



High Note

Author: *H.L. Logan*

Category: Romance, New Adult, Lesbian Romance

Description: "I can't allow myself to slip, not even a little bit."

Overwhelmed with school and her social life, high-strung violinist Brianne is scrambling to get everything ready for graduation. On top of that, she's working hard to find a job impressive enough for her parents. She's kept people out with her prickly exterior for too long, though. When a super cute student bumps into her, spilling her coffee—she finds herself wondering if she should give this intriguing new friend a chance.

"I've never been able to make friends."

Biology student Margie transferred to Beasley with the hope of starting with a clean slate. But she hasn't been successful in making friends, and the loneliness cuts at her soul. When she bumps into Brianne, the mortifying incident turns into the opportunity for an actual social life—and much more. Margie has never considered dating women before, but the easy rapport she develops with Brianne seems like it could lead to something beautiful.

"I'm having such a hard time keeping up."

As Margie and Brianne's relationship blossoms, and Brianne gets involved with a street performance group, the two find themselves growing in ways they never imagined. Margie finds the confidence she never thought she had, and Brianne learns to relax a little. But when the summer looms, threatening to pull them in different directions, the two women have to make a choice—commit to a relationship, or commit to their ambitions?

Total Pages (Source): 54

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 2:08 pm

BRIANNE

I checked the time on my phone and a current of anxiety flitted up my spine, now that I was aware I only had four more hours left in the day to complete everything I had to do.

It was funny, people in my social circle generally thought I was pretty carefree and relaxed, probably because I tended to be quiet and bitingly sarcastic. They didn't know it was all a façade for the pressure I felt every single day.

Why? It was all because of my parents. My parents were the main reason my sister and I had turned out the way we had. It was so hard for me to imagine life any other way.

They'd made me double major in music and marketing. I'd originally just wanted to do music, but they'd said that wouldn't be enough for me to find a job. Music wasn't "useful" on its own, they'd said. And when I'd suggested minoring in music—as much as the thought pained me—they'd said I couldn't do that, either, because what if I had the opportunity to become a renowned violinist one day?

It almost made me hate playing the violin. Almost.

But no, music was my sanctuary. The world of the sheet music and notes and brilliant auburn color of my violin was a world I could spend hours in. I entered what they called a "flow" state and just lost myself.

But there wasn't much time for me to practice. I could only do the bare minimum

because my marketing homework and group projects took up too much of my time. It was a good thing I was decent at time management, otherwise, I'd be screwed.

My phone pinged at me, and I picked it up to see that I'd received a text, reminding me that we were supposed to be meeting for someone's birthday in an hour at the King's Tooth. I couldn't even remember who, and the text didn't say.

Shit. I knew I'd promised them all I'd be there, and when I checked my planner, of course, I found that I'd already written it in. So I had no excuse. Except that I really, really needed to finish up my part of this marketing project and send it in to my group members by midnight.

That was one thing I hated about being in the business program. Way too many group projects. And the problem wasn't even that there were slackers—it was that no one was a slacker. In fact, it seemed like people used group projects to show off, so I had to put extra effort in. It was exhausting, but I supposed they were getting us prepared for corporate life.

I wasn't sure I was cut out for corporate life, but it didn't seem like I had many options, unless I magically became a professional violin player after all. You couldn't do that unless you were excellent, and I doubted I was good enough. I mean, I knew I was talented, but I wasn't next level. Certainly not the next Lindsey Stirling.

I sighed and opened up Powerpoint so I could finish my slides. We were supposed to come up with an advertising campaign for a fictional company, and as I diligently filled out my slides and added notes, I found my enthusiasm for the project waning.

I'd thought I'd enjoy the advertising course because I loved graphic design and video and the concept of putting together a whole plan that used all these elements. But the problem was that we were never advertising anything particularly interesting. This fictional company produced toothpaste. Again, they were trying to make the business

school experience mimic the real corporate experience, where you wouldn't necessarily get to work with things that were interesting.

I thought they could have cut us a little slack here, though. At least let us advertise a fake winery or pet store or something.

I got it done with some time to spare, though I was painfully aware that I hadn't done my études, and I couldn't do them after I came back from Kings Tooth (if I even did come back) because I didn't want to wake up my roommate with my music. So I'd have to do a double round of études tomorrow, before studying for the quiz on Friday...

Life was difficult for me right now. I closed my laptop and checked myself in the mirror, deciding to change into a nicer dress. I had a bit of an image to uphold, after all.

As I walked to the bar, or pub, rather, I thought about Kaitlyn's street performance group. I'd been kinda rude to her when I'd met her, which honestly wasn't unusual for me. I didn't necessarily like being such a prickly person, but it was just the way I interacted with the world. Kaitlyn had seemed too cool and carefree, and in a way, I guess I found that threatening. And I had to admit, I'd been jealous of the fact that she was so... free.

I still was. Kaitlyn was a bit of a nomad, and she didn't have a college degree. She could literally move anywhere and do whatever she wanted to do, and I simply couldn't imagine life ever being like that for me. On the other hand, she didn't seem to have financial security, which was a priority for me—drilled into my head by my parents.

I supposed people had different life paths with pros and cons. It didn't stop me from yearning for something different, though.

Even though it was a Wednesday—or maybe because it was hump day—it seemed like half the population of Beasley was at the bar. I made my way to the back and found my friends, who were all gathered around a large booth table.

The birthday girl was Miriam, who I suddenly felt guilty for forgetting about. She and I were usually pretty close, but I'd been so busy lately that I'd forgotten. It was a weird and unpleasant feeling to realize I'd completely forgotten about it. I really did have too much on my plate.

“Happy birthday, Miriam!” I said, bending down so I could hug her awkwardly. She was already pretty drunk and kissed me on the cheek, which was cute—she was often affectionate like that.

“Thanks for coming out,” she said, beaming at me, and I was suddenly glad I'd decided to leave my house after all. Maintaining social connections was important.

Of course, my parents never failed to remind me of that, either. They were very aware of how important networking was, especially at such a prestigious place like Beasley.

But no—I wanted friends, real friends. People you could count on emotionally, not people you could count on for a corporate job years down the line.

I took a seat at the already crowded table and someone handed me a glass of beer poured from a pitcher. I knew as soon as I arrived here that I wouldn't be getting any more work done today, and I'd already sent in the group project stuff, so I tipped the glass to my lips and took a deep swig.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 2:08 pm

There was something very liberating about deciding you were don

e with work for the day. As I kept drinking, the alcohol buzz started to permeate me and I felt more relaxed.

This had definitely been the right decision.

Kaitlyn was now an established part of the group since she and Emily were together, so I saw her frequently. We'd done some practice for the street performance group, though I hadn't performed on the street much since I was so busy recently. She smiled at me in a friendly manner, and I smiled back, glad that we were actually friends now. I was glad she'd forgiven me for my earlier rudeness.

"Have you had a chance to work on those songs yet?" she asked.

Despite the increasing warmth of my buzz, another bolt of anxiety hit me. Had I really agreed to work on some songs with her? What had I been thinking? There was no way I had the free time to do all this.

I felt bad because I'd originally told Kaitlyn that I wanted to perform with her every day. The thought was ludicrous. I'd been so free last semester, but this semester, my classes made my schedule so hectic. I could barely practice with her during the twice weekly sessions. I only made it for a performance maybe once a week, if that.

"I took a look," I said diplomatically, "and I should have some changes to them for our next session."

She patted my shoulder. “Awesome, thanks.”

I smiled tightly. I guessed she couldn’t tell that I was actually anxious. Kaitlyn and I had actually become close, but we weren’t best friends yet. No one could really read my moods when I put on my public face.

I was graduating at the end of the semester, so I just had to push through and get it over with. I had no idea what I wanted to do after I graduated, except stay in Rosebridge. My parents wouldn’t like that idea, but thankfully, it wasn’t up to them. I’d only acquiesced on the majors because they were paying for my education.

But once I graduated, I’d be free. Not as free as Kaitlyn, maybe, but more able to decide what I wanted to do. There were several marketing firms in downtown Rosebridge, and I’d done an internship with one last summer, so I felt good about my career prospects.

“I’m sorry I haven’t gotten to play with you as much as we’d discussed,” I told Kaitlyn, the alcohol putting me in the mood for feeling apologetic, apparently.

“It’s not a problem,” said Kaitlyn. “I mean, your education comes first, right? And you’ll be graduating so soon.”

“I guess,” I said, sighing. I’d only recently realized I couldn’t do much street performance at all if I had a 9-5 job. Maybe only on the weekends, or evenings during the week when the weather was nicer.

“I’m sure there’ll be more time at the end of May, and then June,” said Kaitlyn. “We can make bank if we go down to the Riverwalk, especially. I’ve been meaning to check it out.”

“Oh yeah,” I said. “There are sometimes people playing music there. We’d fit right

in.”

Kaitlyn beamed at me. How was she always so cheerful? Maybe that was why we were friends. She balanced out my dourness.

“Good things are on the horizon for us,” she said, looking out toward the rest of the group once more.

I agreed, but I wasn’t sure I did, really. I would graduate and get a good job, and do my best to keep up with my music, and then what? It was hard to imagine how life would change.

Maybe I was lonely. I had good friends but I hadn’t been in a relationship for so long. When I’d moved here for college, I’d met a girl, freshman year. I’d known I was a lesbian but I hadn’t dated a girl before, and she’d been my first. She’d been awesome, but we went on different paths.

It was for the best. The person she was now was someone I wouldn’t want to date, anyway. But who was the kind of person I’d want to date? I didn’t know.

I was a little jealous when Kaitlyn and Emily got together... It all happened kind of fast, or at least, it seemed that way in retrospect. It seemed like love randomly dropped in on peoples’ lives when they least expected it.

I couldn’t help but wonder when it would drop into mine.

MARGIE

I hated sunny days.

I mean, the weather was pleasant. It was nice to be outside, instead of holed up in my

room. But the problem was that everyone else was outside, too. And when that happened, I couldn't help but notice how no one was outside alone.

No, that wasn't true. There were a few people laying on the grass with earbuds in or reading a book. But they looked happy, and they probably had friends they could do stuff with.

I didn't have any friends. As I walked past the field, I enviously watched the people playing frisbee, the people slacklining, the people playing hacky sack, the people sitting in circles, all suspiciously carrying water bottles that I was sure didn't have water in them.

It was such a typical picture of college life, and I wasn't a part of it. I had never been.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 2:08 pm

I'd had high hopes when I'd transferred to Beasley from Amherst. It'd been an amazing opportunity, considering how much more prestigious Beasley was, and I thought that with a clean slate, I could make friends.

How wrong I'd been.

It was clear to me now that there was a fundamental problem with me, not with the people around me. I'd thought that Amherst was too much of a party school and that I'd get along better with the people somewhere else. But no, I should have known. If I wanted friends, I had to change something about myself. But what?

I didn't want to keep looking at all the people on the grass, laughing and smiling in the sun. For one thing, I felt like a bit of an idiot for overheating under my jacket. The sun had been a bit of a surprise and I'd been preparing myself for continued New England coolness. For some reason, the contrast between myself, in my jacket, and all the girls tanning in bikinis or guys with their tank tops, made me feel even more isolated.

It was stupid, but that was just how my brain worked.

My phone pinged and I checked it—it was my mom. She didn't bug me as much as she had at the beginning of the year, wanting to make sure I was settling in nicely to my new school. I hated to do this, but I lied to her all the time. I told her I was making friends and going to parties and doing great in all my classes. Only one of those things was true, which was fortunate. It would have sucked if my social and academic lives were both going to shit.

How did people just make friends so easily? I'd always wondered. I'd had a few friends in high school, simply because they were people I saw every day, but I couldn't imagine anyone wanting to be friends with me. How could they? What did I have to offer?

I didn't know.

I was so lost in my thoughts that I didn't see the person in front of me, and I bumped right into them.

The sweet scent of a latte entered my nose, and I felt some hot liquid spill on my sleeve. Fuck.

"What the hell!" said the girl, who was clutching the now empty paper cup her latte had been in. She bent down to gingerly pick up the lid, then glared at me when she stood up.

"I'm sorry," I said, immediately feeling myself withdraw. God, this was so embarrassing. I never did stuff like this usually. I must have really not been paying attention.

"God damn it, now I'm going to have to get changed before practice," said the girl, who was now looking at her dress and surveying the damage. Several large, brownish wet spots were all over her front.

"I'm sorry," I repeated, unsure of what else to say. I wanted to make the situation better somehow, but there was no way I could. What was I going to do, offer her the shirt off my back?

The other girl huffed and rolled her eyes, her brown hair bouncing a little as she did so. She had sparkling gray eyes and a sharp, vulpine face. There was something

expensive about her look, and I wondered how much the dress cost. I certainly couldn't afford to replace it, especially if it'd been stained by the coffee.

There was an awkward silence while we both stared at each other.

"Well, I guess I'd better run back to my house," said the girl, and she turned to throw the coffee cup in a nearby trash can.

"Wait," I said, following behind her and wondering what the hell my brain was up to. "Wait a minute. Let me uh, let me buy you lunch or something."

What in the world had I just suggested? Why should I buy her lunch for ruining her dress? That would just mean I had to see her again. And the thought of that sent another wave of anxiety through me.

"Um... what?" said the girl, turning around with a glare in her eyes. "Lunch?"

"Yeah, lunch," I said, realizing I couldn't pretend I'd said something different now. "I mean, I feel bad. Maybe I could make it up to you by buying you lunch. I know, it's a stupid idea. Maybe pretend I didn't—"

"No, it's fine," said the girl, a little more softly. Her anger seemed to pass through her and now she'd gotten over the shock. I could still smell the latte; she was drenched in it. "Let's do lunch."

"R-really?" I asked. "I mean, it's... you don't have to..."

"No, we'll do it. We'll get lunch," she said. "I'm Brianne. I'm free tomorrow at 12. I could meet you at the strip."

“O-okay,” I said, amazed at how this had completely gotten out of hand. I was going to have lunch with this random girl, all because I’d opened my stupid mouth. Amazing.

“Cool. See you tomorrow then,” said Brianne. “And what’s your name?”

“Margie.”

“Good name,” said Brianne. “See you, then.”

“Bye,” I said, completely dumbfounded as Brianne walked away.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 2:08 pm

I watched her as she did. She was dressed so well. Her thick black tights offset the gray chambray of the dress, and she had these cool boots and a trendy backpack... God, what in the world was I going to do during this lunch? What were we even going to talk about?

And why had I even asked her to go to lunch? Maybe it was the first thing that had popped into my mind because it was the only thing I could offer. The strip was what we called a row of restaurants right next to campus, and I could buy her a meal there. In fact, I'd often daydreamed about offering to take a new friend to lunch there, because there were so many cool restaurants and I didn't want to eat alone like I did at the dining hall every day. That was probably the reason it had popped up in my head.

And now I actually had a lunch date with a potential new friend. Or maybe Brianne was doing it just to humor me—that was way more likely. Who'd want to be friends with someone who started off spilling coffee on them?

I was shaking slightly as I walked away, and I turned back just once, but I didn't see Brianne. I had to collect myself again and figure out where I'd been intending to go. I'd been trying to leave campus and go back to my house, and now I really wanted to because I wanted to change my shirt. Most of the coffee had fallen on Brianne, but there was some on myself too, making my shirt sleeve uncomfortably stiff and sticky.

I sighed and made my way back to my house. I was done with classes for the day, thankfully, and I just had some homework to do. Tomorrow would be busier, as I had a meeting for the Environmental Action Coalition. I'd joined it with the hope of making new friends, but that hadn't panned out. I'd found that most of the people

who were heavily involved in the club were already friends with each other and didn't need any new ones. They were friendly enough, but they didn't seem to want to socialize with anyone new. And they invited me to their parties, but I'd gone once and felt too awkward when I realized I didn't know anyone there.

