on the court, I don’t hesitate to give her a big hug. Things might be weird in our other reality, but they are fine in this one, and I refuse to let myself forget that. “Two wins away from being district champs. How does it feel?”

Marjorie takes her hair down, shakes it out, then pulls it back up into the perfect ponytail. I try to keep my mouth from watering while I watch her for an answer, but she looks so hot right now, I can barely stand it. “It feels fucking amazing.”

I swear she stares at me a beat longer than necessary, but I don't let myself overthink it. I also don't let myself overthink the fact that she runs her tongue over her bottom lip while dropping her eyes down toward my lips.

"I can't wait for the next one." The words are harder to get out than I expect them to be, but I shouldn't be surprised since my mouth is so dry right now. Marjorie's basketball uniform clings to her sweat-soaked body perfectly and makes it hard to do anything.

"I'm so happy you're going to be there."

I swear her eyes shine extra bright when she's looking at me, but that can't be true. There's no way. The notes have stopped, and no matter what Bug says, I can't help but believe it's because she knows it's me. She knows and she's not sure how to handle it, so she just stopped.

An idea suddenly pops into my head for one last ditch effort to try to get a response from her. I say a quick goodbye to everyone then hurry to my car. As soon as I'm home, I go up to my room, open my computer, and print out the first chapter of the novel I'm working on. I sit it on my desk then rip a piece of paper out of my notebook and start to write.

I'm not sure exactly what to say, except that I miss you. I've seen you, but I miss this part of you. I miss whatever this is that only we share. I'm not sure why the notes have stopped, but I hope it's not because I did anything to hurt you. A part of me wonders if I said too much and now you know who I am. If that's what it is, you can just be honest with me. You can tell me you don't feel the same way. It's not going to ruin what we have outside of this. I promise. You keep asking me about my book, so here is chapter one. I know I've written more, but this is probably all I can get to stay on your locker. If you don't think this completely sucks and you want more, just let me know.



I also just realized this sounds like a total bribe. “Write me more notes and you’ll get more of my book.” I promise that’s not what I’m going for. I’m not really sure exactly what it is I’m going for. I’m sorry. If this is a bother, I’m really sorry. I’m going to stop writing now. I hope you enjoy what I’ve written

I question whether to add the heart, because if she knows who I am, she might find that weird now. That’s how we’ve always done it though, so there’s no point in changing it.

I go to the store to buy magnetic clips so it can be stuck to her locker then call Bug to let him know my plan. I’m pretty sure he thinks I’m crazy at this point, but that’s okay. As I fall asleep that night, I wonder if maybe I should just come clean to Marjorie. Maybe this has gone on long enough, and it’s time to just be honest. I have a very good reason not to, but I still don’t know. I wake up the next morning still having no idea what the hell I’m going to do.

## Chapter 22

### Marjorie

I practically run to my locker when I see a bunch of papers sticking to the front of it. I have no idea what it is, but my heart races at the chance of it being something from my mystery girl. I know I’ve been trying to distance myself from the feelings I have for her by not writing any letters, but that hasn’t stopped me from pulling old letters out of the folder I keep them in and rereading them. Each time I reread one, I find something else to like about her. I’m just trying to separate the fact that this could be my friend from childhood that I’m having these feelings about.

I pull the group of papers off my locker and find that it’s not just a note from my mystery girl but also the first chapter to her book. My heart soars when I see that. She actually trusts me enough to let me read it. As I’m flipping through the pages, I swear

I feel eyes on me, but when I look around, there isn't anyone staring back at me.

I do see Eli walking in the opposite direction just a few feet away, so I shout his name. When he turns around, I wave to him, then put the pages into my backpack for safekeeping and run over to him. "I never see you in this part of the school in the morning. Is your locker over here?" I would think I would realize that, but I feel guilty if I somehow missed him all this time.

Eli shakes his head and adjusts the straps on his backpack. "I was just returning a book to the library."

Duh. The library. My locker is literally right across the hall from it. "That makes sense. Anything good?"

"Huh?"

"The book you were returning. Was it good?"

"Oh, sorry. It was for research for a class, so sadly no. It was not good at all."

"Do you like to read?" I don't know why I'm asking so many questions, except for the fact that Eli feels like my connection to Payton. I obviously don't get to see her during the school day, so talking to Eli is the next best thing. There's a part of me that hopes he'll mention our chat to Payton, and that will get her thinking about me. Maybe she'll even text me. Maybe I should text her.

"I do. I like to read a lot, actually."

"What's your favorite genre?"

## Page 52

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 6:39 pm*

Eli shrugs. “I like a little bit of everything. Mystery is probably my favorite. I really like horror too, though. And I love anything that has dark humor in it. Recently, I’ve even been reading comics, thanks to Payton. She got me into the Paper Girls comic series. She says I have to read all of them before she’ll watch the show with me.”

Payton. Just hearing her name makes my heart beat faster. I want to ask him something else about Payton. Anything to keep this conversation going and hear her name one more time. Unfortunately, he tells me he needs to go upstairs for his first class and says a quick goodbye before heading in that direction.

“Marjorie!” a voice calls from behind me.

When I turn around, I find Jocelyn running over to me. “Do you think we could get together and talk again tonight?”

Since sending me that text, I’ve gotten together with Jocelyn four times. That’s not counting the times I’ve seen her at my games or my house while she’s with my sister. She has a lot of questions about liking girls and coming out, and what it’s like when you are out to everyone, and I’m happy to help. It’s actually been a lot of fun hanging out with her. Hanging out with just the two of us has helped me to see her as someone other than just my little sister’s friend, and I’ve learned that she’s funny and sweet.

“I have basketball practice, then the team is having a pasta party to load up on carbs for our game tomorrow.”

“Oh, okay. No problem.”

I can hear the disappointment in her voice, and it makes me feel bad. “We have the same lunch, right? Want to eat quickly then meet in the locker room to talk? Anyone who has gym class will be in class at the time, so no one will overhear us.”

“That sounds great! Thank you so much.”

Jocelyn says goodbye and practically skips away from me.

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As promised, I eat my lunch quickly then go to the locker room to meet Jocelyn. By the time I get there, she’s already sitting on a bench between the second and third row of lockers.

“How’s it going?” I ask as I sit down beside her.

“It’s good. Sorry for making you miss your lunch.”

“I didn’t miss anything. I’m happy to be here with you.”

I must have said something right, because a big smile spreads onto Jocelyn’s face.

“Thanks. That’s sweet.”

“So, did you have something specific you wanted to ask me?”

Jocelyn stares down at her hands, flipping them back and forth as if she’s searching for something on them. “Yeah... I... I have a question. How...?” She takes a deep breath. “How do I tell a girl that I like her?”

I blow out a long breath as if I was the one to just breathe in deeply. “Oh man. That’s a tough one. I’m probably not the best person to ask about that. I don’t have much

experience in the dating department.”

“Really?” Jocelyn sounds genuinely shocked. “But you’re so cool and pretty and popular.”

“I’m also extremely awkward if I like someone,” I admit with a laugh at my own expense. “The best thing you can do if you want something to come of it is just be honest. Tell her how you feel. There’s no tricks to it, unfortunately. Just say whatever feels right.”

“Got it. In that case, I—”

“Jazmin?” I don’t mean to cut off Jocelyn, but I’m shocked to see Jazmin in the locker room. Plus, I’m sure she doesn’t want anyone else to know whatever she was about to say to me.

Jazmin waves as she walks over to us. “What’s up, guys? You didn’t happen to see a math book in here, did you? I thought I left it here last night.”

I shake my head. “I haven’t seen it. Sorry.”

Jazmin looks from me over to Jocelyn, clearly looking for a response from her. Jocelyn clears her throat a few times and stares down at her hands again. “I haven’t either, sorry.” She quickly stands from the bench. “I actually have to go. I’m sorry.”

She’s out of the room before Jazmin or I can say anything else to her. Jazmin furrows her eyebrows and points her thumb back toward the door. “Did I say something wrong?”

“You’re fine. I think she just might have been worried you overheard our conversation.”

Jazmin wiggles her eyebrows, and I can tell she has the completely wrong idea.  
“Something I should know?”

“Not anything you’re thinking. Trust me.” My girl situation is already a mess. I don’t need Jazmin thinking there’s also something going on with me and Jocelyn.

## Page 53

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 6:39 pm*

“That’s all I’m getting?” When I don’t say anything, Jazmin rolls her eyes. “Fine. I’ll see you at practice.”

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After getting home from practice and our pasta party, I’m ready to throw myself into bed. I avoid my family and make a beeline straight for my room. I jump in the air when I open my door and find Lydia sitting on my bed. “Damn, Lyd. You scared the shit out of me.”

“Your mom told me to come right up. She said she would let you know I was here.”

Maybe avoiding my family wasn’t the best idea. It almost caused me a heart attack. “I didn’t see my mom.” I sit down on the bed beside her. “So, what’s up?”

“I wanna talk to you about something.”

“Okay.” Shit. Shit, shit, shit. I haven’t even thought through what I’m going to say if she tells me the notes are from her.

“It’s about the person I have feelings for that I shouldn’t. I’m really thinking about telling them.”

“Okay.” I swallow hard.

Lydia laughs. “Is that all you can say? I’m trying to ask you for advice.”

“I think I need more information.”

“We’ve just been friends forever. This could literally ruin all of that. But there’s a part of me that thinks maybe it won’t. A part of me thinks the feelings are reciprocated, but I... I don’t know. What do you think?”

Is this her roundabout way of asking me if I feel the same way? What the hell do I say? “What do you mean?”

“Come on, Marjorie. You’ve clearly figured out this is about Hunter. I know you haven’t been around the two of us a ton, but from the times you have, do you think there’s a chance he likes me back?”

“You’re talking about Hunter?” I know I sound like a complete idiot right now, but I can’t help myself.

“Obviously. Who’d you think I was talking about? You?” The way she laughs should make me feel offended, but I’m way too relieved.

I take a deep breath and laugh along with her. “Of course not. That’d be crazy. You’re like the straightest person I know.”

“Not to mention we’re practically sisters. Crushing on you would be like crushing on a sibling, and that’s just weird.”

I put my arm around Lydia and pull her tight up against me, my heartbeat finally starting to slow down from that false alarm.

“I think I could definitely see it,” I say once I finally remember what the question was. “I mean, Hunter would be stupid not to like you. You’re funny, nice, hot.”



“I have an excellent ass.”

“That was actually the next thing I was going to say.”

“You really think I have a chance? And I’m not going to completely ruin years of friendship for nothing?”

“I think the heart wants what it wants, and you need to be honest about that. I also don’t think it will ruin your friendship unless you let it. Hunter seems like a cool guy. He’s not going to stop being your friend just because you have feelings for him. Honestly, I think you’re risking more by not telling him. Plus, I selfishly want this. If Hunter becomes your boyfriend, that means I’m your only best friend.”

“Of course that’s where your mind goes. You’re ridiculous.” Lydia’s face takes on a more serious look, and she grabs my hand. “Thanks for talking this through with me. I could never make these big life-altering decisions without you.”

I turn my hand over and interlock our fingers, a gesture I don’t need to overthink now that I know she’s not in love with me. Thank God. “That’s what friends are for.”

“Speaking of which, how are you? Doing okay after what Fucking Felicity did?”

Felicity. I completely forgot about her. That feels so long ago now. “Felicity is long forgotten. Trust me.”

“I can tell there’s a story behind your words and you need to spill it now.”

I consider my options. It would be nice to share it with someone other than Payton now that I inadvertently added her into this little love triangle I have going on. “I’m falling for two people at once, and I have no idea what to do about it.”

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 6:39 pm*

It's the first time I've admitted my feelings about Payton out loud. Hell, it's the first time I've admitted them to myself. I can't try to deny it anymore though. I wasn't looking for someone, but if I was, Payton would be everything I'm looking for. She checks all of my boxes, and not just in that we should work, but don't way. We do work. We totally work. The chemistry between us is palpable. At least, to me it is. Payton is hard to read. She doesn't set off my gaydar, but she also doesn't not seem gay. She's just Payton. She's nice. So nice. Nice people are hard. There's no way to know if they're just being polite or trying to get in your pants.

Okay. Abort those thoughts. Way too many things happen to my body when I get thoughts like that.

Then there's my mystery girl. She's poetic, she's smart, she goes to the same school as me. The best part about her is that I know she likes me. The worst part is that I don't actually know who she is. And that's always been good enough for me. I've been happy with that. Now, I'm not so sure. Now that I have a physical person in front of me, having someone behind a note doesn't seem as exciting.