It had been a bust. But that was the way my life was turning out lately. The only thing going decently well for me was the fact that I was doing well in my classes, though I wasn't even sure I was passionate about my major, Biology. I'd had dreams of becoming a wildlife biologist, but it seemed so far away right now.

I turned onto my street, entering the cluster of student housing. There were a number of small houses here that could be cheaply rented, as well as small apartment buildings, and the proximity to campus and the somewhat rundown quality of the neighborhood meant it was only students who lived here. I should have been able to make friends with my neighbors—I'd hoped I could, anyway—but they'd turned out to be girls that partied hard 24/7. They'd invited me to a couple of hang outs, but the emphasis on drinking and flirting with passing frat boys made me uncomfortable.

Boys. That was another area of my life where I was floundering. I'd thought I could meet a nice guy here... And there were many who seemed cool and cute, but I couldn't bring myself to ask any of them out. If no one wanted me as a friend, then how in the world would anyone want me as a partner?

I opened the door and found my roommate, Cass, sitting on the couch. Cass was the closest thing I had to a friend, even though we didn't actually hang out all that much. She had her own friends.

"Hey," I said, sitting down on the couch across from her.

She looked up from her laptop and raised an eyebrow. "Bad day, huh?" she asked.

“How did you know?”

“The stain on your sleeve,” she said. “Looks like you spilled something.”

I leaned back against the couch and groaned, remembering the stupid lunch I’d asked Brianne to. And it was happening tomorrow! How was I going to survive that?

“I bumped into this girl and her coffee went everywhere,” I said, shrugging. I wasn’t really in the mood to explain further about the lunch date. Cass had early on taken an interest in improving my social life, but she’d given up when she’d seen how unsuccessful I was.

“Wow. That sucks,” she said, turning back down to her laptop. “Marnie’s coming over tonight, by the way.”

“Word,” I said. Marnie was here every night, it seemed. I wondered if she and Cass were dating, given the number of sleepovers.

I picked up my stuff and went up to my room. The space seemed a little dark because I hadn’t pulled the blinds open, but when I did, the light barely filtered in. It was a small room, and I was paying for it proportionally, but it made me feel even more pathetic, somehow. Like I was a hermit, holing myself up in this room.

But maybe, I thought, Brianne could become a new friend. Just maybe. She seemed way too cool for me, but something had made her say yes when I’d asked her to lunch. I didn’t know what something was, but I intended to milk it for all it was worth.

BRIANNE

I had no idea what to expect from this lunch. I slightly regretted agreeing to it,

partially because I had way too much to do, still, and actually spending time talking to Margie was going to cut into the time I had to do it.

Truth be told, the main reason I'd said yes was that Margie intrigued me somehow. She was cute, for one thing. Objectively adorable. Sandy blonde hair contrasted with a moody, aloof expression. She was cute when she was nervous, too. I couldn't really get a good idea of whether or not she was into women, but I was hoping I'd find out soon.

And if she wasn't a potential romantic interest? I wasn't sure I had the time for more friends, considering I barely had time for the ones I already had, but if she turned out to be cool, maybe she'd fit in with my social circle.

I was a little nervous as I walked down to the strip. There was a small courtyard with benches at one end which was used as the common meeting place, and as I'd expected, I found her sitting there. She stood up and smiled tentatively as I approached, and I smiled back and remembered why I was so nervous.

Margie was ridiculously cute.

She looked away bashfully when I came near, and then she looked up at me again with sparkling brown eyes, so deep that they drew me in. And she was dressed smartly too, in a nice blouse and dark jeans.

"Hey," I said. "How are you doing?"

"All right," she said, shrugging. She picked her backpack up and stood. "Was there anywhere in particular you wanted to go?"

"I've been to all these places like, a dozen times," I said. "It's up to you."

Margie's eyes lit up briefly, but she veiled them again, putting on this façade of aloofness I couldn't quite figure out. "I'm partial to the Thai place... I keep walking past it but I've never had a chance to go in."

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 2:08 pm

“Great, Thai it is, then,” I said, wondering just how much I was going to learn about Margie during this lunch.

The weird thing was that it was kind of like a date. There was a date-like vibe to the whole thing, and I couldn’t put my finger on why, exactly. Maybe Margie really was gay. At the very least, I should do some probing to try and figure it out. I didn’t want to pass up the opportunity, because she was just too good-looking.

We walked into the restaurant and got a table. It wasn’t one of the really fancy Thai places, with art on the walls and carved wood tables, though there was a brass sculpture of Buddha near the entrance. This place was primarily targeted toward students, and I saw tons of backpacks everywhere, though no one I knew.

After taking our order, the waitress—another student—disappeared and left us alone to have a conversation.

“So, Margie,” I started. “What’s your deal? What do you do here at Beasley?”

This was bringing back vague memories of freshman year, when I’d had to meet dozens of new people in the space of a month. I didn’t like leading with the question “what’s your major” because it seemed too reductive, and it didn’t normally lead to interesting discussions. People usually ended up mentioning it anyway.

“So... I transferred here from Amherst,” she started, “and this is my first year here.”

That made a lot of sense. It explained why she seemed a little isolated, even though she clearly wasn’t a freshman.

“And how are you liking it?” I asked. “Do you think you made the right choice in transferring?”

Every transfer student I’d met had thought they’d made the right decision, but Margie looked pained when I asked, and I immediately felt a little guilty. I had no idea what kind of problems she was facing, but she seemed like a potentially very unhappy person.

“I’m not sure,” said Margie. She’d clearly been deciding whether or not to be honest, and I was suddenly glad she’d decided to be honest with me. She could have lied and said it was fine.

“Well, if you want to talk about it, I’m all ears,” I said.

&nb

sp; Margie shrugged. “I mean, it’s not a big deal. Whatever. I thought Amherst was too much of a big party school and that I didn’t fit in well there. But it turns out I don’t fit in well here, either.”

“Well... what kind of person are you? What kind of person do you want to be?” I asked.

I’d thought about that question a lot in high school. I’d imagined myself as a cool college kid who hung out with the artsy crowd, and somehow, I’d made it happen. I hadn’t been cool in high school, but I’d achieved it now. My teenage self would have been pleased.

“I don’t know,” Margie admitted. “I just... I just want to have friends to drink and play games with, a boyfriend, maybe... a major I love, instead of biology, which I don’t know if I even like anymore.”

A boyfriend? Well, that brought all my dreams crashing down. But I'd had such a strong suspicion she was into girls. There was just something about her.

"A boyfriend, huh?" I said, deciding to take a risk. "As cute as you are, I'm surprised no one's snapped you up already."

She immediately blushed, which made me smile.

"What? It's true," I added. "You're a good-looking woman and you shouldn't have any problem."

"Thanks," she said. "That's uh, that's good to know. I guess I just don't feel socially confident."

"You asked me to get lunch. Just find a cool guy and ask him the same thing." I grinned, even though I was still staving off the disappointment I felt that she was straight.

Unless she was bi... But then I felt like she would've mentioned it. The dynamic between us would have been different if she did have some attraction to me, and in any case, now she knew I thought she was cute. If that information meant anything to her, she could use it if she wanted to. And I did so hope she'd want to.

"It's intimidating," she said, and she stared down at the table. "And... I don't know. I feel like I wouldn't even know what to do in a relationship."

Well, that was definitely an odd thing to say. Why wouldn't she know? Surely we'd all been raised on the same diet of Disney movies and rom coms.

"I mean, you could do stuff like, hold hands and kiss," I said, gently trying to be lighthearted.

Margie looked up at me and laughed, and I was glad I'd temporarily managed to cheer her up. "I guess."

I wanted to see her smile for some reason. Maybe because she was so cute when she did. "I'm sure you'll figure it out," I said. "Maybe you should join a club or something."

"I'm in the EAC, but they're very cliquey," said Margie.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 2:08 pm

“What are your other interests?”

Margie looked off to the side as she considered. “I do like art.”

“What kind of art?” I asked, my interest piqued.

“Like paintings and stuff, I guess?” said Margie. “I don’t know. I mean, I’ve done some painting myself...”

“Wow! Have you considered taking art classes here?”

“I don’t know if I’d be good enough,” said Margie. “Actually, though, there’s this place I’ve been wanting to check out...”

“Let me guess,” I said. “Shadetree?”

Her eyes lit up. “Yeah! That’s the one. How do you know about it?”

“Some of my friends are artists and they’re involved, so I make it over there for shows and stuff. I considered doing an art minor, but I didn’t have the time,” I said. “But I like to paint too. When I have the free time.”

Margie laughed. “Tell me about it. I think Shadetree’s actually having another show soon,” she said. “I wanted to go, but I don’t have anyone to go with.”

“I’ll go with you!” I surprised even myself with my enthusiasm. Why was I so interested in Margie, even though I now knew she was straight? I wasn’t usually like

this. I didn't become interested in people so quickly.

"Oh, awesome," she said. "I'm just too shy to go alone, you know?"

"Yeah, it can be intimidating," I said, even though I honestly didn't know. I'd never had this problem that Margie had, and I was thankful for it. I'd never had trouble making friends. Romantic partners were harder to come by, but friends? I had many of them and I wasn't afraid to go places alone.

Not that Margie was afraid, necessarily. Maybe she just found it overwhelming. I could tell there was so much more under the surface, but I was only getting it in glimpses.

Maybe that was what intrigued me about her—I could tell that there was something restrained about her, and it made me want to probe further. I wanted to set that restrained part of her free.

Maybe going to Shadetree would be the first step.

"You should do a minor in art, at least," I said. "You can start with the intro classes if you're not confident in your skills."

"Maybe," she said, smiling. "I'll see how going to Shadetree works out for me first. Tell me, what's it like?"

"It's awesome," I said. "It's pretty new, but I guess it filled a niche the community needed or something, because it's hopping all the time. These two women turned an old warehouse into the gallery space, and there are even studio spaces they rent out for artists. I think there were talks of selling art supplies, too."

"The student bookstore doesn't have much stuff," said Margie. "We kind of need a

place like that.”

“Yeah. I don’t want to have to order all my supplies online, you know? Rosebridge is big enough to have a proper art store,” I said.

“So... What else do you do?” asked Margie. “What keeps you so busy?”

There was something coy about the way she asked the question. It really felt like we were on a date. A date date, not a friend date. I couldn’t ignore my intuition telling me that there was something about her... But then, I didn’t want to ignore the fact that she clearly implied she wasn’t into women.

I decided to do a little more poking.

“I sometimes hang out at the Spectrum Coalition,” I said.

“What’s that?”

“Basically the LGBTQ club. It’s a nice place for the queer kids to hang out. We have events and mixers, so it could be a good place to meet people, though you didn’t say...” I trailed off.

She shrugged. “I’ve just never been into women that way,” she said.

I nodded. So she was doubling down. Okay. Maybe it really was something else then.

“I also am involved with a small street performance group,” I said. “Between that and my music classes, I’m pretty much playing the violin all the time.”

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 2:08 pm

“That’s so cool that you can play an instrument,” she said, eyes shining.

“It’s fun,” I said, agreeing. “And I love that it’s a creative outlet. If I was only doing schoolwork all the time, I’d go crazy. As it is, I’m sad that I can’t paint.”

Margie nodded, and there was a pause as we finished up the last of our food. “Well... I’ll think about what you’ve told me. I mean, if we can be friendly, I can make other friends too, right?”

“Right.” I smiled. “I’ll see if my friends want to come to the Shadetree thing and I’ll let you know.”

“Perfect. Thanks, Brianne.”

“No, thank you,” I said. “If you hadn’t bothered to asked me to lunch, we wouldn’t have had this lovely outing.”

We stood up and gathered our things, and I tried to remember where I was supposed to be going next.

“I’m back on campus,” she said, “so I guess I’ll see you around.”

“Yeah. See you, Margie!”

After we parted ways, my brain was swirling with thoughts. Margie was a quiet, shy person, but as I well knew, those types of people tended to have a lot going on inside. And I wanted to figure her out.

MARGIE

I couldn't believe that lunch had gone as well as it had. In fact, I was still marveling at it when I got ready for my outing to Shadetree.

Brianne had actually wanted to hang out with me a

nd she wanted me to meet her friends. Something about that made me feel special, like I was worthy. It wasn't just that she wanted to spend time with me, she wanted others to spend time with me too.

I couldn't remember the last time I thought I'd made a friend. Well, freshman year, I supposed. But that had fizzled out quickly.

Brianne had said some things I'd found intriguing. For one, she'd mentioned the Spectrum Coalition. I had no idea why I couldn't stop thinking about the possibility of attending a meeting. I was pretty solidly a straight, cis woman. Not LGBT in any way I could think of.

So if that was who I was, why couldn't I stop thinking about attending a Spectrum meeting?

Maybe it was because she'd said it was a great way to meet people. It sounded primarily like a social club, though I'd checked their Facebook page and they did fundraisers and other activities as well. But I got a good vibe from the people in the photos—smiling, friendly, good-looking. It all seemed too good to be true.

But I didn't like the idea of showing up when I wasn't LGBT myself. It seemed wrong somehow, even if Brianne had invited me. Then again, maybe she'd invited me because she thought I was gay. I'd mentioned I was looking for a boyfriend, though, so that couldn't be it.

The whole thing was confusing. Maybe I could set aside Spectrum for when I felt more confident. I just had to make sure I looked cool enough for this Shadetree thing first.

I certainly didn't feel very cool. There wasn't much that was interesting in my wardrobe. I ended up picking black jeans and a blue plaid shirt—boring, but at least I would marginally look like I fit in among the artsy kids. There was nothing to be done about my preppy haircut, though.

I really didn't want to screw this up. I had the distinct conviction that it was a turning point of sorts. If I managed to actually build a friendship with Brianne or get in with her other friends, my entire Beasley experience would change. My entire life would change, even.

I was trying not to hang too much on it, but it was difficult. I'd been painfully lonely for so long, and it was hard when I was reminded of how lonely I was all the damn time. To think that my years of loneliness could be over was exhilarating.

Satisfied with my appearance, I grabbed my purse, then hopped on my bike and headed to Shadetree. It wasn't particularly close to anything else, but it wasn't hard to get to, and as I approached the building, I could see that it was already busy.

I locked my bike and realized I wasn't going to find Brianne easily. I texted her to let her know I was here, then took a deep breath and walked into the building.

I recognized some faces of students and professors from campus, but there were plenty of other people who looked like they were from the town. There was art everywhere, of course, and it was amazing. I saw that there was food and drink for sale, so I bought a cheap glass of wine and kept my eyes peeled for Brianne.

As soon as I spotted her, I froze up. God, she just looked so cool and beautiful, even,

with her loose blazer over a floral dress. I was completely deluded to think that she'd want to hang out with me. But she wasn't with anyone else, so I walked up to her.

"Hey!" she said, her sour expression melting into a more friendly one.

"Hey," I said, holding up my wine. "I got a drink. You want one?"

"Nah, I'm good," she said. "Let's look at some art."

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 2:08 pm

We walked around the perimeter of the gallery, where a series of oil paintings were hung on the wall. I liked the abstract style, though it wasn't something I would have done myself. It was nice to see that there were working artists here in Rosebridge.

"Brianne? Is that you?"

We turned to see a professor beaming at Brianne. She grinned when she saw me, too, even though I'd never before seen her in my life.

"Professor Barley! This is my friend Margie," said Brianne smoothly, and the professor shook hands with me. "Professor Barley is the sponsor of the Spectrum Coalition. She also helps run this gallery."

"Nice to meet you," I said politely. Again, I couldn't help but remember the part of me that yearned to attend a meeting... for no discernible purpose.

"Maybe we'll see you around some time," said Professor Barley, who seemed a little out of breath. If she was in charge of this huge event, I didn't blame her.

"Sure," I said noncommittally.

"I actually wanted to ask you, Brianne... I saw you hanging out with that street performer the other day. She seems to be popular with the students, yes?" asked Professor Barley.

"Oh, sure. People love hanging out around her," said Brianne. "I've actually been playing with her a little too."

Professor Barley's eyebrows rose. "Really! Well, then, we must have you play at our next gallery show. It's a paid gig, of course."

"That would be great, Professor Barley. When is it?"

"Next month? We try to have some event like this every month, you know."

"It's just that... we don't have a band name or anything. I mean, we're not a formal band. We just play and improvise on the street," said Brianne, doubt entering her voice.

Professor Barley waved her hand. "Oh, that's not a problem at all. The weather will be nicer so there'll be more outdoor activities and art. We were hoping to have you on the terrace."

"That'd be perfect," said Brianne, grinning.

"Great! I must be off," said Professor Barley. "Nice to meet you, Margie."

I waved as she left, surprised that she'd even remembered my name. She seemed like a really nice person. And Brianne did too, which had been surprising. It just showed that you couldn't judge a book by its cover.

"I think I do want a drink," said Brianne. "If we're going to be here a while."

We stood in the line and waited. "Are your other friends coming?" I asked.

"Maybe," said Brianne doubtfully, looking down at her phone. "They usually come to every single one of these things, but they all seem to have midterms they're concerned with."

“It’s Friday!” I said, gesturing. “They can study tomorrow.”

Brianne smiled. “Exactly what I said.”

A funny feeling went through me when she smiled at me. She had a good face, I decided. Strong cheekbones and jaw, dove gray eyes, and a quirk in her smile. She’d be a good subject for a portrait.

For some reason, I blushed when I looked away, and I stayed turned around so she wouldn’t see.

She got her wine and we wandered off to look at more art. There was a sculpture display in the center of the room, and apparently, the studios were open so we could meet artists and watch them work.

“I like this one,” said Brianne, stopping in front of one of the sculptures, which appeared to be of a raccoon sitting on top of a deer skull. It looked like it was made of clay and was painted with rich earth tones.

“It’s beautiful,” I agreed.

Brianne bent over to look at the price tag. “Two thousand dollars!” she said in a low voice. “And it sold. There’s a marking on the tag.”

“Damn. Nice work if you can get it, huh?”

“It’d be awesome to be a working artist or musician. Instead of a marketing executive, or whatever else my parents think I should do,” said Brianne, scoffing.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 2:08 pm

“Your parents want you to do marketing?”

“If becoming a professional classical musician doesn’t pan out. But I don’t think I’m good enough for that. Marketing it is,” she said.

“I’m sure there’s lots of other things you could do,” I said.

“There are, but my parents will be huffy about it. Which is fine, because it’s my life, but... It’s just annoying, you know?”

I didn’t know, to be honest. My mother was just glad I’d managed to go to college at all. She’d done some community college classes, but that was it. And my dad... I didn’t even know. My family had been amazed when I’d gotten into Amherst, and then completely over the moon when I’d gotten into Beasley.

“They’re just worried about your future, I guess,” I offered, even though I really didn’t know what else to say.

Brianne laughed harshly. “I think they’re more worried about the family being prestigious. But whatever, I already am getting the Beasley degree. What’s your major, again?”

“Biology,” I said. “But I don’t know what I want to do with it. I went into it because I liked animals, but I’m going to have to do graduate school if I really want to work with animals. And now I’m not so sure I want to commit to it.”

“It’s hard. No one knows what they want to do,” said Brianne. “I think they just

stumble onto it.”

“True.”

There was a silence as we walked around more of the sculptures. Many of them appeared to have sold. Maybe I should get back into painting, I thought. Maybe I could become a working artist.

“Why can’t you become a working musician?” I asked. “If that street performance friend of yours can do it...”

“She is doing it, but very precariously,” said Brianne. “Between the busking and the music lessons she wants to do, she’ll be fine. But she can’t busk in the cold. She’ll have to have good savings and think of other ways to make money. That kind of financial insecurity is not for me.”

“Fair enough,” I said. “These artists probably are in the same boat, though.”

“Probably,” said Brianne. She sighed. “I don’t know. There’s pros and cons with everything. Nothing is ever perfect.”

“No. That’s life, I suppose.”

“That guy is totally into you, by the way,” said Brianne. “He’s been checking you out for five minutes.”

That jerked me out of my deep thoughts. “What? Where?”

“Okay, don’t be obvious about it, but he’s looking at the raccoon sculpture, and he’s wearing a red sweater.”

I subtly tried to get a

glance at him, but instead ended up making eye contact. He smiled at me. He actually was super cute, but I didn't want to do anything. I was happy where I was with Brianne. The thought of going up and talking to that guy seemed completely unappealing.

"He's cute," I said.

"So go for it. Ask him to lunch, or whatever it is you do." Brianne smirked.

"Nah." I shook my head and started walking further away. "I just... I just don't feel like it."

Brianne shrugged. "I thought you wanted to meet guys. Or maybe you want to meet girls instead?"

I opened my mouth to say something, but hesitated. "N-no. I don't want to meet girls."

Brianne seemed completely blasé, but there was a glint in her eyes. "I'm sure you'll find someone."

"Y-yeah, I will," I said, wanting to get off the topic of my life. It was nice of Brianne to have pointed out that guy to me, but... why did I not want to strike when I had the opportunity?

"I'm sorry my friends didn't come out," said Brianne smoothly. "We hang out at the King's Tooth pretty often, though, so I can just text you next time we're meeting up. You can come get a drink with us."

“That’d be awesome,” I said, thankful not only for the invitation but the change of topic.

Brianne just smiled at me.

BRIANNE

There were some picnic tables near the spot Kaitlyn liked to play, and my friend group had recently taken over one of them. We sat here for lunch every day that it was nice outside.

Today was one of those days, and Kaitlyn had a lot of passers-by giving her money. I'd have offered to play with her, but I'd just had an exam that morning.

Emily, Kaitlyn's girlfriend, sat next to me. "She's just so good, isn't she," she said.

Tracy laughed out loud. "You're so lovesick! It's too cute."

"Yeah, Emily, I've never seen you like this before. It's super cute. A good change of pace," said Miriam.

Emily scowled at them, but her expression quickly dissolved into a smile. "Yeah, I feel pretty sappy sometimes. It's nice."

"Hey! Mind if I have a seat here?"

I turned to see Margie standing in front of me with a tentative smile. As soon as we all figured out what was happening, people started scooting over to make room for her. She sat down across from me.

“This is Margie, guys,” I said. “New friend of mine. She, unlike all of you, made it out to the Shadetree show.”

Now that I knew Margie was a nervous kind of person, I could tell when she was nervous. And right now, she was deeply uneasy, but she’d been brave enough to ask to sit here anyway. I was proud of her.

“Nice to meet you,” said Tracy sweetly.

She, Emily, and Kaitlyn were pretty nice, but I wasn’t so sure about how the others would treat her. They could be... prickly—as I’d proven when I’d first met Kaitlyn. They weren’t the kind of people I’d choose to introduce Margie to, considering she was shy about social interaction and didn’t have the skills to deflect their barbs.

But she was here now, so we were going to see how it went.

“So how do you know each other?” asked Tracy.

“It’s kind of a funny stor—” I started, but Margie cut me off.

“We met randomly after class,” she said curtly, with a smile. “I thought Brianne seemed cool and wanted to be friends with her.”

Okay, so she didn’t want everyone to know about the coffee blunder. I thought it was a great story, but given her social anxiety, it was understandable.

“Didn’t realize you were one to randomly make friends like that, Brianne,” said Miriam.

“Me neither,” I said cheerfully, “but I’m glad we became friends.”

“So what do you study?” asked Tracy.

“Biology.”

“No wonder we haven’t seen you around,” said Tracy. “All humanities majors here, except Emily, who’s doing engineering.”

“Yeah, I don’t think I’ve seen any of you guys around,” said Margie. “I actually did my first two undergrad years at Amherst and transferred this year.”

She was doing well so far. I was even more proud of her. Maybe befriending me had been the push she needed to get out of her comfort zone and actually interact with people. I found myself rooting for her. She was sweet, and deserved to succeed at this.

“Oh, nice,” said Tracy. “So how do you like Beasley?”

“It’s nice,” said Margie tightly. “I’ve had a bit of slow start socially, but things are getting better. I love my classes.”

“You in any clubs?” asked Miriam with a skeptical look. Knowing her, she wasn’t going to be that nice to Margie. She could be a bit of a snob.

“The EAC,” said Margie. “I like animals and nature and stuff, you know.”

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 2:08 pm

“The EAC isn’t as good as the EAN,” said Miriam.

“What’s the EAN?”

“Earth Action Network. It split off from EAC last year and now it does a lot more work in the community. If you want to really be part of an effective group, you wouldn’t be wasting your time with EAC,” said Miriam.

“Be nice,” said Tracy, shoving her gently.

“What? I mean, it’s true.”

Margie shrugged. “I like the people in EAC.”

“Well, EAN also throws better parties, so there’s that...” continued Miriam.

“Forget the nature stuff,” said Siobhan, who was sitting at the other end of the table.

“Spectrum is where it’s at.”

“Oh, uh, I’m not gay or anything,” said Margie shyly.

“You sure about that?” asked Siobhan with a smirk.

I rolled my eyes. Siobhan was one of those people that was convinced that everyone was a little gay (or bi, if you wanted to get technical) and was just in denial. I had no idea why she would think this way—probably because she was surrounded by queer people most of the time—but I found it obnoxious.

“I’m pretty sure,” said Margie, irritated. I was glad she was standing up for herself.

“Well, if you ever change your m—”

“Oh, shut up, Siobhan,” said Tracy lightly but firmly.

“This is what happens when you bring home a stray, Brianne,” said Miriam with a laugh.

Margie had gone quiet, though her cheeks had some color on them.

“Don’t be assholes, guys. Margie, forget them,” I said, unsure what else to say. I would have to apologize to her next time we saw each other, maybe even over a text message. I didn’t want her to think I was okay with their behavior.

This made me realize that Emily had probably had to apologize for my behavior when she’d introduced Kaitlyn. The thought made me feel like shit, but it was probably a good thing. I really had to get my head out of my ass and not be such a bitch.

“Well, I’ve gotta get to my next class,” said Siobhan, grabbing her backpack and standing up. “See you guys.”

“Me too,” said Emily. She waved Kaitlyn over, and the two kissed a goodbye. I looked away from their coupley moment, but not before my heart twinged with jealousy. I really missed being in a relationship.

I saw Margie quietly gather her things and then stand up. I thought for a moment that she would say goodbye to the group, but it looked like she wasn’t planning to. She hesitated before turning around and leaving.

I knew I had to follow her. I left all my stuff where it was and trotted after her, catching up.

“Hey,” I said, putting a hand on her shoulder to stop her. “I’m sorry my friends sucked.”

Margie turned to face me. “I should have figured, though. I should have known I wasn’t cool enough for your friends. How could I be?”

“Margie, you are cool. You’re interesting already, and I’ve only hung out with you a couple times. And coolness isn’t everything. Being nice matters too, and you’re much nicer than them,” I said.

How was I so invested in this girl I hadn’t known until a week ago

? This was a little ridiculous. But now that I was invested, I couldn’t let go. I wanted Margie to be happy. Her situation was pretty sad, and she didn’t deserve to be so lonely.

“But it doesn’t matter if they won’t even give me a chance,” said Margie, now despondent rather than angry. “How am I going to make friends if I can’t get past the first step?”

“Find people who don’t care about that first step,” I said.

“No,” said Margie. “I can’t do it. It’s too much. I should have just figured this all out in high school, but I didn’t. I have to go to class, anyway. See you later, Brianne.”

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 2:08 pm

She didn't wait for me to answer; she just turned and started walking. I thought about calling after her again, but it was getting close to the top of the hour, and I didn't want to be late for my next class.

I was going to have to do something about this. There was no way I was letting Margie think she wasn't good enough for me. I really had enjoyed hanging out with her—she was so refreshingly down to earth compared to Siobhan and Miriam and some of the other folks in our circle. They weren't bad people, but you had to put up a façade when talking to them.

It wasn't like that with Margie. I felt like I could actually be myself with her. She wouldn't have cared if I wasn't wearing cool clothes or didn't have cool friends. She was just looking for a genuine human connection. And that was much more valuable than social status.

I walked to my next class feeling a little guilty. Of course, Siobhan and Miriam's behavior wasn't my fault, but I still felt responsible. It made me not want to hang out with them anymore. Siobhan hadn't been my favorite to begin with—I found her a little obnoxious in other ways, too—but I could probably talk to Miriam and tell her to be nicer.

I just wanted to make this work. And maybe, just maybe, I was hoping I did have a chance with Margie.

As I sat down in the chair in the lecture hall, I thought back to my previous relationship. She'd been someone a little like Margie—someone I felt like I wanted to protect. Maybe I was a “fixer.” Maybe I kept wanting people whose lives I could

somehow fix.

It was all too much to think about, anyway. I let myself get sucked into the lecture, which was about product placement, and tried not to think about Margie.

But it was difficult. I could still see her hurt face, the anger bubbling under the surface.

When I got back to my apartment, I lay down on my bed, tired. I was done with classes for the day, but I still had practice with Kaitlyn in the evening. And I had a ton of homework to do, as always, as well as studying, since I had a stray midterm to take care of. And then I was supposed to call my mom, because she was organizing a graduation party for me and wanted my input on some of the decorations or whatever. And I had to Skype my friend who was studying abroad in Prague. There was just way too much to do.

I sighed. I couldn't sit still; I had to get up and get started. There was no way I was going to cancel on Kaitlyn; canceling previous obligations was one of my least favorite things to do. I wanted people to be able to count on me.

I put all my things away, made some tea, and settled down to do a bit of reading for class, enjoying the sunlight filtering in through my windows. I was getting into the reading, which was surprisingly pretty interesting, when my phone pinged with a text.

My heart dropped like a stone in my chest when I'd read it. It was Kaitlyn, asking about the songs she wanted me to look at. Fuck. I'd totally forgotten—and I'd told her at Miriam's birthday that I would have them ready for this practice session.

Fuck, fuck, fuck. I had to put off this reading now. Instead, I scrabbled around in my pile of papers until I found the notes and lyrics Kaitlyn had given me.

I didn't like having to switch gears like this, but I only had a couple of hours to get these songs ready. And that was if I skipped dinner... which I would probably do, so I could pick up a pizza on the way back from Kaitlyn's place.

I groaned. When had life become like this? I was a second semester senior—I was supposed to be carefree and ready to graduate. Instead, I was swamped in all this work, unable to even think about graduating.

I texted Kaitlyn back and assured her I would have the songs ready because damn it, I wasn't going over unprepared.

I was going to get all my work done... if it was the last thing I did.

MARGIE

I couldn't believe how stupid I'd been.

As soon as I left Brianne and her friends, I walked to my entomology class. There, I tried to get lost in the lecture about butterflies and moths—which should have been fascinating—but I couldn't. I was thinking about so much.

One, the fact that I'd gotten my hopes up. I thought I could make friends with Brianne and her crew, but that was clearly not going to happen. A couple of them were nice, but why would I want to hang out with people who weren't nice to me? I wasn't going to try to prove anything to them—not that I had anything to prove, anyway. And Brianne herself had apologized, but what kind of person was she if she kept the company of people like that?

I may have been desperate for friendship, but I wasn't going to allow people to disrespect me.

Two, the fact that everyone seemed to think I was a lesbian. Maybe it was because “everyone” so far was just gay people, but it didn’t matter—it had set me on a train of thought I couldn’t get off of. Maybe I really was into women.

Nah, no way. There wasn’t a chance of that. Was there?