"I can literally see your brain moving at a mile a minute, yet all you've said to me so far is that you're falling for two people at once. Spill. Now."

So, I do. I tell Lydia the whole story, starting with the first note, the way Felicity found out about them and used me, and how amazing Payton has been through all of this. Lydia listens carefully, and I can tell she's trying to take in every single detail.

"Payton is the girl who always comes to your basketball games, right? She's hot. You should go for it."

“I don’t even know if Payton’s gay.”

Lydia laughs. “She’s definitely gay. I can tell by the way she wears your sweatshirt. She wraps herself up in it as if it’s the closest she’s ever going to get to you. I’m pretty sure I even caught her smelling it one time.”

“No you didn’t.”

“You’re right. I didn’t. But I still know she likes you. I’m Team Payton. You should definitely go for her.”

“It’s not that easy.” I sigh dramatically. “I’ve had feelings for this mystery girl long before Payton. If I tell Payton that I like her, I feel like I’m cheating on my mystery girl.”

“Are you dating this mystery girl?”

“No, no. It’s not like that at all.”

“Then it’s not cheating.”

“But we’ve been very open about our feelings for each other. It’s not a secret.”

“So, have you talked about dating?”

I shake my head. “I never even plan on finding out who she is.”

“Then you obviously go for Payton!” Lydia practically shouts. She lowers her voice and squeezes my hand. “Sorry, but come on, Mar. You’re going to miss out on what’s right in front of you to live out some fantasy.”

When she puts it like that, it does seem stupid. But she doesn't understand. "I'll think about it."

"All I'm asking is that you don't let something good slip away."

"I won't. I promise." That's not a lie. I do plan to keep Payton in my life, even if it's forever in a platonic way.

"Good. Then my work here is done. I'll let you get some sleep for your big game." Lydia stands from the bed and walks to my bedroom door but turns around right before opening it. "Wait." She looks at me with a huge shit-eating grin on her face. "You totally thought those letters were from me, didn't you? Is that why you were so nervous? Were you trying to figure out how to tell me that you've always been in love with me for as long as you can remember?"

Busted. "No! I was trying to think of how the hell not to break your heart."

Lydia puts her hand on her chest as if she's actually hurt. "Mission accomplished. Consider it broken."

"Oh, shut up." I might still have the conundrum of falling for two people at once, but at least I have my best friend. I can finally breathe again.

## Chapter 23

\*Love Interest\*

I'm an idiot. Probably the biggest idiot in the whole world. I'm so sorry I haven't written to you. To put out a classic - it's not you, it's me. There was a big mix up and I had myself convinced that it was my best friend sending me these notes. I love my best friend more than anything in the entire world, but not like that. So, I was in the

middle of an existential crisis and didn't want to send another note until I figured my shit out. Good news! It turns out you're not my best friend, so that's cool haha.

Now that I covered that, it's time to gush over that chapter I read. OH. MY. GOD. I'm already hooked. Like seriously hooked. Like that next chapter better be attached to my locker tomorrow or I might go crazy. Okay, I'm kidding. Kind of. Seriously though... I think I'm already in love with the main character.

What did I miss these past two weeks (aside from you...immensely)? I'm sure you know this, but we are officially in the district championship game. I have a feeling you were at my first two playoff games and if that's the case, thank you so much. Having you there really does make a difference.

## Page 55

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 6:39 pm*

Also... did I mention I'm sorry? Because I really am. That's it. That's the end. I hope you're doing awesome.

I read Marjorie's note over and over again and a few things stick out to me. First of all, she missed me. I wasn't the only one feeling the loss of this form of communication—the connection we only have within these notes. Except we have a connection outside of these notes too. I feel it. I just don't know if Marjorie does.

I'm also going crazy over the fact that she said she's in love with my main character. That character is based completely off me. If she's in love with them that means... no, I can't think like that. I don't care what Bug says. Hope only leads to disappointment.

Just like before, I print out the next chapter of my book then sit down at my desk to write back to Marjorie.

Hello, Little Miss Soon-to-be District Champ! You don't know how much of a relief it was to get your note. I was seriously worried I did or said something wrong. I also feel like I should be the one apologizing to you. These notes (and my secret identity) have caused a lot of issues for you. If you ever want to stop, I completely understand.

I'm so happy you like the first chapter. I hope you like the second just as much. The main character is very important to me so the fact that you love her means everything to me.

I'm not sure if anyone has ever told you this, but watching you on the basketball court is really beautiful. It's obvious how much you love it and how hard you work at

it. Did you have any idea you were going to end up being the best on the team this year? Knowing you, you don't even realize that you are. You are, though. No one even compares. I honestly don't understand how you weren't a varsity starter before this year. Anyway, I just want you to know that no matter what happens in this next game (or any of the games that could follow), I'm so proud of you

I hope you have a great day. I can't wait to hear what you think about chapter 2.

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The district playoff game is just over an hour drive for me. Bug can't go, but Delilah can, so I pick her up on the way.

"So, what's the deal with you and Marjorie?" Delilah asks while I drive.

I cringe. I really thought she had forgotten about this. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, you come to all of her games. Every game you wear a different shirt or sweatshirt with her name on it, so I have to assume they all belong to her. I thought maybe you guys were dating or something, but since you're not out, you're keeping it a secret."

I shake my head back and forth so forcefully that I give myself a headache. "It's not like that. Marjorie doesn't even know I'm gay."

"She doesn't? I thought you guys had gotten a lot closer now."

"We are... but... it's complicated."

Delilah stares at me for a long time before she speaks again. "You don't have to tell me anything you don't want to, but I also want you to know you can trust me. If you

ever want to talk about anything at all, I promise it will stay between us.”

Maybe it’s the long drive we have. Maybe it’s the way Delilah is staring at me with so much sincerity. Hell, it might even be the fact that it feels like I finally have a sister. But I want to tell her. I want her to know everything that’s been happening. I want her opinion on what I should do.

When I’m done explaining everything, she blows out a long breath. “That’s a lot.”

“I know, right?”

“Can I give you advice even though I have no experience with dating?”

I’m not sure if I actually want to hear what she has to say, but I could definitely use some advice. “Go for it.”

“I can understand why you didn’t tell her at first, but I think you should now.”

“But she said—”

“I know what she said,” Delilah interrupts. “But I bet that’s not the case now. Especially if she knew it was you.”

“What do you mean by that?”

Delilah smirks. “You really can’t see what’s right in front of you, can you? Marjorie likes you.”

Nope. Don’t listen. Don’t get your hopes up. “I doubt that.”

“Just promise me you’ll try a little harder to take notice of the little signs and then



reconsider your current position?”

“Fine.” I roll my eyes at her but can’t help but smile.

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This basketball game is closer than the other ones, and I'm on the edge of my seat as I watch. Capital Creek is currently up by one with two minutes left, but the lead keeps changing.

"Shit," I whisper under my breath when Capital Creek misses a shot that would give them more of a lead.

Delilah giggles at my intensity. "Funny. I didn't realize you were so into basketball."

"Shut up."

I don't have time to argue because I can't take my eyes off of the court. Capital Creek luckily gets their own rebound and now they are passing the ball around. One minute left. I watch the seconds click away as the other team desperately tries to foul them to stop the clock.

Unfortunately, the foul isn't needed as a mistake by Capital Creek lands the ball back into the hands of their competition. Forty seconds. The other team passes the ball back and forth and appear desperate as they search for an open shot. You've got this, Marjorie.

At twenty seconds, my worst nightmare comes true. Not only does the other team score, but it's a three-pointer. They are now winning by two. The look of sadness on Marjorie's face almost kills me. There's another look in her eyes as she calls their final timeout, though. It's a look of determination.

The thirty-second timeout seems to last for hours. My leg bounces up and down as I wait. The ball is passed into Jazmin and she searches the court as she hurriedly dribbles to their end. I can't keep my eyes on her, because they're on Marjorie. I can't look away as she runs back and forth and back and forth to try to shake off the defender. Then it happens. The girl defending Marjorie gets tripped up on her own feet and Marjorie breaks away, off to the far side. She waves her hands and Jazmin lunges the ball over to her. Marjorie takes one step back so she is behind the three point line. She lines up. She shoots. The last seconds tick down as the ball flies through the air. It's in! Oh my god! Marjorie just won the game.

Every single Capital Creek fan floods the court, including me. I can't get to Marjorie because she is already surrounded. I stay back as she high fives and talks to all of her adoring fans, her arms and hands moving animatedly as she talks. Then her eyes meet mine, and I swear her face lights up even more. Goosebumps spread over my arms as she walks over to me.

Before I know it, she scoops me up into her arms and spins me around. "We did it. We actually did it." She puts me back down but keeps a hand on my arm. "Party at my house tonight. Please tell me you can make it."

"I'll be there."

She stands completely still, just staring at me, and I wonder if she's waiting for me to say something else. Before I can, she turns to Delilah and tells her she hopes to see her there as well. Then she says a few other things I can't comprehend and walks away.

An elbow to my side from Delilah brings me back to the real world. "She totally wants you."

Chapter 24

Marjorie

“I take it we should buy a lot of pizza since I just watched you invite everyone in this gym to our house tonight?” my dad asks as he wraps me in a tight hug.

“Sorry not sorry, Pops. We need to celebrate.”

My dad laughs. “I couldn’t agree more.” He ruffles my hair then steps back. “So proud of you, kiddo. We’ll see you at home.”

I wave goodbye to my parents then get my stuff together and head out to the bus. I can’t tell you what we did or talked about during the ride because I’m on such a high from the game.

When I get back to my house, it’s just my family, Abby, and Jocelyn who are there so far. Every single one of them is still wearing their shirt with my name on it and a feeling of pride shoots through me. When I hear laughter in the kitchen, I realize we’re not the only people in the house.

When I walk in, I find Payton and Delilah standing by the kitchen bar talking. When Payton looks over at me and smiles, it feels like a million fireworks explode in my body at once. I want it to last forever. Luckily, she keeps staring, and the fireworks continue.

I hear the doorbell ring and a bunch of people come into my house, but I don’t care. Like a complete dork, I raise my hand and wave at her. “Hi.”

“Hi,” Payton repeats softly before walking over to me.

I shove my hands deep into my sweatpants pockets to keep me from doing what I really want to do—reaching out to touch her. “Thanks again for coming to my game.

It means a lot that you would come even though it's not your school."

Payton has her hands inside her pockets as well, and she rocks back and forth on the balls of her feet. "Seeing as how you knocked Griffin Hill out in game two, it's not like I can watch them."

"There's the MVP," Jazmin shouts as she enters the kitchen.

Soon all of my other teammates have joined her and they're whisking me away. I give Payton an apologetic smile and she motions that it's fine. The night goes by in a blur, and I sadly don't have the chance to talk to anyone for more than a few minutes before someone else is stealing me away.

The person I really want to talk to always seems to be the furthest away and it kills me. When I'm finally able to break away for what I'm sure will be just a few seconds, I find Payton. "Any chance you could stay a little later tonight? I'd love to be able to talk more once it's less crazy here."

Payton looks around as if she's searching for someone. "I just have to figure something out, but I think I should be able to make that work." Her eyes meet mine and the fireworks return. "I'll make it work," she says softly.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 6:39 pm*

Is she feeling the same thing I am? I hope so. At least, I think I hope so. Even though it makes another part of my life ridiculously complicated.

For the first time ever, I find myself wishing everyone would leave my house. After what feels like forever, the only people left are my family, Jocelyn, Abby, and Payton. Since Jocelyn and Abby are most likely staying over, I know this is as empty as the house is going to get tonight.

“Do you guys want to watch a shitty Lifetime movie with us?” Morgan asks as she throws herself down on a recliner just a few feet from where Jocelyn is laying on the floor.

I want to say no, but I’m honestly not sure what else to do with Payton. I look over toward her. “What do you think? You’re not going to get too scared, are you?”

“Of Lifetime?” Payton scoffs. “I love to watch actual scary movies. Lifetime is a joke.”

“We can watch something else if you want.” I’m weirdly afraid that Payton will decide to leave if we don’t do what she wants.

Payton shakes her head. “I didn’t say I don’t like Lifetime. I just said it’s a joke. But who doesn’t love a C-grade Lifetime movie? Sounds like the perfect Friday night to me.”

The perfect Friday night to me is any Friday night with you. Shit. Don’t say that out loud, Marjorie.