I mean, I could think women were beautiful... but that was just because it was normal for women of all orientations to find women beautiful. There were a lot of gorgeous women in the world and I could appreciate that even if I was straight.

Except I had dabbled in looking at lesbian smut before, and I’d been into it, kinda... But that didn’t mean anything, did it? People were into all kinds of things in erotica they weren’t into in real life. And surely sexual experimentation was common.

If I examined myself honestly, it just didn’t make sense that I was gay. Bisexual maybe, but that was pushing it, because I didn’t find women even a fraction as attractive as I found men. The guys on campus caught my eye much more frequently than the girls.

But did I want to actually do anything with them? I wasn’t sure. I’d fooled around with guys, and I’d had sex in a drunken one night stand back at Amherst, but I wasn’t sure if I found sex that interesting. On the other hand, when I fantasized about doing it with women, I wasn’t that interested, either. Sure, it felt good, but...

My mind wandered back to Brianne. I didn’t want to feel like a lost puppy who was just following someone who was kind, but that was what it felt like. I felt a sort of fondness for her because she’d shown kindness to me. And it seemed like she still wanted to be my friend. The conversation we’d had before I left had been heartfelt, I could tell, and I knew she really did feel bad. I just couldn’t stick around—my emotions would get the better of me. I had to leave and cool off.

I needed to text her if I wanted to salvage my first actual friendship since coming to Beasley.

Page 13

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 2:08 pm

The lecture finally came to an end, and I wandered out of the classroom, wondering what to do since I was done with classes for the day. I wasn't a particularly busy person because I didn't have much of a social life.

Maybe I could get back into painting.

I let my feet carry me in the direction of the campus bookstore. They didn't have a lot of art supplies, but they had enough. I'd left all my stuff in my parents' house, so I had nothing here.

I walked into the bookstore, found my way to the art section, and took a deep breath, loving the smell of paint and canvas and brushes. I picked out a pad of watercolor paper, a student set of watercolors, and some basic brushes. They were cheap, but they would do for now.

I paid for them and then walked home, enjoying the smell of the spring air. What would I paint? I had no idea.

Again, thoughts of Brianne flitted through my head. I remembered thinking how she'd be perfect for a portrait study. Her eyes were truly gray, rather than blue, which was rare. Gray like stone, like storm clouds, like dove feathers. And her hair was a rich brown, like dark soil. And her skin was pale and clear over her cheekbones and sharp jaw. She was really good-looking, and she had that regal air about her that added to the whole effect.

I had a funny feeling in my stomach, the same feeling I got when I saw a hot guy. It wasn't butterflies, was it? Just because Brianne was so freaking cool?

No, it was something else. I uncomfortably thought about my interest in going to Spectrum Coalition meetings. I'd feel really stupid if I showed up after professing how not-gay I was to everyone. But then I remembered Professor Barley's kind face, and the pictures of all the students on their website.

Maybe it would be a good place to learn more, at least. If only I could get over my social anxiety.

I unlocked the front door and stepped into the house I shared with Cass. She worked at a coffee shop, so she usually wasn't around in the afternoons, but Marnie was passed out on the couch. I should have gotten annoyed with her being over so often, but I really didn't mind. Having more people around made me feel less lonely.

I tried to be quiet as I stepped into the living room to get to the kitchen, but Marnie stirred and stretched. She blinked her eyes at me and tried to sit up. "Hey. What time is it?"

"Like, two?" I said.

"Word." She sat up fully and tossed the throw off, sitting properly on the couch.

"Cass's working today, isn't she?" I asked as I got a glass of juice from the fridge.

"Yeah, she'll be back in an hour," said Marnie.

"You want some juice?"

Marnie blinked at me, still brushing off the fog of sleep. "Uh, sure."

I poured her a glass and handed it to her, then went to sit on the opposite couch from her. We sat silently as we each took long swigs of the cool, refreshing juice. It was

starting to get a little warm outside and I found myself sweating a little on the walk home.

“Marnie,” I started, figuring I should finally

get to the bottom of it. “Are you and Cass uh, dating?”

Marnie laughed, pushing her unkempt brown hair behind her ears. “Yeah, dude.”

“Oh.” I felt a little dumb, since maybe it should have been more obvious. “I’d been wondering for a while.”

“Yeah. We’re totally dating. It’s even getting serious.”

“Good for you.” I paused, wondering if I should ask Marnie. I didn’t really know her, so it felt alright. “How did you realize you were interested in women?”

Her eyes widened slightly.

“Sorry,” I said quickly. “You don’t have to answer that if you don’t want to. I’m just curious about how people figure this out about themselves.”

She gave me a knowing look, which I wasn’t sure I liked. “Well... I was never into guys as much as everyone else seemed to be,” she started. “So then I tried dating a girl back in freshman year, and wow. The sexual chemistry was incredible. TMI, I know. But that was pretty much my awakening.”

“So you had a hunch and followed up on it,” I said.

“Basically, yeah.”

“Thanks,” I said.

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 2:08 pm

“Yeah, no worries.” She smiled.

She’d given me a lot to think about. Namely, the prospect of experimenting with someone so I could see how I felt. The only problem was that I didn’t want to just experiment with anyone... unless that person turned out to be Brianne. And it wouldn’t be fair to treat her as some kind of experiment if I actually wanted to be friends with her. I knew I’d be able to find a hookup if I wanted—especially since Brianne said I was good-looking, a thought that brought warmth to my heart—but random people didn’t interest me.

After finishing my drink, I went up to my room. The smallness was oppressive, now. I had a sort of restlessness inside me that was making me not want to be cooped up here.

I decided to text Brianne and tell her I was sorry for how I behaved and that I wanted to see her again. I figured if I reached out then maybe she’d feel better about it.

> MARGIE: Hey, sorry I stomped off like that. I was upset. I’d like to hang out again soon.

I tried to get some work done, but it was difficult. I just found myself sitting and waiting for Brianne to reply. Dinner time came and went without a reply, and just when I was going to turn in for the night and watch Netflix, my phone pinged.

> BRIANNE: I was at practice so sorry I didn’t reply sooner. Let’s hang out this weekend!

I finally felt like I could breathe a sigh of relief. She wasn't mad at me. Not that I thought she would be... but it was hard to say with people you didn't know well. I replied and told her I wasn't doing anything this weekend—which was true—and her reply came instantly.

> BRIANNE: Cool, I think there's a party at Miriam's Friday. I promise she'll be nice this time.

I wasn't so sure of that, but if Brianne made a promise, I figured she'd probably talk to Miriam. I didn't really like the idea of her telling them not to make fun of me, as if I was a child who needed to be taken care of, and I didn't like that she still hung out with them, but I was willing to give her a chance anyway. She seemed like a good person.

But what the hell was I going to do at a party? I'd been to a few with EAC, but they'd been busts. I just sipped a beer and stood around awkwardly while everyone around me got wasted and danced. I didn't like getting too drunk or even tipsy around people I didn't know because I was worried I'd do or say something stupid. But on the other hand, I didn't like looking like a square because I didn't get drunk. People were really nice about that here, and didn't pressure me at all, but I still felt like an outsider when I was the only one who was sober.

I supposed I just had to trust Brianne—a scary thought, trusting someone I didn't know well—and just go for it. See what a different party scene was like.

And maybe I could get to know Brianne better. Maybe I could even kiss her.

Shit, that thought immediately made me get a little tingly down there. I felt like that should be telling—or maybe my libido was just revving up because I'd ignored it for so long. In any case, it just made me feel uneasier. It was as if my body was trying to show me that I was into women because I'd been entertaining the idea.

If I got excited at the thought of kissing a girl, that had to mean something, right? Especially when kissing guys didn't always have the same effect on me.

There was no way I was getting anymore work done tonight. I closed my laptop and lay down on my bed, staring at the ceiling. I tried not to think of Brianne and how great it would be if we were actually friends, and I was established in her friend group, but I couldn't help it. When the one thing I wanted more than anything—a true friend—was within reach, I couldn't stop my brain and heart from indulging in the possibilities.

BRIANNE

I wasn't even sure Margie would want to come to the party because Miriam had been snarky toward her, but she'd told me she was down. I'd resolved to make sure no one was a dick to her at this party. I wanted her to feel comfortable.

It was still a little weird to me how protective I was of her. I really wasn't usually like this. I wondered if I was developing a crush on her, and realized that maybe I was. The thought of seeing her at the party certainly made me feel a little jittery, and that was weird.

I checked myself in the mirror and decided to make my way over, glad that Miriam's house was within walking distance of mine. I'd spoken to her and told her to be nice to Margie. She'd asked me if I liked her, and I told her maybe. Of course, she'd gone nuts with that tease, but she'd agreed to be polite and friendly to her. So that was taken care of, at least.

As I approached her house, I saw that the lights glowed warmly in the windows and the faint sound of music escaped it. I tried the door handle, found it was open, and walked inside. The music was blaring loudly, and my friends were drinking in the kitchen.

“Hey,” said Miriam. “Glad you could make it. Where’s your new girl?”

“Brienne has a new girl?” Siobhan perked up.

Suddenly, all the attention was on me. “She’s not my new girl,” I scoffed. “She’s just a new friend. Yeah, she’s cute as hell, but she’s also straight.”

“Oh, bummer,” said Miriam.

“Yeah. Oh well. She should turn up soon.”

“I think there’s probably more to it,” said Kaitlyn. “I mean, you don’t just adopt random straight girls normally, do you?”

“Er, no,” I said, trying to fend off the blush rising on my cheeks. “Margie just seems like a nice girl who needs friends.”

“Sure,” said Miriam, skeptical.

Whatever, they’d see that she really was just a friend. Of course, I wanted her to be something more, but I’d accepted that wasn’t going to happen. Maybe she could find a cute guy at this party, finally.

Page 15

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 2:08 pm

The door opened and I turned to see who it was. Margie's blonde head appeared in the doorway tentatively, looking around until she saw me. I waved her over.

"You all remember Margie," I said, like we hadn't just been talking about her.

"Yeah," said Miriam. "Hey. Thanks for coming." She smiled.

Margie smiled back, though I could tell she was still suspicious. "Thanks for having me."

"Want a drink?" I asked, holding up a beer bottle. When she nodded, I uncapped it and handed it to her.

The group was a little silent now, unsure of what to talk about. I had to do something.

"Hey, Kaitlyn," I started, "I almost forgot to mention Professor Barley wants us to play at the next Shadetree event."

Kaitlyn's eyes lit up. "Wow, really?"

"Yeah!" I grinned. "She's seen you playing around campus and wants to have you since you're popular with the students. Now that the weather's getting nicer, she wants to do events on the terrace."

"That would be amazing," said Kaitlyn.

"And it's paid," I add

ed with a grin.

“Dope!” interjected Miriam. “Getting paid to be creative is the best.”

We were interrupted when the door opened and a few more people trickled in. Miriam and Siobhan—who also lived in this house—went to greet them, and the others wandered off, leaving me with Margie.

“Doin’ okay so far?” I asked.

“Yeah,” she said. “They do seem to be nicer this time.”

“They’re not bad people, just prickly,” I said, though I still felt a little bit of guilt over how Margie had been treated initially. “Want to get the music set up? Now that the party’s really starting...”

We walked to the living room and sat down next to the speakers, finding Miriam’s laptop already hooked up. I queued some songs that were good, with Margie’s help, and when we looked up again, it seemed like the number of people inside had doubled.

It was officially party o’clock.

Some people had pregamed already and I caught the distinct sour scent of weed floating in the air. Margie looked a little nervous, and I couldn’t blame her due to her past experiences. I usually hated having to babysit people—like when one of my more sheltered high school friends visited me back in freshman year—but I didn’t mind having Margie at my side.

Yep, I was definitely getting a crush on her. Actually, the crush already existed in full force. I was so attentive to her like I never usually was with other people, and I felt

irrationally solicitous. And when I looked at her, I couldn't help but notice how adorable her face was, how soulful her brown eyes were...

Fuck.

I had to get her focused on some guy. Maybe if she found a boyfriend, I could put my feelings behind me. Or at the very least, I could stop worrying about whether I had a tiny chance of getting with her or not.

"Hey," I said, nudging her shoulder, "you see that guy over there? Green sweatshirt at ten o'clock."

She turned in his direction. "What about him?"

"I happen to know he got dumped by his ex, who was a really shitty person, and could use a nice girl to help him forget her..." I smiled slyly.

Margie knit her eyebrows together. "You want me to talk to him?"

"Yeah. His name's Max and he's really sweet. You should go for it," I prodded.

"I don't know..." Margie continued to watch Max as he chatted with his friend. "I just don't feel like it."

"You don't feel like it?" I asked.

Page 16

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 2:08 pm

“I, uh, I’m just now getting used to the whole idea of having friends,” she said nervously, “and I don’t know if I want to add the stress of a guy to that.”

“Ah.” Well, so much for that plan. I was going to have to ride this crush out, it seemed.

“I also... I don’t know if I’m even that interested in guys... right now, that is...” She trailed off.

“Sorry, what?”

I was sure I hadn’t heard her correctly.

“Oh, um, yeah, I’m just not interested in dating right now,” she said more firmly.

“Uh, okay,” I said. It sounded like she said she wasn’t sure if she was interested in guys.

There was a pause while we were both silent, Margie watching Max pensively.

Margie sighed and looked up at me with a worried expression. “Brianne... how did you know you liked girls?”

I blinked at her. “Uh, liked girls?”

“Yeah, like, how did you figure out you were a lesbian?” she asked, her eyes more intense than I’d ever seen them.

“Let’s move somewhere quieter,” I said, leading her out of the noisy, crowded living room and into the backyard.

A couple people were quietly talking and smoking out here, so it was easy to find a place to sit and chat. There was a patio table with some chairs. The table was filthy and covered in beer bottles and empty cigarette packets and butts, but it would do.

“How did I figure out I was a lesbian,” I repeated, better able to think in the clear night air. “Um... I guess, when other girls got interested in guys, I realized I didn’t feel the same way. All the feelings they described, I felt towards girls. It took a lot of self-examination, but it became pretty clear to me early on. I guess I was lucky that my parents were progressive in that regard, so I knew about gay people from a young age. I knew it was an option.”

Margie was silent, like she was thinking over what I’d said. “You didn’t have to like, experiment or anything?”

“Nah,” I said. “I mean, once I discovered the wide world of internet smut, that made things easier...”

She chuckled, but it was a nervous laugh.

“You asking for a friend, or...?” I cocked my eyebrow.

“Um... myself,” she said. “All that’s happened recently has just made me think of it. I mean, I do find myself attracted to guys... kind of. And I think girls are good-looking. But I haven’t wanted to be sexual with many people.”

I wasn’t sure why she was opening up to me so much, but then I noticed that her beer was empty. And she seemed a little less inhibited than usual. She must have had a really low tolerance.

“Maybe you’re asexual,” I said.

“But I do want to have sex, and I like it just fine when I have it,” she said.

She’d clearly been thinking about this quite a bit, especially if she’d already considered that possibility. “There’s a place in between asexual and not asexual too,” I said. “But it’s okay to not know. Sometimes experimenting isn’t a bad way to figure it all out.”

“Yeah, that’s what someone else told me,” said Margie, sighing yet again. “I don’t want to just use someone as an experiment, though. And there’s no one I’d want to experiment with except...”

She trailed off and let out an even bigger sigh.

I reached out and put a hand on her shoulder, enjoying the warmth of her body a little more than I should have. “It takes time to figure these things out. Go easy on yourself.”

“It’s just hard when I have confusing feelings for you,” she said, and immediately blushed.

“Me?”

“Yeah, you,” she said. “I mean, you’re the one girl who’s ever caught my attention. And I just think you’re cool... probably too cool for me.”

“I’m not too cool for you,” I said gently. “No one’s too cool for you. It’s just not possible. And if it seems like they are... then they’re probably just pretentious asses.”

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 2:08 pm

“I guess.” Margie didn’t seem convinced. “I mean, it’s not like I want to date you. I mean, maybe. I don’t know what I want.”

“Well, you’re not using someone as an experiment if they know what your deal is,” I said. “I mean, you have to start somewhere. And a cute girl like you is welcome to experiment on me anytime.”

I grinned after I said that, but I really didn’t want to be treated as an experiment. I just liked Margie too much, and I knew what I wanted from her. I just wasn’t sure if I would be able to get it.

“Really? I can like, kiss you or something?” She looked uncertain, as if I’d revoke what I said any second.

“Yeah, really.” I really wanted to feel her lips on mine right now, but I didn’t want to push her too hard. She was probably the kind of person who was easily spooked. And I didn’t want to pressure someone who was questioning.

“Okay.” A determined set came over her face, and she leaned forward.

I leaned forward too, and our lips met.

Her lips were soft and warm, and parted easily, like she wanted more already. I put my hands on her arms, feeling her soft skin, knowing that I wanted more. But I was going to let her lead this and take it at her own pace.

Margie put a hand on my chin, and her tongue flicked out, experimentally licking my

lips and toying with them. After that, she pulled away, blinking at me, cheeks flushed.

“So, how was that?” I asked, trying to appear blasé but having a hard time containing my emotions.

“That was good,” she said. “Um, I definitely like you, Brianne. I just... I just don’t know if I can handle this right now, because my self-esteem is garbage and all.”

“Whatever ‘this’ is, it doesn’t have to be done in a rush,” I said, even though I feared, deep down, that falling for someone who was unsure was going to be bad for me. I didn’t want my heart broken if she changed her mind.

“Good,” said Margie, and she smiled.

And when she smiled, my whole heart lit up like the full moon above us.

MARGIE

“Want to go back inside?” I asked.

The kiss had been wonderful, but it was too much for me right now. I needed to process my feelings minus the fuzziness in my brain before I did anything else. I wanted to go back to the crowd and remember where I was, instead of sit in the lonely backyard with Brianne. As much as I enjoyed it, it was also making me anxious.

“Sure,” said Brianne, standing up. She reached out her hand with a gentle smile, and I took it and stood up.

When we walked back inside, the party was in full swing. People were clearly a lot

drunker than they had been just a half hour ago, and the music had gotten louder and more fast paced. It was pretty crowded inside the house—I would guess there were at least forty people inside, maybe more.

“Damn, I need another drink to keep up with all these people,” said Brianne.

“I can see that,” I said, looking around, though I didn’t really want another drink. The fuzziness in my brain had already led to me kissing Brianne, and I wasn’t sure I wanted to find out what would happen if I had another beer.

I followed Brianne into the kitchen, where she found another beer and Miriam and Siobhan.

“How are you liking the party?” Miriam asked me.

“It’s good,” I said sincerely. Even though I felt a little out of my element, I was enjoying myself. I looked forward to the day I could show up at one of these parties myself, instead of just following Brianne around.

“Looks like it’s really hopping,” said Brianne, peeking into the living room, where most of the dancing seemed to be happening.

“Yeah, I guess sinc

e this week has been so nice, people want to get out,” said Miriam.

Just then, Kaitlyn and another girl who looked like her girlfriend walked into the kitchen, holding hands. Both of them seemed to be a little tipsy, and they were kind of all over each other. It was cute, but I felt a pang of jealousy. I wanted to be secure in an affectionate relationship like that with someone else.

Maybe Brianne and I could get there. But the thought of being like that with her was terrifying. It was something I couldn't imagine being real at all. It was easier—though unappealing—to imagine being with some guy, like Max.

When we walked back into the house, though, I'd seen Max making out with a girl against the wall of the dining room. It looked like he'd found someone after all.

Page 18

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 2:08 pm

I tuned out of the conversation as it turned to gossip about people they all knew. I was content to just half-listen to them and half-listen to the music, standing next to v. I hadn't before noticed how good she smelled—even though the smell of beer pervaded everything, I could catch a whiff of her perfume.

The way someone smelled sure was important. That little whiff made me just the slightest bit more attracted to her.

After a while, though, I got bored of being a wallflower. And I was tired, too, since I didn't normally stay out and active this late. I could walk back to campus myself, but I wanted to privately say goodbye to Brianne.

I nudged her and she turned to me. "I'm gonna head out soon," I said. "I'm pretty tired."

"Okay, let me walk you out," she said.

There wasn't anyone on the front lawn, though I could smell the beer and hear the music from here. Crickets chirped in the otherwise quiet neighborhood, though I thought I could hear the sound of parties further down the road.

"This was really great," I said, "thank you. I had a good time. I'm actually glad I pushed myself to come here."

"That's great," said Brianne sincerely. "I enjoyed seeing you."

There was a pregnant pause. I wanted to kiss her goodnight, but I didn't have the guts

to do it. Maybe the alcohol had worn off, or maybe I was second guessing myself.

But she did it first. She leaned forward quickly and gave me a brief kiss on the lips, leaving my cheeks warm and flushed. But she was flushed too, and she looked adorable.

“Goodnight, Brianne,” I said, unable to conceal my smile as I walked home.

“Goodnight,” she replied with a grin as she waved.

I heard her open the screen door and close it with a clattering sound, and I continued on the walk back to my place. My mind was clear now, and when I got onto the main road, I could see throngs of students on their way to and from social events.

I felt good that for the first time, I wasn’t looking on them with envy. I was one of them—one of those people who actually had social events to go to. It was almost like I had a place where I belonged. I wasn’t sure that place was with that entire group necessarily, but it was with Brianne.

My head was spinning as I made my way back to my house and I didn’t pay that much attention to my surroundings. My feet carried me to my front door and when I walked inside the house, it was quiet. Marnie and Cass were probably gone still.

I checked my phone. It was an early night, but I still felt satisfied. I could hear people being loud on the streets outside, but for once, I didn’t feel envious.

I closed my window since it was getting chilly and the revelers were disturbing me. Now my small room didn’t feel so oppressive; it felt like a cozy place to come back to. I changed into PJs and sat on the bed with my laptop, checking Facebook and the usual sites I did.

When there wasn't anything else new to look at, I found my brain urging me to look for porn... I didn't bother with videos often, usually preferring erotic stories, but now I was curious to give it another try.

It wasn't that hard to find, of course, and I quickly found myself evaluating a video with two girls who were admittedly pretty cute. They looked young, like they could be my classmates, and I appreciated that it was one of those rare videos which didn't seem like it was just made to titillate straight men.

They started by making out, and then the clothes quickly came off. Both of the girls were fit, despite having a girl-next-door look, and I found myself getting tingly.

Well, if I was getting aroused from watching two naked girls touching each other, I was probably into the same thing, right?

I paused the video and opened a new tab. Then I searched for gay porn. The guys were actually quite cute and had great bodies, but I couldn't get into it as much as I could with the girls. I switched between the two tabs, trying to compare. I just found myself way more interested in the girls, even though the guys were good-looking and pretty much doing the same thing as the girls.

I couldn't come to a conclusion after just two data points, could I? And what did it mean that I was only truly interested in getting physical with Brianne?

I continued watching the video of the two girls, letting myself get aroused, then shifting the position so I could touch myself. Yeah, I could get off to this. Much more so than I could all the heterosexual porn—but maybe that was because a lot of it really was unappealing.

By the time the short video had finished, I found myself needing release, so I closed my computer and lay back on my bed, my brain inevitably drifting to thoughts of

Brianne.

Now that it was on my mind, I could imagine how good it would feel if—or when—I finally went further with her. Right now, I could barely handle kisses. But in my brain, I could imagine so much more.

I could imagine taking that chambray dress off, button by button, feeling the warmth of her body pressed up against mine as we pressed our lips together, kisses traveling down necks and collarbones and further below...

This was so unfamiliar for me, to be fantasizing in depth about someone like this. I mean, I'd fantasized somewhat about previous people I'd been with, but... it was never like this.

No one excited me the way Brianne did—not just physically, but emotionally, intellectually. I'd never met anyone like her.

Right now, though, all my brain wanted to do was indulge in a filthy fantasy of what we'd do if we had the space—and if I didn't have my inhibitions. The image in my mind dissolved into a scene of us writhing in bed together, naked, sweaty, breasts pressed against each other...

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 2:08 pm

I wasn't sure what would happen after that, and the thought was simply too arousing to even consider. I kept rubbing myself as I imagined this intoxicating scenario, and when I finally came, it was one of the best orgasms I'd had in a while.

I lay in bed for a few minutes, letting my breathing and my heart rate calm down. I couldn't believe what I'd done. I felt like everything I was doing was propelling me further toward a certain conclusion—the conclusion that I really was a lesbian after all. (Or bisexual. Or asexual. But definitely not straight.)

Once I'd decided to embark on this journey of self-exploration, it seemed like I really was learning a lot about myself. And what I'd learned today was that I was definitely at least a little bit interested in women. I wasn't straight. I didn't want to put another label on myself just yet, but not-straight was definitely on the table.

There was just one problem. My family. I wasn't sure how they'd react. They were more socially conservative, rural people from a small town. We didn't know anyone who was LGBT—well, except my one cousin. That was probably why it had never occurred to me that I could be into women.

My dad wasn't really in the picture anymore; he and my mother had separated long ago. I would have been more worried about disappointing him. My mother was a wild card. She didn't rail against gay rights like he used to, but she didn't speak up in favor of it either. She didn't say anything mean about my gay cousin, but she also didn't seem particularly accepting. With her, it seemed like it could go either way.

I didn't have to worry about it just yet—after all, maybe my journey of s

elf-exploration would lead me to the conclusion that I was not gay. But I would have to worry about it eventually, and that thought was worrying.

My mom was very important to me. We'd become close after my dad left, and we'd developed a strong bond. I didn't want to break that bond. I couldn't help it, though. If this was really who I was...

It was stressful to think about, and I knew a lot of other people had it worse than me. Teenagers got kicked out of their homes, and adult children got disowned.

But right now, I had to focus on what was making me happy—Brianne. I loved spending time with her, feeling like I was worthwhile, like I was someone who deserved a genuine connection with another human being.

As I felt myself get tired, I decided to pull the covers over myself and just go to sleep. And as I closed my eyes, I thought about how lovely it would be to be curled up with someone I loved, in bed—and maybe one day, that someone would be Brianne.

BRIANNE

"I 'm sorry," said Kaitlyn sheepishly. "I just... I just don't know if it would make sense for you to play at Shadetree if you aren't able to come to the practices."

I sighed. I knew she was right. The Shadetree gig was a big one, and we didn't want to screw it up. And if I couldn't practice enough, then I could definitely screw it up somehow.

"I'm pretty good at riffing, though," I said, knowing I was defeated.

"You are, but if you're going to be as busy as you say you are..." Kaitlyn trailed off. I knew she wanted me to be there, but there was no point in playing with someone

who was woefully underprepared.

“Yeah, it’s just all this work for my classes... It’s killing me. I thought it would let up after midterms, but it just got worse.” I sighed again. My business major was getting in the way of my music, as usual.

“Maybe after graduation, you’ll be more available,” said Kaitlyn. “And that’s not that far. You’ll only miss this gig, and you could probably make it to the next one.”

“You’re right. I could definitely make it to the next one, if Professor Barley hires you again,” I said. I knew Professor Barley would love Kaitlyn, and she’d be a hit with the gallery patrons, so she’d definitely be invited back. Hopefully with me in tow.

“There you go,” said Kaitlyn, reaching out and touching my shoulder. “I am really sorry, by the way.”

“No, no, I’m sorry,” I said. “I bit off more than I can chew.”

“It happens.” Kaitlyn shrugged. “I’m going to have to be careful with that when I finally start giving music lessons.”

“I can imagine,” I said, wondering if I could give music lessons. That was one of the things I’d been rude to Kaitlyn about, but now that I saw it as a way to make money... I could definitely teach some kid to play the violin if I wanted to. And it wasn’t like these kids were going to be the next Itzhak Perlman or Lindsey Stirling either.

“Well, I’ve gotta head out,” I said. “I’m meeting Margie.”

“Oh?” Kaitlyn raised an eyebrow. “For a date?”

I felt myself blush, heat flooding my face. “I... Yeah, it’s a date.”

Kaitlyn pumped her fist in the air. “Yeah! It’s finally happening.”

“What’s finally happening?” I asked, eyes narrowed.

“You and Margie are becoming a thing. Emily and I were practically placing bets on it.” She grinned.

I laughed. “Yeah, it’s a thing. A very small thing, right now.”

“Well, have fun,” said Kaitlyn.

“I will. See you later.”

I picked up my violin case and left practice, pushing the door open and walking out onto campus. Even though Kaitlyn wasn’t a student, we sometimes used some of the practice rooms in the music department. No one seemed to mind.

My violin was heavy, so I hoisted the case over my shoulder, wearing it sort of like a backpack. I loved this thing. I felt like my approach to making music was a little more clinical than most, but that was because it hadn’t come easy to me.

That was partially why I liked playing with Kaitlyn. It gave me a chance to improvise and exercise my spontaneity, instead of playing a predetermined song as accurately as possible.

My fingers still smelled strongly of rosin—the resin used to condition my horsehair bow. I wiped them on my jeans and walked onto the main road, toward my house. I’d told Margie I’d meet her at her place, then walk to the Riverwalk together.

I was excited for my date with Margie—I’d been the one to ask, since I didn’t think she could—but I was bummed that I had to put the music group on hold. It was probably for the best, though. If my relationship with Margie kept developing, then I really wasn’t going to have enough time for everything in my life.

And I wanted my relationship with Margie to blossom. I’d missed liking someone, thinking about them. The whole dance when you were starting to date someone was

so much fun, and it brought a joy to my life that I'd forgotten to indulge, thanks to how hectic my life was right now.

I walked into my apartment, went up to my room, and put my violin down finally, taking a moment to massage my shoulder. Then I went to my closet and picked out nicer clothes, more suitable for a date. I styled my hair and made sure my appearance was perfect.

And then I set out.

We were supposed to be getting dinner at Malabar, a fancy Indian restaurant. Afterward, we planned to just hang out at the Riverwalk. There were a number of little shops there, and it was just nice to walk around. I imagined we'd be doing a lot of talking, mostly.

I didn't want to bike, because I didn't want to get all sweaty, but I didn't have a better way to get there. I hopped on and rode at a leisurely pace. Rosebridge was, thankfully, very bike friendly because of the huge student population, and you didn't really even need a car.

There were a lot of bike racks at the Riverwalk, and I locked mine up and walked toward the restaurant. There was a small sitting area around a fountain here, so I sat and waited.

And waited.

And waited some more.

After half an hour had passed, I decided to just call Margie. The phone rang and rang, but she didn't pick up, so I sent her a text message asking what was up.

This wasn't like Margie. She struck me as someone conscientious and reliable. Maybe she wasn't into me after all. Maybe she was backing out because she was too scared of what dating me would mean for her sexuality. It certainly wouldn't be unusual.

I hoped she hadn't run into some kind of emergency. Maybe she'd just overslept. That was the best possible answer, since I didn't want there to be anything wrong with Margie's life or our relationship.

After another fifteen minutes, she didn't show up or text back. I tried calling again to no avail, so I texted her to let her know I was going home.

And then I got my bike and started pedaling back, disappointed, anxious, and irritated. I'd gotten so much work done ahead of time so I could clear space for this date. Why hadn't Margie bothered to show up?

I had some work I could catch up on, so after a quick pasta dinner, I started my études, enjoying the familiar ritual of tuning my violin, applying rosin to the bow, and setting up the shoulder rest. Within minutes, I was engrossed in the repetitive sound of the études, though Margie's absence still worried me.