I don't get a chance anyway because Jocelyn starts to speak before I can. "You like scary movies? Which ones are your favorites? I love scary stuff, but there's only a few people I can get to watch it with me."

Jocelyn and Payton launch into a conversation about movies I haven't even heard of as Morgan and I pick out a Lifetime movie.

Morgan looks toward Payton who is still standing and gestures toward the couch. "You two can have the couch."

I hope Payton doesn't realize the way Morgan smirks at me after she says it. If she does, she doesn't show it, and instead sits down on one edge of the couch. I contemplate whether to sit on the other edge or closer to her then decide on the middle. Jocelyn looks from me to Payton to Morgan with furrowed eyebrows. What's that all about?

When the movie starts, I try to keep my eyes on the screen but keep sneaking peeks at Payton instead. She's wearing the sweatshirt I let her borrow before Christmas, and I think, not for the first time, how perfect it is on her. I notice her shiver and immediately jump up from the couch and go to the closet where we keep extra blankets.

I toss it at her as I sit back down. When she gives me a questioning look, I shrug. "You looked cold."

Goosebumps pop onto my arms in response to the way she's looking at me, and Payton must notice because she stares right at them. "Are you cold too?"

I don't want to admit that the goosebumps have nothing to do with the temperature and everything to do with her, so I nod.

She puts the blanket over herself but holds up the end of it. “We... umm... we can share... if... if you want.” When I don’t immediately reply, she shakes her head. “Or you can just have it. I’ll be okay. I promise.”

“No,” I say much louder than I mean to, grabbing the attention of both Jocelyn and Morgan. “Sharing sounds great.”

Morgan looks back at the TV screen, but Jocelyn continues to stare at us. That same look from before is on her face, but when I try to give her a questioning look right back, she moves her eyes to the TV. Weird.

When I sit under the blanket with Payton, we’re so close that our legs touch. We’re both wearing sweatpants, but the contact still sends a chill through my whole body. I refuse to look over at Payton because I’m afraid how much stronger these feelings will get, but I also can’t pay any attention to the movie.

I sit there in a complete stupor until the credits start to run. When I finally sneak a peek at Payton, I notice that her eyes are closed and mouth is hanging open, with the slightest bit of drool coming out. I must really be losing it because I think it’s the cutest damn thing in the entire world. The last thing I want to do is wake her up, but I know I don’t have a choice, so I gently shake her.

Payton startles awake and quickly wipes the drool from her face. “I’m sorry. I didn’t realize how tired I was.”

“Do you want to stay over? You probably shouldn’t drive if you’re this tired.” As soon as my words are out, I panic. I have sleepovers with friends all the time and that’s all Payton is. She’s just a friend. A friend that I have feelings for but who is most likely straight. Even if I swear there’s a connection between us. The same connection I feel with my mystery girl who is very much gay, but who I very much do not know. I’m so screwed.



“I don’t want to intrude. I have to work tomorrow.” The way Payton yawns at the end of her sentence confirms that she shouldn’t be driving.

“It’s fine. Abby is in the guest room, but you can sleep in my room, and I’ll take the couch.”

“I can take the couch. I’m already here.”

I shake my head. “Absolutely not. You’ll take my bed. No arguing. Plus, I work at the same time as you tomorrow. We can get breakfast before we go. We’re closer to the ice cream shop here anyway. If you need to borrow a visor or polo, mine should fit you.” It takes everything in me not to check her out while I talk about our clothing size. I have no question my polo will fit her. I don’t actually need to look.

“That’s really sweet of you, but I have extra stuff in my work locker. Are you sure about your room? Because I’m seriously okay on the couch.”

“What did I say?” I point a finger at her in mock lecture. “No arguing.”

Payton laughs and grabs my hand to push it away but freezes when I stare at our hands that are now connected. My heart is pounding in my chest so hard I can feel it in my ears. I hope Payton doesn’t hear it. We both stand like this, completely frozen in time, until I finally clear my throat and she pulls her hand away. I miss her touch almost immediately. I need a cold shower.

“What’s that?”

Shit. Did I say that out loud? “Oh. I was just saying I should shower tonight. Probably shouldn’t sleep in my own filth.”

“Makes sense.”

I look around the room and realize Morgan and Jocelyn left at some point without me even realizing. When I focus my attention back on Payton, I clap my hands together like a complete loser. “Let me walk you up to my room.”

After getting Payton settled in my room, I take a shower that doesn’t help at all. I lay on the couch and think about Payton upstairs in my bed. I wish my relationship with her was like my friendship with Lydia, so it wouldn’t be strange for me to crawl into bed with her and snuggle close. Just the thought of that makes my whole body hum. There’s no way I’m getting any sleep tonight.

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“Marjorie! Wake up!”

I’m startled awake at the sound of my brother’s voice. Apparently, at some point in my tossing and turning, I actually dozed off. It couldn’t have been for long because I feel like complete shit right now.

I rub my eyes and glare up at my brother. “What time is it?”

He looks at his watch. “It’s ten. You have to be at work at one today, right? Why are you sleeping on the couch?”

“Payton slept over. She’s sleeping in my bed.”

“But you normally just sleep in the same bed with your f—” Marcus cut himself off and a smirk spreads across his face. “Is she your girlfriend? I knew it.”

“She’s not my...” I lower my voice just in case she walks into the room. “She’s not my girlfriend.”

My brother crosses his arms, lifts both eyebrows, and smiles in a way that makes me want to smack him across the face. “But you want her to be.”

“I don’t...” I groan and throw my hand over my face. “I don’t know what I want.” Or who I want...

“Better decide. Here she comes.” My brother laughs and walks away, saying hello to Payton along the way.

I jump to my feet and smooth out my clothes with my hands. Payton’s hair is half in her ponytail, half out, and her clothes are completely disheveled. She is gorgeous. “Hi.” It’s not much, but it’s all I can push out since her appearance has my mouth going dry.

She pushes some of her loose hair behind her ear and looks to the ground. “Good morning.”

“I slept longer than I meant to, but we should still have time to get some food before work. Did you want to shower first? Not that you need a shower. You look amazing. Like, really clean and stuff. I just thought you might want one.”

Wow. Real smooth. I can be surrounded by a huge group of people and have no nerves and never overthink anything I say. I'm around Payton for two minutes and lose all control of everything. No wonder I'm perpetually single. Everyone who has ever told me I could get anyone I want has clearly never seen me in the presence of a pretty girl.

"A shower would be nice, actually. I can make it quick, though."

"You want to borrow some clothes from me?"

"That would be great. Thank you so much."

"Of course. I'll leave them in the bathroom for you."

I grab jeans, a long-sleeve shirt, and hoodie that I know will look amazing on Payton. I sit them on the bathroom counter along with a towel and washcloth. When Payton passes by me on my way out, she squeezes my arm to say thank you and I swear my heart squeezes at the exact same time.

I head downstairs and turn on the TV to distract myself, but I'm only able to half pay attention. I hear someone walk into the room and turn toward the sound expecting to see Payton.

Instead, it's Jocelyn. She gives me a shy smile and sits down beside me. She stares over at me for a very long minute before finally speaking. "Could we maybe talk at some point?"

"Of course. I'm free right now."

Something across the room catches Jocelyn's eye. "Not right now." She stands from the couch and walks away before I can respond.

I hear her say hello to someone, and this time when I turn, it is Payton standing there. She points her thumb in the direction of where Jocelyn just walked out of the room. “Is she okay?”

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 6:39 pm*

“I think so? I’m really not sure.” I don’t have the brain power to consider it right now because Payton looks so cute standing there in my clothes. Her hair is still wet from the shower and the wet strands are resting on my sweatshirt perfectly.

“Are you okay?”

“Me? Oh. Oh yeah. I’m great. You look nice and refreshed.” Nice and refreshed? Really? “Ready to get some food?”

“Is that burger place open yet?” Payton licks her lips.

“You’re obsessed.” I laugh and shake my head. “Do you really love burgers that much?”

“Burgers are fine.” Her face develops a hint of blush. “This is going to sound weird, but they have the best pickles. A lot of people think all dill pickles are the same, but trust me, they aren’t.”

She’s so fucking cute. “I didn’t realize I was in the presence of a pickle connoisseur.”

Payton shrugs and her blush deepens. “I just really love pickles.”

“I love that.” I do. I want to learn all about it. I want to know what other foods are her favorites and what brings the biggest smile to her face. I just want to know it all. I’ve never felt this way with anyone before. I’m not sure if I love it or hate it. That’s a worry for later. For now, I’m taking Payton to get the best pickles ever.

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“It’s another slow one today, girls,” Mrs. Fairfield says as soon as we walk into work.

Mr. Fairfield walks up beside her and puts an arm around his wife. “Enjoy it while it lasts. The first unseasonably warm day we get, this place is going to be crazy.”

“I know.” Mrs. Fairfield smiles at her husband in a way I suddenly wish someone would smile at me. “Not to mention the first day of spring next month. It could be frigid, and we’ll still be packed.”

“As it should be.” Mr. Fairfield smiles over at us. “Will you girls be okay if we step out for a bit?”

Payton and I nod at the same time. When they turn to walk away, Payton takes a step toward them. “Oh, Mrs. Fairfield, did Eli tell you he’s working for me on Wednesday?”

“He did. But thank you for double-checking.”

When Mr. and Mrs. Fairfield walk away, I turn toward Payton. “Wednesday?”

“That’s your game, right? I didn’t get it wrong, did I?”

“No, you’re right. I just didn’t even tell you, so I’m surprised.”

“Yeah, I made Eli figure it out for me then asked him to work that day.”

“So, you and Eli are pretty close, huh?” When Payton nods, I figure this is the perfect time to figure out what I’ve been wondering. “Are you guys dating?”

Much to my surprise, Payton bursts into laughter. It takes her a bit to gain control, but once she does, a few more giggles escape. “Sorry. The thought of dating Eli is equal parts hilarious and gross. He’s like my annoying little brother. I love him, but no, never.”

“Got it.” One step closer to the real question. “Are you dating someone else?”

Payton swallows hard, and for a few seconds, I question whether she’s even going to answer. “No. I’m not.”

“Do you have a type?” I’m afraid I might be pushing it now, but I can’t stop myself. I need to know.

“I, um...” Payton’s eyes drift toward the back of the shop. “I forgot to change into my work polo. I’ll be back.”

Shit. I definitely made her uncomfortable. I wonder if it bothered her so much because she realizes why I was asking. I might have just completely given myself away. I might as well have screamed, “I like you and I wish you were a big ol’ lesbian so I could date you.”

I guess she’s not too bothered because when she comes back out looking adorable in her work polo, she’s also carrying the stool I always sit on.

“A peace offering,” she says quietly as she places it in front of me. She stands there staring and I can tell she wants to say something, but she isn’t.

“I shouldn’t have pushed it. I’m sorry.”



*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 6:39 pm*

Payton shakes her head. "It's fine. I just don't normally talk about that stuff."

"Then let's talk about something else." I sit on my stool facing her. "Like how great it's going to be to have you at my game on Wednesday."

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Ugh. We're going to lose this game. I look up at the clock. One minute left, no timeouts, and down by five. It's not completely impossible, but seeing as how we can't get a play set up correctly, I know exactly what's coming. The other team now has the ball and they're passing it around to run down the clock. We're trying to foul them, but even that's unsuccessful. I'm guarding the best player on their team, so I'm the last one who should be fouling their man, but when she gets the ball and time continues to tick away, I have no choice.

She makes both and I check the clock again. Down by seven with twenty seconds to go. When Samara misses an open shot and the other team gets the ball back, Coach signals for us to back off. It's over.

We made it farther than I ever thought we would before the season started and we did just as well as last year's team, but I'm still disappointed. After congratulating the other team, I sit back down on the bench. I just need a little bit of time.

After a few minutes, my coach comes over and puts a hand on my shoulder. "You've still got another year, kiddo. And a lot to be proud of. Keep that head up."

I nod but continue to stare at the ground. I'm not ready to face anyone yet. At least,

that's what I think until I feel a more delicate hand squeeze my shoulder and look up to see Payton. Suddenly, I have no interest in being alone anymore.

Payton tilts her head to the side as she stares down at me. "Are you okay?"

"I will be." I smile and pat the spot next to me. "Not sure how your parents feel about you staying out late on a school night, but any chance you could come over for a movie?"

"That won't be a problem."

"You're not too tired, are you?"

Payton shakes her head. "I'll be fine. I'll get an energy drink to chug before I leave your house."

"Nonsense. There's a convenience store right by my house. Let me get it."

"Are you sure?"

"Positive. I'll also get some pickles."

Neither of us can say anything else because my coach announces we have to get on the bus to head home. I wave to Payton as I walk away. As she smiles at me, I memorize the way her lips curve up. The game is forgotten, and all I can think about is how excited I am to get home.

## Chapter 25

\*Love Interest\*

I can't do it anymore. It doesn't feel right. I need to tell Marjorie the truth. But how?  
And when?

## Chapter 26

Marjorie

When are you free? I'm sorry to keep bothering you about this, but I really need to talk to you.

I stare down at my text from Jocelyn and chastise myself for dropping the ball on this. She's been asking me to talk for weeks, and I have yet to find the time. I can't even blame basketball since our last game was over two weeks ago.

The truth is, I've been taking more shifts at work to spend more time with Payton. Whenever I work up the courage, I ask her to get dinner or a snack with me after work. And by whenever I get the courage, I mean twice. I've done that two times. Both times were great, and I still can't be sure since she hasn't told me, but I have a suspicion she likes girls. Maybe it's a hunch or intuition or maybe it's just wishful thinking.

How does Friday night after school sound? I have to be at work at five, but that should give us enough time, right?

Now that I've finally done what I should have done weeks ago, I lay down on my bed and reward myself by taking out one of Mystery Girl's old letters to read. Our letters haven't been as frequent as before. I know some of that is my fault since my mind is preoccupied, but it's also taking longer for her to write back to me. I almost wish I could say that has helped me get over the crush, but it really hasn't. Every time I see a new note and another chapter of her book attached to my locker, my heart rate picks up and my hands get clammy. The letter I read this time is the one I got a few days

after losing our playoff game.

Hey! This is probably a stupid question, but how are you doing now that basketball season is over? I just wanted to let you know again that I'm so proud of you. You did amazing this season. I know right now all you can think about is how it ended, but if you play well enough, it's always going to end in a loss (unless, of course, you win the state playoff, but let's save that for next year). Anyway, you're great. I'm proud. End of story.

I included TWO CHAPTERS this time to help cheer you up. I really hope you enjoy them (crossing everything). Thanks for encouraging me to write so much. It means more to me than you'll ever know.

I really hope you know how much you mean to me. If things change or this stops or something goes wrong, I want you to know that these notes have meant the world to me. This time in my life is one I will never forget and that's all thanks to you. You don't understand the extent of it, but you've changed my life

## Page 61

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 6:39 pm*

I stare at her words. I changed her life? My letters did that? I can't wrap my head around it, but I have to fight back tears as I read those words not for the first time. She thinks I'm changing her life, but she doesn't know how much she's changing mine as well. Yet, I'm still in a terrible predicament. Falling for two people at once isn't fun. I'm once again contemplating what I'm supposed to do when I get a reply from Jocelyn saying that Friday works. I may not have my life figured out, but at least I can help someone else figure out theirs.

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After school on Friday, I stand by my car and wait for Jocelyn. I wave my hands in the air when I see her leave the building. A big smile comes to her face as she walks over to me. It's a really nice smile. Once this girl gets more confidence, she's going to break a lot of hearts.

When she is close enough to hear me, I motion around us. "Do you want to talk here or...?" I let my voice trail off because it's really up to her.

She looks around as if she's trying to make sure no one is watching us. "Could we go for a drive?"

"Of course." I walk to the passenger side and open the door for her.

Jocelyn's eyes go wide as if she's surprised. "Wow. Thanks."

"What can I say? My parents raised me right." I wink at her then walk over to my side of the car.

“So, I have a problem,” she says once I’m driving.

“A problem?”

“Maybe not a problem, but more of an issue.”

“Isn’t that essentially the same thing?” I laugh to try to keep the conversation light.

Jocelyn apparently doesn’t appreciate it because she groans and rubs her temples.

“Maybe I should call it a situation.”

“Okay. What’s the situation?” And why the hell are we talking in circles?

“So, I like someone.”

Okay, this is getting interesting now. “Oh yeah?”

Jocelyn nods. “She’s older than me. I don’t know why I always fall for girls who are older, but apparently it’s my thing. Anyway, we’ve gotten close recently and I know she likes girls, but I’m not sure if she likes me.”

“You should go for it.”

“What?”

Jocelyn sounds surprised by my quick response. I’m honestly kind of surprised too. Apparently, falling for two people has made me think everyone should throw caution to the wind. “Yeah. Go for it. Shoot your shot.”

“I… I mean, I want to… but that’s why I need to talk to you.”

“What’s up?” Not sure how I can help, but it’s nice that someone thinks I can.

“First of all, I want to apologize for acting so weird around you and Payton.”

“It’s no big deal. I didn’t even notice.” Kind of a lie, but she doesn’t need to know that.

“Well, there was a reason for it. I promise.”

“Okay.” I’m not really sure how I’m supposed to respond to that because I’m so confused right now.

“I was trying to figure out how to act around someone I want to date. So, I was hoping watching you and Payton would give me some answers. Then I realized I probably looked like a huge creep so I figured I should just talk to you.”

“Payton and I aren’t dating.”

“But you want to, right?”

“Did Morgan tell you that?” My sister needs to shut her mouth sometimes. She doesn’t even know what she’s talking about. Well, okay, she does, but she didn’t hear it from me, so she shouldn’t spread it around.

## Page 62

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 6:39 pm*

“Morgan didn’t say anything. It’s written all over your face. Well, both of your faces.” Jocelyn laughs. “I have to admit, I was the slightest bit jealous to see my first crush finally smitten with someone, but you two are adorable.”

I point to myself like an idiot. “I was your first crush?”

Jocelyn laughs even harder this time, throwing her head back as she does. “You didn’t realize that? You were my gay awakening way before I even wanted to admit I was gay.” Jocelyn stops laughing and looks at me with a straight face. “Don’t worry. I don’t have a crush anymore. That was a long time ago before I knew you really well.”

I bring my hand to my chest as if I’m offended. “Ouch.”

Jocelyn shakes her head. “That’s not what I meant. I just mean we’ve gotten a lot closer since then.”

“Still not making it any better.”

“Fine. Whatever. Just as long as you don’t think I’m over here pining for you.”

“Understood. So, who is this older girl you’re pining for?” Please say Jazmin. Please say Jazmin.

“It’s actually your friend Jazmin. We talked a lot at the New Year’s Eve party and started talking after basketball games and stuff. Then, at the party at your house after you guys won districts, she gave me her number.”



Way to go, Jazmin. I smile over at Jocelyn. “I have some good news for you.”

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When I get to work, I check the schedule then text Payton. I’m sad we don’t work together tonight :(

I’m happy when I get an immediate response. I know! I work tomorrow morning.

I see that. I’m looking at the schedule right now. I only hesitate for a moment before sending another text. Since we’re both off tomorrow night, do you want to hang out?

That sounds great. Did you have anything in mind?

Anything with you sounds great. At least I know how to be smooth over texts.

There’s actually an indoor mini golf course that just opened about fifteen minutes from my house. The only problem is it’s about a half hour from you. Is that okay?

It’s perfect. I love mini golf. I can pick you up on the way.

We send texts back and forth the whole time I work, talking about everything except the one question I want to ask—is this a date?

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I take a deep breath when I pull up to the house at the address Payton gave me. It’s a cute townhouse with a black door and shutters. With a lot of friends, I just text them when I arrive, but I’m not going to do that with Payton. I have no reason to believe this is a date, but just in case it turns out it is, I’m going to do it right. I get out of the car and pause for just a moment before knocking on the front door.

A woman who looks like an older version of Payton opens the door. Her already wide grin gets even bigger when she sees me. “You must be Marjorie. I’ve heard so much about you.”

“Thanks, Mom. Bye.” Payton hurries past her mom and pushes me out the door. “If she gets talking, we’ll never leave,” she whispers.

As I continue to get pushed further away, I wave my hand at Payton’s mom. “It was so nice to meet you, ma’am. I hope we have more time to talk later.”

Payton’s mom says something I can’t make out as Payton literally drags me to my car. Once we’re inside, I laugh. “Your mom seems nice. You know, from what I could gather in five seconds.”

“She’s very nice. She’s also extremely talkative and loves to embarrass me. We were probably just a few more seconds away from her inviting you inside to see my baby pictures.”

“In that case...” I pretend I’m reaching down to take my seatbelt back off, but Payton grabs my hand to stop me.

I instantly forget everything I was about to do because Payton’s hand is on mine. Her skin is touching my skin. My heart is racing. My palms are sweaty. I’m a mess in the best way possible.

Payton quickly pulls her hand away as if she’s been burnt. “Sorry.” She stares straight ahead and I wonder what went wrong. Was I super obvious how that touch affected me? “We should get to the golf place before it gets too crazy.”

Unfortunately, with the golf course being new, getting there before it was busy wasn’t a possibility. It’s already packed when we get inside. The worker takes our

name then tells us they'll call when it's our turn. She directs us down the hall to where there's a concession stand, tables, and a few TVs.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 6:39 pm*

I turn to Payton and shrug. “I actually could go for some food.”

We decide to split an order of loaded nachos, which probably isn’t the best plan if you’re trying to make a good impression on someone, but it doesn’t matter because the nachos are good. They are damn good.

“I think I’ve died and gone to Heaven,” Payton says before shoving another huge handful into her mouth.

I nod and take a big bite as well, chewing a bit before I speak again. “When I saw there were pickles on them, I knew we had to get them.”

Talk of pickles makes my mind momentarily flash to my mystery girl. What are the chances that both girls I’m falling for are obsessed with pickles? How strange. Payton and my mystery girl are so similar that if I didn’t know any better, I’d think it was her. The notes are clearly coming from someone at school though. Plus, I told Payton about the mystery girl and she never said anything. She wouldn’t do that.

“Everything okay?”

I’m brought back to reality by the sound of Payton’s voice. “Yeah. Sorry. I think I’m just in a little bit of a food coma.”

“I hope that doesn’t hinder your golf game. It might look bad if Capital Creek’s basketball MVP gets beaten by Griffin Hill’s bookworm.”

The hint of cockiness in her voice both amuses and intrigues me. This is a side of

Payton I haven't seen yet. I'm quickly learning I love every side of her. Wow. Love... really? Might be going a little strong now. I've never been in love so I don't even know what that feels like. All I know is every time I'm with Payton, I'm happier than I've ever been before. I think about her all the time, even when we're not together. Every little thing reminds me of her. When something happens, she's the one I want to tell. This all came on so quickly, and I'm not sure how to feel about any of it.

"Don't worry. A little food coma never kept me from getting the W."

Just in time with my own cockiness, Payton's name is called over the loudspeaker, which means it's time to prove that what I'm saying is true. My eyes go wide as I take in the golf course. It's the kind of mini golf course I'd expect to find at the beach, not in middle-of-nowhere Pennsylvania. The lights are low, which causes the glow-in-the-dark objects to glow. Each hole has its fair share of obstacles, some of which move or make noise. Maybe this won't be as easy as I expected.

My first shot bounces off an annoying laughing clown and comes right back to me. Payton picks up the ball and hands it to me. "Doesn't count if it comes back. At least, that's how my mom and I always play."

"I like that rule." And thank God it exists in this game because my ball bounces off that stupid clown's stupid laughing mouth three more times before finally going through.

Once I get past that part, it only takes two more shots for me to get it in. Unfortunately, it takes Payton the exact same amount.

She kneels down by the clown and puts her arm around him. "Take a picture of me with the clown who almost broke you."

I roll my eyes. “You’re sick.”

Sickeningly cute. Payton smiles wide with her tongue slightly out of her mouth. Even though she’s teasing me, it’s absolutely adorable. Actually, I think the fact that she’s teasing me actually makes it that much better. Payton is normally so shy. I love to see her open up more.

The next few holes, the lead continues to go back and forth. At one point, Payton puts an arm over my shoulder and leans in slightly, causing my whole body to go into overdrive. “Wouldn’t it be embarrassing to have to say that I’m better at bowling and mini golf? For your sake, we’ll make sure we never play basketball just in case.”

I bring my hand to my heart. “I appreciate that. My ego couldn’t handle it.” I playfully shove her shoulder. “You might be getting ahead of yourself though. We still have half the course left.”

Payton smirks at me and it seems like my stomach might tumble right out of my body. “What can I say? I’m feeling uncharacteristically confident tonight.”

We continue to go back and forth, teasing each other relentlessly with each hole, until we get to the last one and it’s completely tied up.