An hour later, I got a call back. I immediately grabbed my phone and swiped to pick up, wondering what the hell had happened.

"Hey," said Margie, her voice tight and reserved. "I'm so, so sorry I didn't show up or call you or anything."

"Yeah, what happened?" I asked, now mostly relieved to hear that Margie was actually okay. But as my relief faded, anger took its place.

"Um, my roommate had an emergency," she said.

“And you didn’t think to text me?” I asked coldly.

“It was an emergency!” she protested. “Anyway, I’m outside your house.”

“What?”

“Yeah, Miriam gave me your address.”

“When did you talk to Miriam?”

“Girl, just let me in,” she said.

I hung up and walked to the door, opening it to find Margie outside with a grocery bag. She had puppy dog eyes on, and I found myself warming up. But I was still irritated. Roommate emergency sounded like a made up excuse.

“Well, is your roommate okay now?”

“Yeah, we managed to get her to the ER.”

“So it was really serious then,” I said.

“Yeah. Really serious. I feel really, really bad for standing you up,” she said, walking in. “I should have texted.”

“It’s okay,” I said, sighing and wrapping an arm around her shoulder to squeeze her tightly. “I’m just glad you weren’t like, kidnapped or something.”

“I brought ice cream,” said Margie, holding up the grocery bag. “I figured it was too late for dinner...”

“That’s really kind of you,” I said. “Maybe we can have an ice cream and Netflix date instead.”

Margie smiled tentatively, and I could tell she was worried she’d really made me mad. She probably didn’t want to make me mad since I was the first friend she’d made in so long. She didn’t want to ruin it.

And I didn't want to ruin it either. As irritated as I had been earlier, Margie did have an actual emergency to respond to. I couldn't begrudge her helping her roommate.

"So, you live alone?" asked Margie, looking around my apartment. "Nice place."

"Yeah, it's small, but it's affordable, and I like it. I kind of have to live alone because night is sometimes the only time I have to practice my violin. And even then, I bother the neighbors," I said, taking the grocery bag from her and putting the ice cream in the freezer. "Actually, I was just doing my études. You want the tour?"

"Sure," said Margie, following me into my bedroom.

I started putting my violin away, while Margie sat on my bed and looked around. I had a lot of decorati

ons—art prints, stacks of books, interesting textiles. Most of it had been pinched from my parents' house, since they had a lot of things they never used.

"This is really nice," said Margie. "It's like a real adult lives here and not a college student."

"Thanks," I said, finally zipping up the violin case and putting it away, sliding it under the bed. I stood up and walked to the door, and Margie followed.

I cleared some cushions and jackets from the couch in the living room and we sat down.

"So... what exactly happened with your roommate?" I asked.

"I don't know what it was," she admitted. "Her knee sort of just seized up and became incredibly painful and she couldn't walk. I had to drive her to the ER in her

car, and then her girlfriend came to stay with her.”

“That sounds scary. Hopefully it’s okay.”

Margie looked at her phone, which she’d placed face up on the coffee table. “Marnie said she’d text me when they got word from the doctors.”

“Well, it’s good that you were a good roommate,” I said. “You have to help take care of the people you live with.”

“Yeah. And honestly, I care about her. I didn’t think we’d be close when we moved in together, but we’re getting there.”

I was a little relieved to hear that. It was good news that she was making friends outside of my social circle.

“That’s awesome,” I said, sliding my laptop onto my lap and opening it. “So, do you want to watch something and eat ice cream?”

She grinned. “Sure.”

“Here, find something good,” I said, handing her my computer, which was logged into Netflix. I retrieved the ice cream tub and two spoons from the kitchen.

“What’s this one,” she asked, indicating one of the shows on my recently watched list.

Page 22

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 2:08 pm

“Oh, that? It’s a drama-comedy about queer teenagers in England...” I said, trailing off.

“Is it good?”

“Yeah, it’s super good,” I said.

“Let’s watch this, then,” said Margie, clicking on it. The next episode loaded and started playing, and I opened the ice cream and handed her a spoon.

We were sitting pretty far on the couch, but we had to sit closer together to share the ice cream. I could feel the heat from her body and I desperately wanted to be closer, but I didn’t want to spook her.

That was all right, though. I had time.

10

MARGIE

The anxiety I felt when I looked at my phone and saw the missed calls from Brianne had been awful. The whole evening had been horribly stressful. And the prospect of seeing Brianne again had been stressful too, but I’d done it anyway because I felt like I owed her—and I wanted to see her.

Cass and I had a friendly rapport, but today’s incident had brought our relationship to a new level—a level at which we could really be friends.

I'd been studying up in my room, trying to get work done before the date, when Cass had called me, distraught and urgent, from the kitchen. Her scream had startled me and I raced down the stairs to find her lying on the floor clutching her knee.

She'd told me it had suddenly seized up and started hurting terribly. After a moment of discussion, we decided she had to go to the ER. Since it was so close and Rosebridge had no traffic, we took her car. I was rusty at driving, but I managed, even with poor Cass moaning in the back seat.

I helped her check in and sat with her, and I hadn't even thought to look at my phone. Eventually, Marnie came to stay with Cass, so I left in Cass's car.

And that was when I realized I'd completely forgotten about the date, in the chaos. I stopped at the store to get ice cream, left the car at our house, and hightailed it to Brianne's. I was glad she wasn't too mad. It really had been a freak occurrence.

And now I was here, not in that fancy restaurant, where we would be a comfortable distance from each other, but in Brianne's apartment, on her couch. With no one else around, and no roommate who was going to show up later.

It kind of seemed like anything could happen, and truth be told, I wasn't sure what I wanted to happen. More kissing would be nice, but in the privacy of Brianne's house, it seemed like things could go farther. I couldn't decide if I wanted it or not. Or rather, I did want it, because goodness knows I'd fantasized so much, but the thought of acting upon those fantasies terrified me.

It felt like it would open a whole can of worms I wasn't used to addressing. But then again, I'd already opened that can. The worms were wiggling out everywhere.

"You okay?" asked Brianne.

“Oh, yeah,” I said, realizing I’d been spacing out into my thoughts. “I guess it’s just been a crazy day.”

“I understand,” said Brianne, holding the ice cream out to me. “Here, have more.”

The ice cream was good, and so was Brianne’s company, but I couldn’t get into the TV show we were watching. It looked interesting, but my brain was buzzing too much and I felt restless, like I wanted to talk, like I had all these thoughts inside me that needed to be said.

I stuck it out until the episode ended. “Sorry I’ve been so spacey,” I said. “I’ve just had so much to think about, I guess.”

“Yeah. I mean, when I met you, you didn’t even think you were into women,” said Brianne carefully.

“Exactly. It’s just a lot, you know? And a lot of people figure it out when they’re in high school, but the older you get, the weirder it is,” I said.

“You’re not the only one,” said Brianne. “Plenty of people learn stuff about themselves only in college, or later.”

“Yeah.” I sighed. “I just... So much in my life has changed recently, and I don’t know how to handle it.”

Brianne put a comforting arm around me, her hand on my shoulder. It made me feel warm and comfortable, but it also made me a little nervous.

The ice cream was sitting on the table; we’d managed to polish off the pint. A couple of drops were slowly trickling down the outside of the container.

I turned to Brianne, finding myself nestling a little closer to her. I couldn't help it; it was like I was magnetically attracted to her. I'd never been this attracted to anyone before in my life.

“Do you wanna make out?” she asked.

I blinked at her. “Y-yeah.”

That was all the invitation she needed. Brianne pressed her lips to mine and I immediately felt a burst of warmth flooding through me, lighting all my nerves up. And because I’d spent so much mental energy hyping up my next encounter with Brianne, my brain was inundated with images from my fantasies... My body responded, getting wetter, and I knew I wanted to go farther than just making out.

Even though making out was really fun. Brianne’s tongue danced with mine expertly, and I finally understood how kissing was like a conversation with the other person. It was a form of communication, almost, and a way to flirt even further.

Her hands were warm, one resting on my shoulder and another creeping down toward my waist. I put a hand on her face, feeling the smooth skin of her jaw, and my other hand on her arm. It just felt good to touch another person like this, in such an intimate way. I’d been craving it for so long.

She pulled away from the kiss and looked at me intensely, her gray eyes dark. And then, without missing a beat, she started kissing my jaw and my neck, making me melt into a puddle in her arms.

What was it about being kissed on the neck? It made me feel boneless, shivers running through every nerve in my body. I whimpered into the kiss, unable to resist expressing how good I felt.

And I was pretty wet now, soaking through my panties, probably. I wanted to touch myself so badly, or I wanted her to touch me... I wondered if I should try taking my

clothing off, to show it was okay. I knew she was being cautious with me, I could tell. She wasn't moving farther than we had last time.

So I pulled away and made to remove my shirt and bra. I was glad that was one area where I was more confident—I

did put in the effort to exercise and take care of myself, because I didn't have that much else to do, and I was proud of what I'd achieved. It was certainly good preparation for this moment.

Brianne paused to remove her clothes too, and I drank in her lean body, with a smattering of freckles, small, round breasts, and pink nipples that were stiff already.

When we started kissing again, the sensations were even more intense with her hands on my bare skin. I felt more sensitive than I'd ever been, able to register every touch, every feeling. I could hear every breath of hers, every beat of her heart. I felt more alive than I could remember feeling in a long time.

"God, you're so... so sexy," Brianne whispered.

I blushed slightly. No one had ever called me sexy before. Not like that, in that reverent voice. It was intoxicating to know that I could be the object of someone's desire.

"Th-thanks," I said awkwardly, unsure of how to respond.

"You're cute," said Brianne, smirking.

I could only look into her gray eyes, getting lost in them. They were beautiful.

"Your... your eyes are pretty," I blurted, blushing even more.

Brianne chuckled, then pressed her lips to mine again.

As she kissed me, her hand traveled further down, dangerously close to my crotch. I wanted her hands on me so bad, but we still had our pants on. I reached down to unzip my fly, fumbling with urgency. But soon enough, I'd freed myself of my pants, though we broke away so Brianne could help me shrug them off completely. And I helped her remove her pants, making short work of our underwear as well.

Now we were completely naked with each other, and I was breathing heavily, my whole body electric. I had no idea what was going to happen next, and wanted to wait for Brianne's lead.

Good thing she knew how to proceed. She lowered her lips to my neck and started kissing, making her way down with a winding trail, using her tongue to deliver even more sensations that made me squirm.

Brianne wasn't that much taller than me, but somehow, she seemed bigger than me now, and I submitted to what she was doing, happy to go with the flow as she continued making me feel incredibly good.

Her kisses came down to my chest, and she flicked her tongue against my nipples, cupping my breasts and squeezing gently. I moaned softly, the sensation unexpected, and closed my eyes and lay back as I realized she was going down, further down, her fingers flicking against my lips.

Was she finally going to touch me?

I hoped so. I couldn't remember the last time someone had give me an orgasm—and certainly not someone I actually cared about, someone who wanted to make me feel good. Knowing that this was Brianne, and not just any random person, was even more of a turn on.

Brianne reached down and stroked my clit, spitting on her fingers so she'd be lubricated. Not that she needed the help—I was already dripping wet with desire for her. And to have her hand on my most intimate place... it blew my mind. The feeling was incredible, and I was already so wet that I thought I was going to explode.

But I had to hold on until Brianne actually put her fingers inside me. When she did, when her finger tips reached my very core, I whimpered, amazed at the feeling. I didn't even know it was possible to feel this good.

"This... this is incredible," I said, figuring I should say something to let Brianne know she was doing a fantastic job.

She just looked up at me and smiled, her fingers slick with my juices, her eyes languid and almost smug. It was devastatingly sexy.

I was surprised I could actually keep myself under control as she used her fingers to bring me closer and closer to the edge, where I was threatening to fall off, into the freefall of pleasure...

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 2:08 pm

“I’m going to—” I said, cut off as the orgasm overtook me. I moaned as I shuddered, trying to hold myself still against the bed, though Brianne held me tight.

I was left panting and covered in a sheen of sweat.

Brianne smiled at me with an eyebrow raised. “Good, huh?”

I laughed, tension leaving my body. “Yeah. Yeah, that was fucking great,” I said, still amazed at what had just happened. “Maybe... maybe I can return the favor?”

“Yeah? Show me what you got,” said Brianne, and we switched positions so I could return the favor. I was so eager to pleasure her like she’d just pleased me.

She had a gorgeous pussy too, and I was excited to finally touch it. I pressed my fingers to her clit, loving the velvety feeling of her lips and her natural scent of arousal. I felt like I was being granted a privilege, somehow, that I was being allowed entrance into some closed off part of Brianne’s world. She seemed like a reserved person and I got the distinct impression that she wasn’t the kind of person to get intimate with others too easily.

I looked up briefly and saw her eyes closed, a lazy smile on her face. She was cupping her own breasts and rolling her nipple between her fingers, which was a gorgeous sight. She looked so beautiful that my clit twitched again, amazingly signaling that I might be getting aroused yet again. I turned my attention back to her core, fondling her clit with my finger tips and sliding my fingers inside her. I was rewarded with a soft moan, which only spurred me on further.

I could feel her body tensing, and I knew she was getting close. I slowly increased my pace and stayed at the same rhythm. Even though I didn't have any experience doing this to another person, I had the same parts, so I felt fairly confident with what I was doing.

A louder moan from Brianne warned me that she was going to come, and then she did, her sounds of pleasure music to my ears. I tried to keep my movements consistent as she came, delighting in how wet she was for me.

I sat up and looked at her, eager for her assessment of how well I'd done.

"That was great," she said, grinning, then beckoning me closer. "Thank you."

I lay down next to her and we held each other, enjoying the feeling of slightly sticky skin against skin, and the sounds of our heart beats and breathing slowing and becoming a soft, peaceful backdrop to what felt like a peaceful scene.

I snuggled up closer to her, feeling drowsy, and soon enough, sleep overtook both of us.

11

BRIANNE

The next morning, I woke up on the couch cuddled with Margie. We woke at the same time, blinking blearily and getting our bearings.

"Oh, hey," said Margie, smiling at me adorably. Just seeing her draped over me, naked and beautiful, was making me wet already.

But I had stuff to do. I had so much work to catch up on, and I couldn't afford to

waste another minute, as much as I wanted to waste all the time in the world with Margie.

I tried sitting up, and we faced each other on the couch. It was extremely difficult to resist her, now that the sunlight was filtering in and I could see her lovely body and beautiful face...

I leaned forward and kissed her softly, and we made out a little at a leisurely pace. Her skin was warm and she smelled like sleep. The air in my apartment was cool, and I felt the urge to press my body against hers.

We pulled away.

"I wish I could keep going, but..." I said apologetically.

"I know. Finals are coming up and I have some essays and projects I really should get a head start on if I don't want to be completely screwed." Margie laughed.

"Same," I said.

We found our clothes, which were strewn all over the floor and even the coffee table, and put them back on.

"I'll see you soon, though," said Margie. "Let's plan another date for this coming week."

"Or you can just stop by and see me at lunch." I smiled. "We'll pretty much always be there."

She nodded. "Got it."

I walked her to the door, and she made sure she had all her stuff. “See you soon,” I said. I couldn’t resist, so I pecked her again on the lips, and of course, it turned into a kiss with tongue.

She pulled away and smiled at me. “See you, Brianne.”

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 2:08 pm

I watched her as she walked down the street, joining the crowds of other revelers from the past night who were making their way back to their own apartments and houses. Soon enough, I couldn't see her anymore, and I turned to go back inside.

I couldn't believe what had happened last night. The Margie who'd opened up to me so much had started off as someone unimaginably shy. When she'd bumped into me that day, I had no idea it would turn into this.

I sighed as I returned to my bedroom to get ready for a shower. I had so much work to do today. At least now I could see the light at the end of the tunnel because graduation was coming up soon. Soon, I'd be free. At least until I found a job.

Shit, that reminded me I had to get on that too. Seized by a burst of energy, I opened up my laptop and decided to write an email to my supervisor from my internship. If they gave me a job, I'd be golden. If not... Well, I'd have to figure something else out.

My phone rang—it was my mother. I picked it up, even though I didn't really feel like talking to her right now.

“Hi, honey, how are you doing?” she asked.

I was suspicious of her tone. It sounded like she was going to bring the smackdown on me for some reason... But I couldn't imagine what that reason might be.

“Fine,” I said. “Just finishing up some homework before class tomorrow.”

“Good. I wanted to ask you... Have you thought about your plans for the summer?”

There it was. And I’d just been thinking about it, too. I had no idea what to tell her because I hadn’t really thought about it at all.

“I uh, emailed the people from the internship at Robinson so we’ll see what they say,” I started. “And I plan to look for other options... as well...”

“What position will Robinson offer you?” she asked.

This is what I hated about talking with her. She asked way too many detailed questions when I didn’t know the answers myself. It always made me feel like I was falling behind, even though I knew I was doing my best.

“I’m not sure what yet,” I said honestly. “Probably Marketing Associate, I think that’s their entry level position.”

“

Entry level position? You can’t wrangle something better? After all, you did do an internship with them...”

I tried to keep my anger under control, remembering the lovely time I’d had with Margie. “We’ll see,” I said curtly, hoping to get her off the topic. I’d learned a while back that one of the most effective techniques for dealing with her was “gray rock”—just be as boring as possible so she stopped asking questions. It worked sometimes.

“What about dating? Have you found a date for Marcy’s wedding?”

I froze. I’d completely and utterly forgotten about my cousin Marcy’s wedding. I was

glad my mother had reminded me, actually, because I would have simply not shown up.

“Um, yeah,” I said, thinking of Margie. Even if she didn’t want to go, I could take Miriam or someone. But was Margie even my girlfriend? And would I want to introduce her to my mother so soon? Would she even want to—since she was still so new to being in a same-gender relationship?

“Oooh, who?” asked my mother, suddenly sounding a bit like a schoolgirl.

“Um... Just a friend,” I said, unwilling to get into that whole conversation. “I was thinking I’d take Miriam if she’s free, remember her?”

“Maybe...” said my mother. “What about Nicole?”

“Nicole?”

“Your girlfriend?”

“Mom, we broke up like, a long time ago. Years ago, even.” What the hell was she doing bringing her up?

“She was a nice girl. Maybe you should get back together?”

“No, Mom. We broke up for a reason.” I really wanted to tell her I was dating someone else now, but I couldn’t. I would be on the phone with her for another hour as she interrogated me about every aspect of Margie’s life.

“Hm. Well, I liked her. I’d certainly be happy if you were dating her again.”

“Good to know, Mom,” I said, though I was sure she missed the sarcasm in my voice.

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 2:08 pm

“Anyway, just make sure you have a date and your clothes are ready.”

“Got it,” I said, scrambling to find my planner so I could write down the date of the wedding. It was in just two weeks—I knew because it was the weekend before graduation. Not ideal, with finals, but it was here in Rosebridge, so hopefully it wouldn’t take up too much time.

“Anything else?” my mother asked.

“Um, no,” I said. She was the one who’d called, after all, so I had no idea why she was even asking.

“Me neither,” she said. “Talk to you later, Brianne. Love you.”

“Love you too.”

I hung up and wondered what my next move was. It should have just been easy to text Margie and ask her if she wanted to come to the wedding, but I knew asking her that question would imply more than she might be prepared for. She was just building up her self-esteem and self-confidence, and I was reluctant to throw her into that situation.

Maybe I should just take Miriam. It would solve a lot of problems. But then what if Margie felt hurt that I hadn’t taken her, considering she was my... well, not my girlfriend, but on the track to becoming one.

It was even more shit that I didn’t need to think about.

And it hurt that my mother wasn't warm like other mothers I'd seen. Her calls were always like this—like she was a taskmaster, not someone genuinely interested in my life. It would have been nice if she'd asked how my music was coming along, and then I could have told her about the street performance group. Though I had a hunch she'd dismiss it as a waste of time.

I sighed. I was so anxious that I didn't really feel like doing anything, even though I had everything to do. I yearned for Margie's touch again. I found it comforting in a way I'd never felt before. Maybe with all the change happening in my life, I needed her to help me feel grounded.

I glanced at my phone. Would it be too much to text her again? Ask her if she wanted to hang out again tonight? I desperately wanted to see her again. And it was weird, because I couldn't remember the last time I felt like this.

I decided to text her and see what she had planned. I didn't want to be the kind of person who simply didn't text someone she really liked just because she thought it'd be too forward. I didn't want to play games.

The reply came instantaneously.

> MARGIE: Sooo there's actually a EAC potluck later tonight... Would you want to go?

My chest tightened with even more anxiety. I didn't really want to go to a potluck, but if I said no, I felt like I'd be letting Margie down. Honestly, I'd been hoping for another quiet evening inside with her, since it was Sunday, after all... But maybe my accompanying her to the potluck would be the boost she needed to feel even more confident.

I texted her to say yes and ask for the details. My heart rate increased a little when I

thought about how I'd have to fit all my work in around this potluck... and maybe even cook something for it, but I knew I had to do it for Margie.

And I did. I spent the next several hours working feverishly on all the readings, group projects, essays, and études I had to complete. While I didn't get to everything, I felt okay about my progress.

Margie had told me she was bringing the food, so I didn't have to worry about that. The house where the potluck was to be held was in my neighborhood, so I set out to walk there, having no idea what to expect.

All I knew was that Miriam didn't like the EAC folks for no discernible reason other than the beef between EAC and EAN. It sounded stupid to me, but what did I know. A lot of people clearly hadn't left their high school attitudes in high school.

It was strange to be a senior about to graduate and stumble upon a scene I'd never encountered before. I had no idea who these people were. In fact, it would be up to Margie to help me out a little.

I saw her walking up from the opposite side of the street and waited for her. She smiled, and we kissed a hello.

"I couldn't go so long without seeing you," she said shyly.

"Me neither. That's why I texted you. Anyway, what's up with this potluck?"

"Apparently it's a monthly thing," said Margie, as we approached the house. "It's just a social event, so members can hang out. I know a couple people..."

"I thought you didn't like these people because they were cliquy," I said.

Margie flushed. “I felt like I should give them another chance. Maybe... maybe if I showed up with my cool friend...”

That was honestly too cute, but I worried that she wasn’t developing actual self-confidence. The EAC people had to like her for who she was, not because I was cool. I also doubted that the EAC people would be impressed by my perceived coolness.

“Well, we’ll see,” I said. “I’m sure they’re perfectly nice.”

We knocked on the door, and a girl opened the door, her red glasses framing her wide eyes and beaming smile. “Oh hey! Margie, is it? And your friend?”

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 2:08 pm

She reached out and hugged Margie—who looked startled but pleased. She turned back to glance at me with raised eyebrows.

We entered the house, and it turned out that a lot of people knew Margie's name. She introduced me to several people, some of whom were familiar faces around campus. But I didn't know anyone here personally, which was a new experience for me.

I was starting to suspect that the EAC people weren't that cliquey—it was just that Margie hadn't had the confidence needed to break into the group.

We got paper plates and loaded them up with food, all of which looked fantastic, and then sat down. There were about twenty people in the house, so some people sat on the floor of the living room, while others sat on the sides of the couch, because the couch itself was stuffed.

A few people trickled in, but still, no one that I knew.

And that was when I saw her—Nicole!

My jaw literally hung open, and I turned around quickly so we wouldn't make eye contact. What in the world was Nicole doing here, so soon after I'd discussed her with my mother? Today was turning out to be a da

y of coincidences.

My heart started to pound. It wasn't a big deal that Nicole was here—it wasn't like we'd left on bad terms, and honestly, she was a decent person. It was just weird. I

didn't like getting this blast from the past, especially when I was so close to escaping Beasley forever.

I couldn't keep sitting in this room, pretending she didn't exist. I had to face her at some point. And I probably should inform Margie, too. I wondered how she'd take it. Was she the kind of person who was weird about exes?

I took a deep breath. Looked like I was about to find out.

12

MARGIE

Brianne stiffened where she was sitting next to me, and I wasn't sure why. I looked around, but I didn't see anyone familiar. She was staring at her plate, her eyes slightly wide, and a small frown on her face.

I nudged her. "Hey. What's the matter?" I asked quietly.

"Oh, um..." She paused to pull her phone out. "Check your texts in a minute."

I picked at my food, intensely curious. Then I saw my phone's screen light up and I scrambled to read the text.

> BRIANNE: The girl in the dark blue striped sweater is my ex from freshman year, Nicole. We're cool but we haven't talked since then so I just feel weird.

"Oh," I said, unsure of how to navigate the situation. I wanted to do whatever Brianne felt comfortable doing.

But on the other hand, Nicole was ridiculously good-looking and apparently popular

with all the people here. In fact, I remembered her from the EAC parties I'd been to, the ones where I'd felt intimidated. I'd seen her hanging out with other people, easily chatting and enjoying the vibe, and I'd felt like I could never be a part of that.

And to think she was Brianne's ex... that made me feel even worse. How could I ever compete against someone so socially graceful and beautiful? Especially someone with whom she'd had a clean break up? If they were still on good terms...

I tried not to think about it and instead replied to Brianne.

> MARGIE: I'm okay with whatever you want to do.

It would be up to her. I continued to eat my food, even though my nerves were getting the better of me. I'd feel even worse if I didn't eat.

Bringing Brianne to this potluck hadn't been as good of an idea as I'd hoped. Of course, I loved the idea of bringing her to things, but bringing her hadn't made me feel more confident, even though she seemed to be able to talk to the other EAC members just fine. I wondered where people learned conversational skills like that, since I never had.

"I should probably just say hi," said Brianne quietly next to me, adding a sigh. She stood up. "Want to come with?"

"I guess," I said, standing up with her and heading to the kitchen, where another group of people was standing and eating.

And Nicole was there, surrounded by a bevy of people, looking carefree and popular. How in the world did people end up in situations like that, like they were the quintessential college student enjoying life? I felt like I always looked downtrodden, quashed by the weight of my backpack.

“Hey,” said Brianne, approaching Nicole with a confidence I couldn’t even fathom.

Nicole’s attention turned to Brianne, and some of the bevy floated away. “Hey,” said Nicole, looking Brianne up and down. “Haven’t seen you in... years.”

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 2:08 pm

“Yeah. Weird, huh? This is my girlfriend, Margie, by the way. Margie, Nicole,” said Brianne casually.

It was like there were fireworks inside my chest. She’d referred to me as her girlfriend! It was an amazing occurrence, and one I hadn’t anticipated. Maybe she was doing it just to make Nicole jealous or something, but I didn’t care. Now it was official.

“Nice to meet you,” I said, unsure of how to behave.

“Yeah, you too,” said Nicole. “So, Brianne, you in EAC? I haven’t seen you at parties or meetings.”

“No, Margie is,” said Brianne.

“Yeah, I don’t go to the parties that often,” I said. “I’m hoping to change that.”

“Nice, nice,” said Nicole, but I got the sense she was seeing right through me and didn’t care what I was even saying. Which was fine, because surely she was as surprised to see Brianne as Brianne was to see her, but... The way she was directing the conversation made it seem like she was excluding me.

When you were socially anxious like me, you noticed these things. I’d become pretty good at it, in fact. And I worried that Nicole was going to steal Brianne’s attention away. I worried about this specifically because Brianne seemed nervous—her normal unflappable demeanor had changed into something unfamiliar, and it was putting me on edge.

“So... graduation, huh?” said Nicole, chuckling easily even though she’d made a completely mundane comment.

“Yeah, dude. Can’t believe it’s happening. Time flies, right? What are you going to be doing?” said Brianne.

“I got accepted to a managerial position at Robinson,” said Nicole.

“Uh, what?” Brianne looked almost scared now, which I couldn’t fathom at all.

“Yeah. Remember that internship we both did after freshman year? I guess they really liked me. They called me before I even called them and offered me the position, since they liked my work with the soccer team,” said Nicole.

“I see,” said Brianne. “Well, I’m still looking at all my options.”

“You should probably get on that,” said Nicole. “Rosebridge is a small town.”

“Uh huh. Well, we’ll probs get another round of food, right, Margie?” Brianne turned to me.

“Sounds good,” I said, even though I’d barely touched my food.

I eagerly followed her out of the kitchen and to the table where all the dishes were set up. I was glad to see that people had taken generous helpings of my roast vegetables, and most of the dish was gone already.

“You okay?” I asked Brianne.

“I’ll be okay,” she said. “I just... Ugh, I’ll explain it later.”

Brianne was in a snit for the rest of the potluck, but she put up her cool façade—that I could now recognize as a façade—and was able to interact with everyone else just fine. I managed to have a couple of good conversations with some of the quieter EAC members, and started to see how I could start to fit into this organization. Coming to the potluck had been a good idea—though I wasn't sure it had been a good idea for Brianne.

When the party started winding down, we were quick to leave, and I walked with Brianne back to her apartment so we could talk.

“Um, what exactly happened with Nicole?” I asked. I didn't like prodding her, but it was clearly bothering her deeply.

Brianne sighed. “So... we both did a marketing internship at Robinson Communications during the summer of our freshman year. After that, I ended up majoring in marketing and she went into something completely different, kinesiology. But now I just learned that she somehow snagged a senior-level position at Robinson, and I'm hoping I can get any job there. My mom was pressuring me to get something above entry level, which I thought was impossible, since I was just an undergrad, but then they go and give a good job to a kinesiology major? It doesn't make any sense.”

Brianne turned the key in her lock and we entered the apartment. It might have sounded a little weird, but I liked the smell. It smelled fresh, with a hint of her perfume. She plopped down on the couch and I followed suit.

“That blows,” I said, now able to understand why she'd been so rattled. “That's really fucked up.”

“It totally is. I guess being the captain of the soccer team for two years impressed them that much? I had no idea they even paid any attention to Beasley soccer. And now I don't even want a job at Robinson, because what if fucking Nicole is my

boss?" She put her head in her hands.

I hated to see Brianne so upset, but I was also admittedly relieved that I wouldn't have to worry about anything happening with her and Nicole. Even though she'd said she and Nicole had ended things on good terms, Nicole had seemed a little condescending. I wasn't sure I liked her.

"So now I'm going to have to look for other options... and I feel so lost," said Brianne, now leaning back on the couch.

I took her hand, unsure of how to comfort her. I was a junior, one year away from being in the same predicament as Brianne. I wasn't sure what I wanted as a career, and it was a little frightening to see Brianne so worked up about it. That could easily be me in a year, I thought.

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 2:08 pm

“Things will work out,” I said, rubbing my thumb on her palm in what I hoped was a comforting manner. “But I completely understand your frustration. The whole situation is messed up.”

“Yeah,” said Brianne absently, like she was lost in her own thoughts. “Oh shit, I forgot I had to ask you something.”

“Yeah?”

“So... My cousin Marcy is getting married. The wedding is the weekend before graduation. Do you want to be my date?” She looked right at me, her expression a bit more cheerful.

“Uh, yeah, that’d be great!” I said. “And that reminds me... you called me your girlfriend.” I grinned.

“I mean... do you want to be my girlfriend?” Brianne asked with a small smile.

“Hell yeah,” I said.

“Good, then we’re girlfriends,” she said, and I couldn’t hide the blush from creeping up my cheeks. She blinked at me. “God, you’re cute, you know that?”

I blushed even more, the words lost in my mouth. “Th-thanks,” I managed. “You’re not so bad yourself.”