“All comes down to this one,” I say as I stare at the only thing standing between me and victory. Unfortunately, it’s another clown. This one doesn’t laugh but kicks its legs back and forth instead.

“Bad luck for you. Your old friend is back.”

I glare at the stupid clown. “He can suck it. I’m not letting him take me down this time.”

I hit the ball and pump my fist when it goes right between his swinging legs and lands a few inches from the hole. I smirk at Payton and cross my arms. “Let’s see what you got.”

Payton cracks her fingers and does some dramatic stretching. She stares down the clown the same way I did then hits the ball right between his legs as well. Except unlike mine, that was a few inches from the hole, hers goes right into it.

She jumps up and down a few times then does an awkward little dance that is so very endearing. I can’t even be mad that I lost, because the truth is, I would lose all over again to get to witness this scene for a second time.

“Congrats!” I put my hand up for her to high five and hold onto it when she does. I think about lowering our hands together and intertwining our fingers, but then I think better of it. I still don’t even have any confirmation that Payton is gay. I drop my hand and bring it to my side. “Since you won, what do you want to do to celebrate?”

“There’s a cafe by my house that has really good hot chocolate. Want to go there?”

“You’re the champ. Completely up to you. Hot chocolate does sound amazing though.”

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 6:39 pm*

“I figure we might as well drink it now before it starts getting warm out.”

“I’d argue that hot chocolate is good no matter what the weather is outside.”

“And I won’t hold that against you.”

Our banter continues the whole way to the cafe, and it’s so much fun the fifteen-minute drive goes by in a flash. Payton’s not lying about the hot chocolate. It’s by far the best I’ve ever had. “You were right about getting the one with peanut butter in it,” I tell her. “Oh my god.”

The door to the cafe opens and when I look over, I can’t believe my eyes. “No way,” I say before breaking into a giggle.

When Payton gives me a questioning look, I lean closer to her. “Don’t look now, but the guy who just walked in is the first person I ever kissed. I was eleven and starting to have feelings for girls, so I kissed him at summer camp to prove I wasn’t gay.”

“How did that go for you?” Payton asks with a laugh.

“It definitely cleared up a lot.”

We both laugh together. “Been there.” As soon as the words are out, Payton puts her hand over her mouth, which tells me she didn’t mean to say that.

I don’t want to push it, but at the same time, I need to know. “What do you mean?”



“I kissed Eli when we were ten years old and immediately threw up afterward. Eli still claims it’s because we ate pizza that had been sitting out overnight, but I’m sticking to the fact that it felt like I was kissing my brother. Plus, Eli used to eat bugs. Who wants to kiss someone who eats bugs?”

“Has it gotten better? You know... the kissing?” And is it with girls now?

“Wouldn’t know. Haven’t done it since.”

“Sorry. I didn’t mean with Eli. I mean overall.”

“I... umm... I haven’t kissed anyone else.” She puts her hand over her face. “That’s really embarrassing to admit. I...” She lowers her hands and also her voice. “I like girls.”

I have to stop myself from doing a happy dance because I can tell that wasn’t easy for Payton to admit. “In case you didn’t know, I’m completely cool with that.”

I’m happy when Payton laughs at my dumb joke. “Yeah. I kind of figured that.” Her face becomes serious and she stares down at her hands. “I haven’t told many people.”

I reach across the table and put my hand on top of hers. “Don’t worry. I won’t tell anyone.”

Even though I don’t want to, I quickly pull my hand away. Since she’s not out, I’m sure the last thing Payton wants is to be seen in public holding hands with another girl.

“Thank you, Marjorie.” Payton looks deep into my eyes and it’s right there. That connection. The pull. There’s no way I’m imagining it.

Now the question is what I do with it. I have so much to sort out myself, and Payton isn't even out. All I can do is let time run its course. Enjoy the present and try not to overthink what's to come. That's easier said than done.

I change the subject to something lighter and the heaviness of the moment is quickly forgotten. When we get back to Payton's house, I turn off my car and walk her to the door.

I shove my hands deep in my pockets and bounce up and down. I have so much nervous energy, I have no idea what to do with it. "Thanks for hanging out with me tonight. I had a lot of fun."

"Thank you. For everything."

Even though she doesn't say it, we both know what she's talking about. I'm not sure what to say next, but my mouth takes care of that before my brain has a chance to overthink it. "Just so you know I'm still exchanging notes with the mystery girl." There. Honesty. The best way to go.

"I know. I mean, I kind of figured."

I rock back and forth and watch my feet as I do. "Yeah, so... um... I just... uh, wanted you to know that, because... yeah."

"Do you still not wanna know who she is?"

Payton's question takes me by surprise, so I'm not sure how to answer. "I don't think she wants me to know."

"But, what do you want?"

## Page 65

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 6:39 pm*

Isn't that the question of the year? "I... I don't know... I have a lot of conflicting feelings about it, and I'm just not sure."

Payton nods slowly. "That makes sense."

Does it, though? I take a step closer and hold out my arms. My heart hammers in my chest when Payton accepts my hug and holds me tightly in return. She has to feel my heart beating. There's no way she doesn't. We stay like this for a long time. Longer than is probably normal, but I don't care. I don't want to let go. I don't ever want to let go.

Eventually, Payton does, so I have no choice. I mutter another thank you before hopping off her porch and heading toward my car. After a few steps, I turn around to sneak one more peek at her. Payton is already staring at me and when our eyes meet, the cutest smile spreads across her face. I smile back, and when I turn around, there's an extra skip in my step.

Best. Night. Ever.

## Chapter 27

*\*Love Interest\**

"I should tell her, right? I definitely need to tell her now?" I ask Bug and Delilah as I lean up against my locker.

They don't answer because they are too busy reading the note from Marjorie, so I

push off the lockers and stand behind them to read it once again myself

Hey, you! First of all, I wanted to tell you I loved the last chapter you gave me. Mark my words: This book is going to be a best seller someday. There's something else I need to talk to you about though. I need to be honest. Somewhere in the span of sending these notes, I've developed a pretty substantial crush on you. The problem is I've developed a big crush on someone else as well. Someone who doesn't only exist in a fantasy world. I'm not sure what to do because I love this world we've created with each other, but it's also not real life. I want to keep talking, but I also need to be honest and open with you about everything. I don't even know for sure if this other girl likes me, but there's a definite connection there, so I have to imagine she feels it too. I don't know what this means for us, but I do know that I don't want to lose you. I'm sorry. I'm not sure what else to say or do. Maybe you'll have some grand idea. You're amazing like that

"So, I need to tell her, right?" I ask once again.

"You definitely need to tell her," Delilah says as she hands the note back to me.

"Yeah. You needed to be honest like... yesterday," Bug adds.

I roll my eyes at him. "You don't have to be rude. She said she didn't want to know. What was I supposed to do?" I look between him and Delilah. "How pissed do you think she's going to be?"

Delilah shrugs. "I think as long as she hears it from you, she'll be fine."

"You have to tell her for multiple reasons. One is that she clearly likes you, like real-life you, not just the girl writing the letters. Second, if you tell her, you guys can start texting each other all your sweet nothings and that gets me off the hook." He laughs so I know he's kidding, but the comment still earns him a shove.

“You act like it’s so hard to deliver a few notes.”

“It is when I have to be all incognito.”

“Excuse me,” a voice says. All three of us look over to where Mrs. Fairfield is standing. Her arms are crossed over her chest, but she’s luckily smiling. “I hate to break up this little locker powwow, but it’s the first day of spring and it’s unseasonably warm out, so I need all hands on deck from my after-school crew.” She looks at me and Bug. “You two will be on the outside window to start.” Then she turns her attention to Delilah. “And you’ll be inside. Marjorie should be in soon to join you.”

I grab my visor from my work locker and put Marjorie’s note inside of it. We are super busy, so I don’t have any more time to think about the Marjorie situation. After about an hour, a car pulls into the parking lot that I unfortunately recognize. I wish I didn’t know what car he drives. I wish I didn’t know any of it. But I do, and now I can’t breathe. I want to run in the back and hide, but Eli is busy making milkshakes so I have to stay at the window. I watch him get closer and closer, his whole stupid perfect family right there with him. I pray that Eli gets back over here before they make it to the window, but he doesn’t. Of course he doesn’t, because that’s just my luck.

He walks up to the window, and I wonder what he’s going to say. What does a man say to the child he simply gave up?

“I’ll take two small vanilla cones, a medium chocolate milkshake, and a large twist in a cup.”

Apparently, that’s what he says. He gives his fucking ice cream order as if he’s not staring his daughter straight in the eye. I watch him, completely dumbfounded, hoping if he doesn’t acknowledge me that he at least moves off to the side so I don’t

have to see his stupid face with the stupid eyes he gave me. He doesn't do that, so I turn around to prepare his order.

The problem is, my hands are shaking, I'm having trouble breathing, and I can barely see. Sweat gathers on my face and hands. My vision is completely blurry now, and I realize it's because I have tears in my eyes.

"Payton? Payton, are you okay?"

It's Marjorie's voice, but I can't figure out where it's coming from. I'm having a full-blown panic attack now. It's like I'm hearing everything from under water, but I can make out Bug explaining that my dad is here. Then, I hear some commotion, and I can't be sure, but I think I hear Marjorie say something like, "We don't need your business, asshole. Get out of here."

Mr. and Mrs. Fairfield are now speaking with stern voices, but I don't hear any expletives. I really hope Marjorie isn't getting in trouble, especially since it's all my fault.

A warm, comforting hand lands on my arm. "I'm going to get you out of here," Marjorie whispers in my ear.

I nod my head, but I still can't comprehend what's happening. Soon we're in a car and my head is down between my legs as I try to catch my breath. There's a hand rubbing circles on my back, and it's calming me down. I can finally breathe again.

The car comes to a stop and my head feels too heavy to lift up. "Where are we?"

## Page 66

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 6:39 pm*

“We’re at your house, sweetie,” Marjorie answers softly.

I shake my head. I can’t let my mom see me like this. She’ll blame herself and feel terrible. That’s the last thing I want. “There’s a playground right down the street. It has its own parking lot. Park there.” I add a desperate, “Please,” when I realize how demanding I sound.

Marjorie starts driving again and continues to rub my back. “Whatever you need, I’m here. I’m right here.”

## Chapter 28

### Marjorie

I sit on the merry-go-round next to Payton who has yet to say a word. I’ve never heard her say anything about her dad, but I didn’t realize things were so bad. It all happened so quickly, I’m still having trouble processing it. One moment I was helping customers, then the next thing I knew, Payton looked like she was about to be sick. It was one of the scariest things I’ve ever seen. She was physically there, but I don’t think she could hear or comprehend a single word I was saying.

Eli came over and explained to me that it was Payton’s estranged father at the window. I looked over at the man, who had a cocky smile on his face, and completely lost it. I never understood the saying, “Seeing red,” until that moment. I saw a shit ton of red, and I was out for blood. I yelled at him to leave, and I think I might have dropped a few swear words, but I’m not sure. I’ve never acted that way at work, and now I’m not really sure if I still have a job. It doesn’t matter though. All that matters

is Payton. I need to be there for her. I need to make this better, if that's at all possible.

I reach out and grab her hand, and for the first time, I intertwine our fingers together. I don't think about how good it feels or how I want to hold her hand every day for the rest of my life. Okay... so clearly I do. But the more important thing on my mind is making sure she's okay.

She drops my hand and I figure that's the end of it until she lays back and motions for me to lay next to her. As soon as my back is on the cold metal, she connects our hands once again. I look over and smile at her, and I'm surprised when she actually smiles back.

I stare up at the sky and think about how to handle this. "I'm right here when you want to talk. If you want to talk. If you just want to lay here together, that's fine too."

I'm not sure how long we stay like this. It seems like forever but also feels like no time passes at all. I'm starting to think Payton decided on the no-talking plan until her voice floats between us out of nowhere.

"My dad left when I was five years old. He was cheating on my mom and ended up getting the other woman pregnant. If it would have just ended there, I probably would have been okay, but he stayed in the area. So, now I run into him at least once a year, and he pulls the same shit he did today. He acts like he doesn't know me. He never wanted a daughter. Now he has two sons, so he's living his perfect life. I shouldn't know the part about him never wanting me. My mom would have never told me that. She would have blamed herself forever. Told me she wasn't good enough, and I was just collateral damage. But we ran into him when I was nine, and they really got into it. He told her right in front of me that she should have known this would happen because having a little girl was never the plan." Payton stares up at the sky, and it looks like she might start to cry. "I try to see the good in the world. I want to believe the best. But my mind always goes back to that day. It goes back to the way my own



flesh and blood can see me on the street and just look right through me. I've tried so hard to be okay. I see a therapist. I have my mom and Bug... sorry... Eli. I call him Bug because of his bug-eating days. Now I have you and Delilah. I'm trying really hard to let more people in, but it's not easy."

"Payton, I..." Shit. I don't know how to respond to all of this. Growing up with a perfect family, it's easy to assume it's the same for everyone. So many people I'm close to have already dealt with so much crap though. It almost makes me feel guilty that I haven't. "I'm so sorry. God, that sounds so stupid to say. Me being sorry right now does nothing to help."

Payton smiles over at me and squeezes my hand. "You've done so much more for me than you could ever imagine, Marjorie."

I smile at her. Her smile grows. We move closer. Our faces are moving closer. I stop for a moment, afraid that it's just me, but the distance between us continues to close. Our lips are inches apart. I lick my own. Payton closes her eyes and does the same. I'm about to kiss Payton. I'm about to be her first kiss with a girl ever. The first kiss she doesn't throw up after. At least, I really hope she doesn't. I pucker my lips, ready to feel hers any moment.

A loud sound makes us both jump. It's Payton's phone. Her damn phone.

Payton cringes then gives me an apologetic smile. She looks at her phone and holds it out to me showing me that it's her mom. "I'm sorry. I need to take this."

My heart is still pounding from our almost kiss, so I close my eyes while I listen to one side of Payton's conversation. "Hey, Mom! Yeah, he did, but how... oh. I'm okay now. Yes. I promise. I'm at the playground with Marjorie. No, that's not necessary. Tell him I'm good. Ugh. Okay. Fine. See you soon." When she hangs up the phone, her eyes are even more apologetic. "My mom and Mr. Howard are coming

down here. I'm sorry. Delilah called and told them what happened so now they're freaking out."

Her mom and Mr. Howard? Why were they coming down together, and why did Delilah call to tell them what happened? I don't get a chance to ask because soon they are speedwalking over to us.

Payton's mom thanks me for being there for her then wraps her daughter in a tight hug. Mr. Howard stands behind them. He's rocking back and forth and his face is beet red. When Payton and her mom pull apart, he shakes his head. "Are you okay? I'll kill him. I swear, I'll kill that asshole."

I've only met Delilah's dad a few times when he's stopped by the ice cream shop, and he's always soft-spoken and sweet. He must be really pissed. I don't blame him, but it makes me wonder why he's taking it this personally. Payton's mom starts to rub soothing circles on his back, and it all makes sense. They're dating. That's why Payton and Delilah are together so much now. I had no idea. It makes me wonder what else I don't know about Payton. I understand why she doesn't like to open up to people, but it makes me sad that she didn't feel close enough to me to let me know about her mom and Delilah's dad. I try not to think about it though, because this isn't about me. It's about her and what she's going through right now.

I rub Payton's back in the same way her mom rubs Mr. Howard's, and her mom gives me a knowing smile. What does she know? Can she tell I have a huge crush on her daughter? Does she know that Payton probably (hopefully) feels the same way?

My phone starts to ring. I cringe when I see it's Mrs. Fairfield. Is this when I get fired? I hold up my phone. "I need to take this, sorry."

Payton smiles and leans into me. "It's okay. I'm really tired, anyway. I should go home and rest."

“Can I call you later? To make sure you’re okay?”

Payton’s body trembles against mine, and I hope that means I have as much of an effect on her as she has on me. “I’d really like that,” she says softly, and now I’m the one with goosebumps.

I step away and give her one last wave, then answer my phone. “Hi, Mrs. Fairfield. I’m so sorry about how I acted today. I couldn’t stand seeing Payton so upset and I reacted without thinking. I’m willing to accept any consequences of my actions.”

Much to my surprise, Mrs. Fairfield starts to laugh. “Oh, honey, that’s not why I called at all. I wanted to thank you. You did what I should have done a long time ago. That asshole has been pulling stuff like this for way too long. I’ve tried to remain professional, but I don’t want someone like that at my establishment.” She laughs even harder now. “Thanks to you, I don’t think we’ll have to worry about that anymore.”

I can’t speak for a moment because I’m so dumbstruck. That’s not the response I expected at all. “Wow. I’m so glad to hear you’re not mad. I thought I was getting fired.”

“You’d have to do much worse to be fired, dear. You bring in half of our customers.” Her voice then becomes more quiet and her tone is serious. “How is she?”

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 6:39 pm*

“Payton’s tough. She’s shaken up right now, but she’ll be okay.”

“She’s lucky to have you.”

I’m not sure what to say to that, so I ask, “Do you want me to come back to work?”

“That’s okay. We’re good here. I’ll see you this weekend.”

Later that night, I call Payton, and I’m happy to hear that it sounds like she’s doing much better than earlier. I don’t keep her long and don’t say anything about our almost kiss because I know she’s tired.

The next day at school though, she’s all I can think about. We text all day and she’s insistent that she’s okay, but I’m still worried about her. I need to see her. I want to see that smile. Truthfully, I also want to see if maybe we can continue what almost happened last night. We’ll see. I don’t want to push anything.

Since I know she doesn’t work, I decide to surprise her by coming to her house after school with a jar of pickles. I pick up the pickles and a ribbon then drive to her house. Before getting out of my car, I tie the ribbon around the jar of pickles for her.

I walk up the sidewalk and take a deep breath before knocking on the door. Payton’s mom opens the door and greets me with a warm smile. “Marjorie! It’s great to see you. Does Payton know you’re coming? She’s not home yet. She had to make a few stops after school.”

“She doesn’t know.” I hold up the pickle jar. “I wanted to surprise her. I thought this

would make her smile.”

“That’s so sweet.” Her mom brings her hand to her chest and for a moment, I think she’s about to cry. “She shouldn’t be too long. If you don’t have anywhere to be, you can come in and wait for her.”

“That would be great.” I walk through the doorway and wait there.

“Do you want a drink or a snack or anything?” Payton’s mom asks.

“I’m okay. Thank you, though.”

“I’d love to talk more and get to know you better, but I actually have to run out and grab a few groceries. I’m so sorry. I’ll take you to Payton’s room. She has a TV and a ton of books up there, so it shouldn’t be hard to keep yourself entertained until she gets home.”

“Thank you, ma’am.”

I follow her mom up the stairs and down the hall. Her mom opens the door then says something before walking away, but I don’t hear it because I’m mesmerized by Payton’s room. It’s so very her, which means it’s perfect. The walls are such a light blue, they almost appear white. Unlike my room, there aren’t any posters or pictures on the wall. The only things on the wall are two whiteboards above her desk. One is a calendar and the other is a to-do list. The calendar has her work schedule written out on it.

I sit on her bed, surrounded by pillows that smell just like her and try to watch TV. When I realize I’m too jittery for that, I walk up to her packed bookshelf to see what books she has. Much to my surprise, she has a whole section of lgbtq+ books. I run my hands over the spines until I land on a sapphic young adult book by Morgan Lee

Miller that I've been meaning to read. When I go to pull it out, a notebook falls out with it. I bend down to pick it up so I can put it back, but when I do, I notice some loose pieces of paper have fallen out of it.

Only, they aren't just any papers. This is notebook paper from my notebook with my handwriting. It hits me like a direct punch to the gut. I haven't been falling for two people. I've been falling for just one person... one person who has been lying to me this whole time.

## Chapter 29

\*Love Interest\*

"So, what should I say?" I ask Delilah as I sit on her bed and hold one of her pillows close to my chest.

Normally, I'd be having this conversation with Bug, but since he's working tonight, Delilah is the one that gets subjected to it.

Delilah sits down beside me and pulls the pillow out of my death grip. "Just tell her the truth. When you started writing her the notes, you guys didn't talk much, and once she started opening up to you, you wanted to tell her, but she said she didn't want to know."

I nod slowly. "And I really want to kiss her, but it doesn't feel right without telling her the truth first. And I'll let her know that I never expected it to get to this point. Never in a million years did I ever think there was a chance Marjorie Madden would like me back."

"She's going to be really happy it's you. It might take her a bit to get there, though, so just be ready for that. She'll probably be confused and a little bit hurt, but she'll

get past it. I'm sure she's just going to be happy that she hears it from you and doesn't find out some other way."

"Oh yeah. That would be terrible." I laugh, but even the thought of that makes me sick. Bug could have been caught leaving a note on Marjorie's locker at any point and I would have been completely busted. I'm lucky it didn't come to that. I'm relieved she gets to hear it straight from my mouth.

I text Marjorie right away to see if she has any free time to get together so I can tell her tonight. I don't want to wait any longer, especially after we almost kissed yesterday. She doesn't text back right away, which is unusual for her, but I still figure I should head home, that way whenever she's ready to talk, I'm free.

I say goodbye to Delilah then get in my car to head home. I sing along with music as I drive, which is something I never do, but I finally feel happy. Really happy. Even more so than that, I'm optimistic for probably the first time in my life. I'm nervous, but I know this will end well, and that means I have a lot to look forward to.

When I pull into my driveway, I see that Marjorie's car is already parked there. My heart skips a beat. She's here. It's as if she somehow knew I needed to talk to her and showed up right when she was needed. I skip into the house then yell her name as soon as I'm inside. I'm surprised when she doesn't answer, but since I know my mom always sends Bug up to my room to wait for me, I figure that's what she did with Marjorie.

I leap up the steps, run down the hall, and fling open the door. I'm ready to wear my heart on my sleeve. I want Marjorie to know everything.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 6:39 pm*

When I step into the room, I stop short. No. This can't be happening. Marjorie has my notes from her in her hands, and she's staring down at them.

When she looks up at me, there are tears in her eyes that make my heart sink. "It's you? It's always been you? But, why wouldn't you...? How could you...?"

I run across the room to her. I try to reach out and touch her arm, but she quickly pulls it away as if my touch could burn her. "Please, Marjorie. I can explain. I was going to tell you. It's why I texted you. I really was. Please."

Marjorie stares at me for a long time, her tears causing her eyes to shine in a way I never wanted to see. For a moment, I actually believe she might forgive me. Something passes between us. The connection is still very much there. I feel it, and I know she does too.

But when she breaks the connection and looks toward the ground, I know I'm screwed. She shakes her head as she continues to stare at my carpet. "This... I just... I'm sorry. It's a lot to process. I don't think I can... I don't know. I have to go."

She turns toward my desk and grabs a jar of pickles I hadn't noticed before. There's a ribbon tied around the top, and the sight makes me cry, because I ruined everything. Marjorie is the sweetest person in the whole world, and I blew it.

She shoves the jar at me but still refuses to make eye contact. "These are for you. I hope you're feeling better."

Then she swiftly walks away. I stand there frozen in place as I listen to her walk



down the hall and the stairs, then out the front door. She's gone. Marjorie Madden is gone. I had the whole world in the palm of my hands, and now I lost it.

I throw myself onto my bed and sob. For once, I let myself believe something good could happen. For once, I let myself be truly happy. And just as I always feared, it was stripped away from me. The worst part is this time it's all my fault. I deserve for Marjorie to never speak to me again. I deserve for her to hate me.

Then my mind goes to a phrase my therapist always tells me: control the things you can and let go of everything else. I can't control how Marjorie feels, but I can control my side of it. I don't know if she'll ever forgive me, but I can do my damndest to show her how sorry I am. All I need is a plan and a little bit of help.

After sitting at my desk for an hour and plotting out exactly what to do, I send a group text to Delilah and Bug. Marjorie found out about everything without me telling her. I really messed up, but for once, I refuse to roll over and accept this is my life. I have a plan, but I need some help. Either of you good at crafts? We need to make an Eiffel Tower.

## Chapter 30

### Marjorie

It's been two weeks since I've heard anything from Payton aside from one text. It makes sense since that one text told me how sorry she was and said she didn't want to bother me, so if I wanted to talk, I should reach out to her. I haven't reached out. I'm not sure what to say. I know she didn't mean to hurt me. I could see it in her eyes from the moment she knew that I figured it out. I just don't know how to feel about any of this. I opened up to her. I told her something I hadn't shared with anyone else. Even though I know it's not the case, it still seems like she took advantage of the situation. She could have used things I said in real life to make her letters more

appealing to me. I shake my head. As much as I want to believe that so I can be angry rather than hurt, I know it's not true. Payton was always herself—in real life and in her letters. I know it. I can feel it in my bones.

Now, I'm not only hurt, but I also miss her. I miss her so much I can barely breathe. She keeps switching her work schedule with other coworkers, so I haven't even gotten to see her there. And I do want to see her. As much as I'm upset at her, I also want to see her. I honestly don't know what to think or do anymore. Every single day I've written out a text that I've ended up deleting. If I reach out to Payton, it means I'm giving her the chance to hurt me again. I want to believe she won't, but how much do I really know about her? I'd like to believe it's a lot, but in reality it's not. I didn't know anything about her dad. I didn't even know her mom was dating Delilah's dad. There's so much I don't know about her.

When I see Eli walking toward my locker, I think about running away. I know none of this is Eli's fault, but it's still hard to see him. Seeing him makes me think of her and only makes all of the pain in my heart a million times worse. There's nowhere to go though. We've made eye contact, and at this point, he knows I've seen him. It would be rude to walk away now.

I raise my hand in the most awkward half-wave ever. My only saving grace is that Eli appears to feel just as awkward about this upcoming interaction as I do. He raises his hands as if he is surrendering. "Don't shoot me. I'm just the messenger." He reaches into his backpack and pulls out a very large clump of papers. "I was given strict orders to hand deliver this to you to make sure you get it."

"Thanks," I barely squeak out. I take the papers from Eli's hands and the heaviness is made even heavier since I know who this is from. I know what it's about.

Eli nods then turns to walk away. I finally find my voice after he's taken a few steps. "Hey, Eli?" When he turns around, I clear my throat then look down at the school's

old beat-up carpet underneath my feet. “How is she? Is... is she okay?”

I chance a look up and notice Eli is giving me a sad smile. “She’s sad. Really sad. She’s beating herself up like crazy over this. She knows she was wrong. She knows it was her fault. She really wants to make it right.” He nods toward the papers in my hand. “Just read what she has to say. I promise that Payton is a really good person, Marjorie. Hurting you was the last thing she wanted. Trust me.”

Thank God my last period of the day today is a free period, because there is no way I would be able to focus on any class knowing I have something from Payton waiting for me. I go to the library, find a table, and waste no time focusing on what Eli gave to me. The first page in the stack is a note, followed by chapter after chapter of Payton’s story. I put the story into my backpack and put all of my attention on that note. Just seeing that handwriting makes my heart clench, and I have no question that I’ll be crying by the end of this. Thank God no one else is around to see right now.

Marjorie, I don’t even know where to start. I guess sorry is a good spot. I never meant to hurt you. When I started writing you these notes, I never thought we would get closer the way we did. That’s because I honestly never believed I was good enough for you. Then you started to notice me, really notice me, and I had no idea how to respond. When you told me you didn’t want to know who was writing you letters, I used this as my out. You didn’t want to know who was writing the letters because you didn’t want to be disappointed, and I was sure if you knew it was me, that’s exactly how you would feel. When I started to notice a growing connection between us, I figured it had to be one-sided. Then we went mini-golfing and it really felt like a date, but I still wouldn’t let myself believe it was. This isn’t an excuse, but I’ve lived my life not having high expectations. It’s a defense mechanism so no one can hurt me the way my dad did (and clearly continues to). Again, I’m not trying to use this as an excuse. I just want to explain where my head was at.

After we almost kissed, I knew I had to tell you. That day you were at my house, I

had texted you to get together because I wanted to tell you immediately. I know it was too late, but I really wish you could have heard it from me. I could have explained where I was coming from and how I was going to make it better. You could have heard it from me, which is what you deserved. You didn't deserve to find out that way, and I'm so so so sorry that you did. I want you to know that nothing I ever told you in my notes or in person was a lie. My feelings are very real, probably even more real than you could possibly understand. I want to help you understand though. If you give me another chance, I will spend as much time as you allow helping you to understand.

For now, all I'm asking for is one date. Just one. It doesn't even have to be a date if you don't want it to be. Consider it a few hours of me treating you like the queen you are and groveling over how sorry I am. In the end, if you want to be friends again, that's great. If you never want to speak to me again, it's understandable. I'm not asking you for any more than that (Unless, of course, you want it, because I do...more than anything).

I'll be waiting for you in the parking lot of the ice cream shop tomorrow at 2pm when you get off. I'll make sure to park in the back so if you want to leave without me noticing, you'll be able to. If you want to spend the day with me, you'll know where to find me. I've included the rest of my book. I finished it for you (well, the first draft. This thing needs about a billion edits, but it's a start). I also want to end this note with ten facts about me. Some of these you know, some you might not. This is just the first step in letting you see every single part of me since I'm sure right now you feel like you don't know me at all. If I don't hear from you, I want you to know I understand. You're the most amazing person in the entire world, Marjorie. Don't ever let anyone, especially me, convince you otherwise.

1) My dad left when I was five and it's been messing with my head ever since. Every time I think I'm starting to get over it, I end up seeing him again and it sends me into another spiral.

2) Mr. Howard (Delilah's dad) is my mom's first boyfriend since my dad left. I've been trying really hard not to get attached, but I can't help it. Delilah is the sister I've always wanted. Mr. Howard has taken on the father role without even being asked to. If I'm being honest, it scares me to death. This is the first time it's been more than just me and my mom, and as happy as I was with just her, this is pretty perfect. My mom and Mr. Howard are perfect together, but I keep waiting for the other shoe to drop.

3) I fucking love pickles. Seriously, give me all the pickles. You already know this, but my mom and I have our Christmas Pickle tradition because I love them so much. The fact that you gave me the jar of pickles to make me feel better is by far the sweetest thing anyone has ever done for me.

4) You know how much I love pickles? That's how much I hate Griffin Hill. I've never told anyone just how much I hate it because I don't want it to get back to my mom. We moved into this school district after my dad left so she could still be close enough to her job but not in the very same town as that terrible man. I don't want her to feel bad that I absolutely hate it. I don't relate to anyone here, and I always thought it was just me, until I met more people from Capital Creek. Griffin Hill is full of douchebags. I'm so happy I only have another year after this until I can be done.

5) Spring is my favorite season (as you know), but fall is a close second. Obviously, I love the weather for the same reasons I love spring, but I LOVE spooky season. Scary movies, haunted houses... sign me up for all of that.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 6:39 pm*

6) I volunteer at a nursing home, and I love it. I call one resident Grandma and we exchange books with each other. She's the closest thing I've ever had to a real grandparent.

7) I'm obsessed with reading. I'll read any type of book - romance (straight or gay), mystery, thriller, graphic novels - it doesn't matter. I wish I could read every book to ever exist (that goal might be just a tad unrealistic).

8) My mom and I read books together. It started when I was little with picture books, but now we read novels together.

9) If something is gay (whether it's a show, movie, book, song), I will eat that up. We need more sapphic content, which is why I want to get my books out into the world.

10) This one might scare you off (hopefully not), but I'm madly in love with you. I have been for a long time. I know we're young, but I don't think I could ever love anyone the way I love you.

The last point doesn't scare me off. It does the complete opposite actually. I feel like I'm floating as I read the words over and over again. They look blurry through my tears, but the tears are there for a different reason than what I expected. All I want to do is run into Payton's arms, but I'll make myself wait until tomorrow. That's for the best anyway, since I'm still scared to death.

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I only work for three hours, yet it seems to drag on forever. As soon as it's time to

clock out, I rip off my visor and run to the back to change into the outfit I put in my locker that morning. Since I don't know what we're doing, I decided on jeans and a white sweater with brown boots. I throw a jacket over top of the outfit, fix my hair and makeup, then head outside.

I walk to the back of the parking lot, and there she is. Payton is leaning against the hood of her car and staring out in the opposite direction of the ice cream shop. I can tell she's not wearing a coat, and while it's not freezing out, is still too cold for just a long-sleeve shirt. "You're gonna get sick, you know," I yell over to her.

Payton turns her head, eyes wide and a smile bigger than I've ever seen it, as if she actually thought I wouldn't show up. "You're here," she says before pushing herself off of the car. "A jacket would have ruined the outfit and it took me forever to decide what to wear."

She has done a good job though. She's wearing a black button-up shirt, red pants, and black shoes. As if that's not enough, she's wearing a red and black checkered bow tie. A goddamn bow tie. I'm putty. Absolute putty. I'm so distracted by the bow tie I don't even notice the single red rose that she's holding at first.

I walk over and straighten the bow tie. I told myself I wouldn't touch Payton, at least not this soon, but when a girl wears a damn bow tie on a date, what choice do you have? At least I have enough self-control not to run my hand through her smooth ponytail, which is something else that I very much so want to do. "You don't fight fair. A bow tie? A rose? That face. Ugh, you're killing me, Payton Benner."

Payton smiles shyly and bites her bottom lip. "When you're going on a date with Marjorie Madden, you have to pull out all the stops." Payton's smile suddenly drops and her face turns red. "I mean, that is, if you want... it doesn't have to... we don't..."

Now, I do reach out and run my hand through her hair. “It’s a date, Payton.”

Her smile returns, but if possible, it’s even bigger now. “Cool. In that case, we should get going.” She rounds the car to the passenger side and opens the door for me then gets in on her side.

“So, where are we off to?” I ask once she starts to drive.

“You’ll see soon enough.” She fiddles with her phone and turns Dixie D’Amelio on over Bluetooth. “Well, by soon enough, I mean about forty-five minutes.”

I have no idea where she could possibly be taking me that’s so far away, but I don’t question it. Instead, I enjoy the music and the conversation, which is surprisingly easy, even with two weeks of silence between us.

After a drive that goes by much quicker than I expect, Payton pulls into a big parking lot. At the front of the parking lot is a building with a big sign that reads, “Mr. Ardley’s Arcade.”

That’s when it hits me. “My perfect date,” I whisper under my breath.

Payton nods. “I won’t be able to stick to it completely, but I hope you like what I came up with.”

“I’m sure I will.”

Before I can get out of the car, Payton jumps out of her side and opens my door for me. As we walk beside each other, she rubs her hands together then looks from her hands to mine. Since she’s not the least bit discreet (something I actually really appreciate about her), I know exactly what she’s thinking.



“You can hold my hand if you want.” I told myself I wasn’t going to give in so easily, but what’s the point in holding back? Sure, there’s a lot we need to talk about, but we might as well enjoy the time Payton planned.

Payton smiles the sweetest smile before taking my hand. I don’t know what’s better—that smile or the feeling of her hand in mine. I’m so caught up in the girl beside me, I don’t even notice how amazing this arcade is at first. It’s huge.

“I picked this one because it has a bunch of different basketball shooting games. I figured you could show off on all of them.”

That’s exactly what I want to do. After Payton buys a game card that she refuses to split with me, we head over to the section with all of the basketball games. There are low hoops, high hoops, moving hoops. There’s even a hoop with a clown that tries to block your shots.

Payton raises her eyebrow when she notices me staring at that one. “Want to get your revenge on your archnemesis?”

“You don’t have to ask me twice.” I grab the card out of Payton’s hand and swipe it in the game.

It only takes a few shots for me to figure out a pattern, then I make that clown my bitch. We make our way from one basketball game to the next, and Payton competes against me on the two-player ones. I do beat her at those, thank God. After basketball, we move on to racing games, trivia games, then all the games that will win us a bunch of tickets. Payton uses all of our tickets to get me a little stuffed bear who’s holding a basketball and wearing a jersey with the name of the arcade. If it wasn’t for the fact that she won it for me, it would be the biggest waste of tickets ever. Instead, I find myself swooning over the little teddy.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 6:39 pm*

“Where to next?” I ask her as we leave the arcade a few hours later. It hits me that this might have been the whole date, and I feel bad for making it sound like I need more from her, but I really don’t want the day to end.

“You ask too many questions. You need to just trust me. Do you trust me?” The tone of her voice tells me that the question goes beyond the date we’re on right now. Payton is desperate to know she hasn’t completely lost my trust.

I take her hand and squeeze it. “I trust you, Payton.”

As we drive to our next destination, my stomach growls, and I pat it. “I hope one of our stops involves food.”

“It does. Don’t worry.”

We end up at the burger place that now feels like “our spot.” Payton shuts off the car and smiles at me. “I know we’ve been here a lot, but they also have the best milkshakes and I don’t know if this is weird, but it’s kinda, like, our spot now.”

“It’s like you’re reading my mind.”

I’m surprised when she takes my hand once again walking into the burger place since this is closer to where she lives and is in the town where she works. It means so much more to me knowing what a big step this is for her. She’s been so scared of coming out, and she’s doing this for me. Me. She really knows how to say sorry. We get the food to go, because according to Payton, we have, “Places to be.”

We drive back to her town and park in her driveway, and Payton gets our food and a blanket out of the car. We then walk down to the playground we went to after everything happened with her dad. She leads us over to the merry-go-round (once again, hand-in-hand... swoon). When we sit down on the merry-go-round, she wraps us in the blanket then points to our takeout food and milkshakes. "If possible, save some of that for after the sunset. Now, I know the sunset wasn't part of your actual perfect date, but if we wait for the stars to come out, it's going to be way too cold. I promise I'll make it up to you though."

I put my hand on her leg and let it rest there. "You don't have to make anything up to me. This is absolutely perfect."

"Well, there's more to come. I promise."

After watching the sunset, we each have half of a milkshake and half of our food left. According to Payton, that's perfect. We go into her house, which is dark, which leads me to believe we must have it all to ourselves. My heart rate picks up at exactly what that could mean for the rest of the night.

Payton leads me up to her room, and when she opens the door, I'm blown away. There are glow-in-the-dark stars scattered across her whole ceiling, and a cardboard cutout of the Eiffel Tower over in the corner. "I know it's not quite the same as a night in Paris, but..."

"Payton, it's absolutely perfect." It really is. Never in a million years did I think someone would do something so sweet for me. Payton not only asks questions and actually pays attention to the answer, but she also remembers it. That's a big deal. There aren't enough people like that.

We sit next to each other on her bed and stare up at the stars while we finish our milkshakes and food. Payton has more than made up for her mistakes. She went

above and beyond what she ever had to do. What she did really wasn't that bad, and this... well, this is amazing. We still need to talk about everything though, and as much as I don't want to ruin the moment, I know it has to happen.

"Can... Can we talk?"

Payton looks over at me and audibly swallows. "Of... Of course."

## Chapter 31

\*Love Interest\*

I knew this was coming, but it's still hard to hear the words. I hold my breath while I wait to hear what Marjorie has to say. Today has been perfect, and at least no matter what happens, we'll always have these memories.

"When I found those letters, it was like a shot straight to the heart. I felt betrayed and blindsided."

I squeeze Marjorie's hand at the same time I squeeze my eyes shut to try to stop myself from crying. "I know. I'm so sorry. It was never my intention. I really messed up, and I realize that, and I know that one stupid date and one stupid day doesn't make up for it."

"Do you really think that?" Marjorie asks.

"Think what?"

"That this was a stupid day."

I shake my head and wipe the few tears that have started to fall. "This was the best

day of my life.”

“It was the best day of my life too, Payton. Listen, I don’t like how I found out, but I get it. I completely understand why you didn’t tell me. I flat-out told you I didn’t want to know who the person was multiple times. I can’t blame you for listening to me. I just needed time to process it because it was confusing for me. This whole time I was fighting an internal battle of falling for two different people, and it turns out, I was just falling for one.” Marjorie laughs and shakes her head. “It was a lot to wrap my head around.”

“And where do you stand with things now?” I chew on my nails as I anxiously await her answer. It sounds positive so far, but I don’t know. I hope I’m not reading her wrong.

“I think I’m ready to move forward. With you. To see where this goes. I mean, I fell for you twice. That has to mean something, right?”

“You really mean it? You want to give this a try?” My heart might burst. This is a literal dream come true.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 6:39 pm*

“I do.” Marjorie has the goofiest grin on her face and it might be my new favorite look of hers. “I just have one question.”

“What’s that?”

“Number ten on your list of facts. Did you mean it?” When I nod, Marjorie’s smile gets even bigger. “When did you know? How?”

“One day, about a year and a half ago, you came into work. It was raining outside so your hair was all over the place. You were wearing glasses and they were soaked with raindrops. You honestly looked like a drowned dog, but in the cutest way possible. You were carrying a box of donuts and looked so proud of yourself for bringing them. We hadn’t talked too much at that point, but you looked right at me and told me you had gotten me a butter pecan donut because you heard me telling Bug how much I loved those. My heart did this weird thing that it’s never done before, and I just knew. As crazy as it sounds, I knew at that moment that I loved you.”

Marjorie is quiet for a long time, and I wonder what’s going through her head. Does she think I’m completely crazy? Then she sighs and rests her forehead against mine, our lips only inches apart. “Remember when you told me you don’t understand how the girl gets the girl?” She pulls back slightly and puts her hands on my cheeks. “That’s how.”

And now she’s kissing me, and everything is right in the world. I kiss her back and our lips get into the perfect rhythm. Marjorie runs her tongue along my bottom lip, and I know exactly what she’s asking for. I let her slip it into my mouth and the first touch to mine causes fireworks to erupt throughout my whole body. So, this is what

it's like. Everything I've been through in my life suddenly doesn't matter. All that matters is this moment and this girl. I'm not thinking about how it's destined to fail. I'm not thinking about everything that could possibly go wrong. I'm allowing myself to hope, and that hope doesn't seem so crazy anymore.

As we continue to kiss, Marjorie's hands move down my arms, over my stomach, then onto my legs. She pulls back and we both struggle to catch our breath.

"Sorry," Marjorie says between breaths. "I was getting a little carried away there."

"I didn't mind."

"I figured, but we need to save some of that for the second, third, fourth, so on and so on, dates."

"Really?" I still can't believe it.

"Really." Marjorie licks her lips then clears her throat. "You know how you said your heart did that weird thing, and that's how you knew?" When I nod, the look Marjorie gives me tells me all I need to know. "My heart did that while we were kissing. I love you too, Payton. I love you so much."

We start to kiss once again, but it's cut off by the sound of the front door closing and my mom yelling up to me. What the hell? She promised she'd stay out late.

"Coming, Mom!" I give Marjorie an apologetic smile. "Sorry. I didn't realize she'd be home already."

"It's fine. I'd love to get to know your mom better."

We walk downstairs hand in hand and my mom's eyes go wide when she sees us.

“I’m sorry, Marjorie. I didn’t realize you’d still be here. I hope I didn’t interrupt.”

“No, ma’am, of course not. We were, um, just, ah, talking.”

I know my mom doesn’t believe Marjorie’s lie, but I can also tell by the look on her face that she doesn’t care. “I actually have something I need to talk to you about, Payton, but we can do it later if you want.”

Marjorie squeezes my hand as if to remind me that she’s here for me, and even though I’m nervous about what my mom could possibly have to talk to me about, I feel brave with Marjorie by my side. “Now is fine. Whatever you need to say, you can say it in front of Marjorie.”

My mom walks over to the couch and pats the spot beside her. When we sit down, she takes the hand that Marjorie isn’t holding. “As I’m sure you’ve noticed, things are getting pretty serious between me and Mr. Howard. Well, tonight, he asked me if we would want to move in with him. I’m fine with waiting until you graduate if that’s what you want. Obviously, if we move in with them sooner, you’ll have to transfer to Capital Creek for your senior year.”

I shake my head, sure I must be hearing this wrong. “Wait. You’re saying we can move in with Mr. Howard and Delilah and I’ll get to go to school with all of my friends and my girlfriend?”

Marjorie squeezes my hand once again. “Girlfriend, huh?”

“Oh, sorry. That just slipped out. I didn’t mean to assume anything. We don’t have to label anything now... or... like... ever if you don’t want to.”

Marjorie laughs. “Calm down, Payton. Of course I want to be your girlfriend.”



“So, that’s a yes?” my mom asks.

I look at my girlfriend then back at my mom. “That’s a hell yes.”

Epilogue

First Day of senior year

\*Love Interest\*

My smile is bigger than it’s ever been before as I walk into Capital Creek. Instead of finding my assigned locker, I make a beeline right for Marjorie’s.

## Page 72

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 6:39 pm*

She smiles lovingly as soon as she sees me, and once I'm close enough, she fixes my bow tie. "Oh my God. I can't believe you're wearing a bow tie."

I re-fix what she only made worse. "First day at a new school. I have to make a good impression."

Marjorie lifts one eyebrow. "Who are you trying to impress?"

"Honestly? Just my girlfriend."

"Your girlfriend goes here? Do I know her? Is she cute?"

I love this flirtatious banter between us and can already tell this is going to be the greatest school year yet. "I'm sure you do. It's Marjorie Madden. She's the most popular girl at the school. Super pretty, basketball star, a shoo-in for Homecoming Queen."

"Oh! Her? She's all right. You're better though." She pushes me against the locker and kisses me hard.

"Get a room," Bug yells as he walks up to us.

"Trust me, they have," Delilah says from next to him. "It's right beside mine, and the walls are very thin."

"Sorry, sis. What can I say? I can't resist this one." I pinch Marjorie and she jumps away from me.

Unfortunately, our little powwow is broken up by the sound of the warning bell. Marjorie gives me one more quick kiss. “I’ll see you in gym. If you run into any issues before that, just text me. Oh yeah! Almost forgot.” She reaches into her pocket and hands me a note. “A little something for extra good luck.”

“No way.” I open my backpack and pull out the first-day-of school note I wrote for her the night before. “One for you too, my lady.”

She holds it to her chest as if it’s her most prized possession. “I can’t wait to read it.”

“I can’t wait to be able to pass notes in person all year round.”

“Me either, babe. Me either.”

Yes, this is going to be the best school year ever.

## State Basketball Playoffs

### Marjorie

Sweat drips down my face as I stare up at the scoreboard. Thirty seconds left and we’re up by two. All we need to do is keep the other team from scoring and we’ll be state champions. That’s easier said than done though, especially since they have the ball now.

They pass the ball back and forth as they bring it down the court and search for an open shot. The girl I’m guarding does a quick turn that causes me to slide and lose my balance on the court. She gets the ball and sets up for the three-pointer that will win them the game. But, no, there’s no way I’m going to let that happen. A voice screaming from the stands reminds me that I can do this. There are a lot of voices right now, but only one that matters, and that’s my girlfriend.

Right as the girl goes to shoot, I throw my body in front of the ball and block the shot. I don't know who gets it because I'm struggling to get off the ground. Once I stand, I see my team at the other end of the court with the ball and the clock winds down to zero. We did it. We actually did it.

My teammates storm over and tackle me as if I won the whole game for us just because I blocked that shot. That's not true though. This was a joint effort. It took every single one of us, including the newest starter on the varsity squad, Genesis Brimstone.

Once I escape from the pile, I find Payton standing right on the edge of it. All of my focus is on her as I close the distance between us. She looks so hot in my Capital Creek Basketball T-shirt, I can hardly stand it. I pick her up and spin her around then place a big kiss on her lips. Even after almost a year together, each kiss still feels like the first one. Things just keep getting better with her.

Payton runs a hand down my arm then rests it over my stomach. "I told you that you'd be a State Champ, didn't I?"

"You sure did. There's going to be a party at my house tonight, but after that's over, what do you say we have our own party?"

Payton's eyes light up as she licks her lips. "Sounds perfect. I already have some ideas of how we can celebrate."

I lose my breath just imagining what that means. There was a time I never thought anything could be better than winning the state championship in basketball, but I was wrong. Having Payton as my girlfriend is a million times better.

One year post-college

\*Love Interest\*

I laugh as Marjorie twirls me around at my mom and Mr. Howard's wedding reception. The night is winding down and the party guests are dwindling, but I'm not the least bit tired. I couldn't be happier. I want to soak in every single part of this night.

Marjorie must feel the same way because she asks me to go on a walk with her. We walk along the lake by the wedding venue and hold hands as we talk about everything we've been through together. Our final year of high school, four years at the same college, finally moving in together after graduation. Sometimes I have to pinch myself because it still doesn't feel real.

We find a bench and sit down next to each other. My mind goes to my mom and Mr. Howard as I look up at the stars. "I still can't believe it took my mom and Mr. Howard this long to get married."

Marjorie shrugs. "I guess they just wanted to be sure." She fiddles with something in the pocket of her fitted suit. "I'm sure. Well, I have been for a long time, but I'm really sure."

"Sure of what?" She can't possibly mean what I think she does.

"Sure that I want to marry you." She pulls whatever it is she's been fiddling with out of her pocket, and I see that it's a ring box. Before I can fully comprehend what's happening, she kneels down in front of me on one knee. "Payton Benner, I loved you before I even knew who you were, and I'm going to keep loving you every day for the rest of my life. Will you make me the happiest woman in the whole world? Will you be my wife?"

I was wrong out on the dance floor earlier. It turns out I could be happier. And now I get to keep that happiness for the rest of my life.