She laughed. “This is gonna be great, isn’t it?”

There was a pause where we both just smiled at each other, looking into each other's eyes. Girlfriend. I had a girlfriend now. My heart felt like it never had before.

"Um, so there was something about a wedding?" I asked.

"Right, right," she said. "I was just worried because you'll be meeting my parents and like, all the rest of my family. And I don't know how you feel about being an out gay couple?"

"It's fine," I said. "I'm sure I can handle it."

„

I wasn't at all sure I could handle it, but I wanted Brianne to be able to have faith in me. She needed to know she could depend on me, and I had to suck it up and deal with this wedding myself.

"Cool," said Brianne. "I'll forward you the details in an email later."

"Cool," I said, snuggling up closer to Brianne. I wanted to make her feel better about everything, but I didn't know how.

"I'd love for you to stay over, but I'm sure you have work to do," she said. "I know I do."

"I do have work. But hey, maybe sometime I can bring my work and we can be together," I suggested.

She smiled. "Brilliant idea."

Reluctantly, we got up from the couch and kissed a goodbye, lingering at the

doorway.

“When will I see you again?” I asked.

“I’ll let you know,” said Brianne. “Once I figure out how miserable this week is going to be.”

“Okay,” I said, smiling softly. “See ya, Brianne.”

She waved and watched me as I walked down the street.

It wasn’t a long walk back to my place. When I got there, I saw that Marnie’s car was parked outside. She’d been helping Cass out since she came back from the ER. Apparently Cass would recover just fine soon enough—it had been an autoimmune disease, a rare case of rheumatoid arthritis striking someone young.

“Hey,” I said when I walked in, spotting the two of them cuddled up on the couch. I wasn’t jealous anymore because I’d been cuddled up with my own someone special just a few minutes ago. Now seeing happy couples made me feel happy.

“Hey,” said Cass, smiling. I was glad to see her cheerful. Even though I knew she’d be okay now, the whole incident with her knee had been terrifying, and I knew it was still painful.

“Where’d you come from?” asked Marnie, seeing my foil-covered and now empty dish of roast vegetables.

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 2:08 pm

“EAC potluck,” I said. “I went with Brianne. We’re official girlfriends right now.”

Both girls let out a cheer of excitement. I sat down across from them, feeling lighter myself. It was nice when other people were happy on your behalf.

“Fuck yeah,” said Marnie. “Dude, that’s awesome.”

“It’s about time,” said Cass, smiling kindly.

“Yeah. I’m going to be her date to her cousin’s wedding, so I guess I’ll meet her parents,” I said, glad I finally had someone else to share my news with. After the knee incident, I’d become a lot closer to Cass and Marnie.

“That’s so exciting, oh my gosh,” said Cass.

“Yeah, I’m uh, I’m really excited. It’s my first real relationship.”

“Ah, young love,” said Marnie. We all burst into giggles.

“I have some work to do, so I guess I’ll head up. But let me know if you need me for anything,” I said, standing up again and putting the dish in the sink.

“Of course,” said Cass, giving me a small wave as I went up the stairs.

I felt at peace for the first time in a long time as I settled into bed to do my readings for class.

It was a good feeling.

13

BRIANNE

Seeing Nicole had put me in a bad mood that lasted a while and was compounded by the fact that Robinson had emailed me back to say they didn't have any open positions. I was furious, but there was no one I could really direct my anger toward. The situation wasn't anyone's fault.

The one good thing was that my workload was easing up significantly. It was weird how work tended to come in waves. I found myself with a lot more free time, and since I only had a couple of final projects to complete, I was good to go.

I had no idea what to do with all this newfound free time except tell Kaitlyn that I wanted to get some practice in. I was serious about playing with her. Participating in the school orchestra, and then doing individual study had been fun, but it hadn't freed my musical expression like jamming with Kaitlyn had.

I knew that hanging out with her would make me feel a lot better. And maybe I could invite Margie to a practice session.

I texted Kaitlyn and told her to let me know when she wanted to practice. I didn't know whether she'd recruited other band members or not, since I'd pretty much fallen off the map as far as the group was concerned. I didn't even know how the performance at Shadetree had gone—if it had happened at all.

Maybe I could still get in on the performance, if there was still enough time to practice. It would be a little tricky with graduation happening, but... it wasn't like my parents were flying in from California like some peoples' parents were. They lived an

hour away and the whole affair would just be a quiet dinner with them after the ceremony.

Still amazed that my planner showed that I didn't have much to do now, I decided to take a nap. And before I fell asleep, I was inundated with thoughts of Margie and what I wanted us to do the next time we were together...

I woke up in a haze, realizing when I grabbed my phone that I hadn't set an alarm. Kaitlyn had texted me back and called me, and when I noticed that, I immediately woke up, remembering everything.

I'd slept for nearly three hours, catching up on all the missed sleep from the past few months. Apparently, Kaitlyn was practicing in half an hour.

I quickly got up, washed my face and brushed my teeth, grabbed my violin case, got ready, and left.

As soon as I reached the end of the street, I stopped to text Margie, giving her Kaitlyn's address and telling her that she could swing by to hang out if she wanted.

When I got to Kaitlyn's, she was already set up, strumming on her guitar and taking notes. Emily was on her computer, probably doing work. They looked up and waved, and I put my violin case down to get started.

"How have you been?" asked Kaitlyn. "You haven't even been coming to lunch consistently."

"I know," I said, sighing. "I was ridiculously busy, but now that finals are pretty much coming to a close, I don't know what to do with myself. I have too much free time."

“And then graduation,” said Emily, who was in my class. “It’s going to be crazy. Is Margie graduating too?”

“No, she’s a junior,” I said, glad that I’d been planning to stay in Rosebridge already. I wasn’t sure I could do a long distance relationship.

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 2:08 pm

“Word,” said Kaitlyn. “Anyway... Remember those songs you worked on? I feel like if we practice hard this week, we could be ready for the next Shadetree show. Professor Barley said we could do it.”

“Awesome,” I said, thrilled to know that I would get to perform after all. I would certainly still be around in June, and I probably wouldn’t have a job yet. This thought cheered me up a little bit. After being buried with work over the past... year, I would have a stretch of blissful free time.

I tuned my violin and applied rosin to my bow, and moved a chair into a comfortable position next to Kaitlyn, so we could both see the sheets with our notes. It felt good to go through the whole set up ritual. It helped me get in the zone.

“Okay so, obviously, we’re going to improvise a bit,” said Kaitlyn.

“Right.” I suddenly felt a little nervous, rusty, even. Improvisation was different from being one of many voices in an orchestra. The violin was such a vocal instrument, and if I made a mistake, it would be much more obvious.

Kaitlyn tapped out a beat with her foot and started strumming and humming. It was a pleasant tune—most of ours were, since it was nearing summer and we were playing outside, where people just wanted pleasant music while they were passing by or focusing on something else.

I played some experimental notes, my fingers pressing the strings down and my other arm sliding the bow across the strings. The reverberation from my violin was subtle, but I loved hearing it. I loved everything about this instrument and what I could do

with it. Truth be told, I thought of it a little like a pet.

As I kept playing, I was able to relax, and Kaitlyn and I fell into a good groove together. I'd lost t

rack of time, my soul in tune with only the music. Emily had closed her computer and was leaning back on the couch with her eyes closed. She was smiling, though, listening to us without distraction.

Kaitlyn's humming turned into singing; I hadn't realized she'd written lyrics for this song. It was beautiful. It was so thrilling to be a part of something greater, even with just one other person.

A knock on the door interrupted us, and Emily jumped up to get it.

It was Margie.

"Hey," she said, waving. "I texted you, Brianne."

"Oh jeez, sorry," I said. "I guess I got lost in the music."

Margie smiled and she and Emily sat down on the couch. "Please, keep playing," said Margie. "Don't let me interrupt you."

I still had some of the energy going, so I jumped back into what I was doing. Margie seemed at ease, and I felt comfortable with Kaitlyn and Emily's company. It seemed cozy, somehow, just the four of us in this apartment.

We quickly got our groove back. Now that Margie was here, I couldn't help but glance over at her, pleased to see how rapt she was. I didn't think I was that good, but then, what did I know? Her eyes were wide and her mouth hung open slightly. She

was really into it.

Kaitlyn and I came to a natural stopping point and decided to take a break. I stretched my arms and hands and went to sit next to Margie, putting an arm around her while Kaitlyn walked around to stretch her legs.

“You two are seriously great,” said Margie. “I mean, I knew Kaitlyn was already great, but when you play together, it’s awesome.”

“Thanks,” I said, truly glad for the compliment. “We’re going to be playing at Shadetree next month. Are you going to be here?”

Margie’s face fell. “I’ll probably have to go home for the summer. Find an internship or job or something.”

“Why not find one here in Rosebridge?” asked Kaitlyn, who was now standing in front of us. “You like animals, right? There’s a number of animal rescues and even a zoo.”

“Hmmm.” Margie pondered. “I don’t know how I’ll be able to afford to live here over the summer, though, especially if it’s unpaid.”

“The school sometimes gives stipends for that reason,” said Emily. “You could ask financial aid.”

“Or you could move in with me,” I said casually. “I mean, just for the summer. It’d be fun.”

“Really?” Margie turned to me. “Are you sure? I wouldn’t be imposing? I mean, I’m sure I could pay some rent...”

“Margie,” I said, “my parents are paying for my apartment. So you really can just stay there if you want to.”

“I’ll think about,” Margie said, “see if Cass can find a subletter. Or maybe Marnie will stay with her.” She stared off into the corner, clearly thinking through the logistics.

“Just let me know,” I said. “No pressure.”

“Sure.” Margie nodded. “Thanks for the offer.”

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 2:08 pm

“The zoo would be a sweet place to work,” I said. “I can’t believe I haven’t gone this year.”

“Me neither,” said Emily. “And I’m also a bio major. You’d think we’d have a field trip or something.”

“Hey, you go on some awesome field trips,” said Kaitlyn. “Like the one to that wildlife refuge.”

“I guess,” said Emily.

“Well, I’ll look into it,” said Margie. “I guess because I’m new in town I didn’t know about all the opportunities.”

“It shouldn’t be too hard to find something. A lot of Beasley students are from out of state so they go elsewhere for their internships,” said Emily. “I don’t think a lot of them actually stick around for the summer.”

There was a pause in the conversation. I checked my phone; it was getting a bit late, and I did still have a couple finals to knock out. By the end of the week, I’d be done. And then, after graduation...

I loved thinking of what my life as an adult would look like. I loved knowing that I would be completely free from my parents’ influence so soon. Even though, as a college student, they weren’t breathing down my necks all the time, they did still control me financially. I ran up against a lot of resistance when I wanted to make big purchases or take trips. Or even rent an apartment—my parents had come down when

I was house-hunting and taken over the process. I yearned to actually be able to make my own decisions.

And it would be amazing if Margie moved in. Even though I was introverted, and loved having my apartment to myself, I felt like I'd be even happier with her. She was one of the few people who didn't make me feel tired after I hung out with her.

Of course, we'd also be able to do plenty more sexy stuff if we lived together too. I really hoped that she would say yes.

"Want to go for another half hour or so?" asked Kaitlyn, cutting into my thoughts.

"Sure." I nodded, picked up my violin, and sat back in my seat. The chinrest fit perfectly against my jaw, and the violin's weight was comforting. As I started playing again, I found myself falling under the spell of the music, the rare harmony that Kaitlyn and I were able to create together. Music was magic, there was no doubt about it. It spoke to me in a way words never could.

And playing with Kaitlyn made me feel more fluid, more free, than playing in the orchestra. The orchestra was largely about precision and making sure you were doing the same thing as everyone else. There wasn't too much room for individual style, not as much as this. As a result, my playing was pretty methodical and stilted. I felt like improvisation and jamming with Kaitlyn had freed some other intangible part of me.

I could feel it; that was what it came down to. I couldn't say what it was, but it was a part that had needed healing, and had found it here.

I found myself humming along with the tune as Kaitlyn sang, and it was so catchy that Margie and Emily joined in as well, tapping their feet and getting into the music.

I felt connected in a way I'd never felt before in that moment. It was beautiful, like

my whole self was ensconced in the comfort of our united expression.

I took a deep breath and gave it my all.

14

MARGIE

I was honestly shocked that Brianne had offered to let me live with her. Even though we'd been dating for a bit, I still felt like parts of her were inscrutable. And to think that she wanted me around in her living space... she was really opening up.

It must have meant she really liked me. And maybe even better, trusted me. We'd come a long way from me spilling her coffee.

Of course, I wanted to take her up on her offer. I knew it might not be completely smooth sailing—problems came up when you lived with someone—but so far, we'd both handled problems in a mature way. I felt like we could handle this too.

I discussed the situation with Cass, and it worked out like a stroke of luck—Marnie lived in the dorms (which explained why she was at the house so often) and was open to moving in with Cass over the summer. I helped her move her things into my room, since I didn't have much.

And after graduation, I would move in completely. It was strange to be one of the only non-seniors sticking around Rosebridge. But part of the reason I was sticking around was because I'd agreed to go to this wedding with Brianne.

I dug up some of my best clothing, which I was glad my mother insisted I pack for formal events, and tried to look halfway decent. I knew Brianne herself would look like a princess, and I wanted to keep up. I had a bit of a hunch about how her parents

would be, and I wanted to earn their respect.

“Ready?” she asked, as she smoothed out her dress.

“Yep.” I grabbed my purse. I wasn’t sure I was really ready—could you ever be, when you were going to meet your girlfriend’s parents? But I was as prepared as I’d ever be.

We were taking my car. The wedding site was just forty-five minutes away on an old farm. The couple had apparently decided to do one of those trendy barn weddings, with rustic decor and shabby chic. Despite this, Brianne told me I should dress up as best I could.

The only nice dress I had was an old one from one of my high school homecomings. I’d bought it from a thrift store and it had a weird crimson paisley print from the ‘90s, but it was in good condition and didn’t look bad. Still, I worried. I knew Brianne’s family was really rich and mine, well, wasn’t. I wasn’t sure I’d know how to talk to these people, or answer certain questions they might ask.

But I had to stop worrying. My palms were slightly damp on the steering wheel, and I even worried about the condition of my car. It was a respectable thirteen year old Toyota Corolla. It looked clean and I took good care of it. But it certainly wasn’t going to be the nicest car in the parking lot.

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 2:09 pm

We arrived at the barn, and signs directed us to a grassy lot upon which we could park. When I stepped out of the car, the warm afternoon sun greeted me.

I had no idea what to expect. I'd been to weddings before, but they were much more casual affairs in my family.

Brianne led the way, and I took her hand. She'd assured me that her family was totally cool with us being together, which was hard to believe. I personally did not think my mother would be cool with it at all—but that was a bridge I'd have to cross later.

We entered the barn and found that many people were simply standing around and chatting and drinking. The barn itself was decorated beautifully with paper decorations, bunting, fairy lights, and tons of flowers—the effect was much better than I thought it would be.

I didn't know a single soul here, so I followed Brianne cautiously, hoping I could get a drink at some point.

“There's my parents,” said Brianne, gesturing with her hand. “Over there. We should say hi to them first.”

They looked perfectly friendly, but I knew they were going to be evaluating me. As we approached them, they turned their focus to us.

“Hey, Mom, Dad,” said Brianne. “This is Margie.”

“Nice to meet you, ma’am,” I said, shaking her mother’s hand.

“Oh please, call me Patricia. And my husband is Steven,” she said. “It’s a pleasure to meet you too. I’m glad you could come to the wedding.”

“M

e too,” I said. “It’s a beautiful venue.”

I was glad I was at least able to make small talk. I often found it easier to talk to “grown-ups” rather than people my own age. When parents asked questions, I knew what answers they wanted to hear.

“Margie transferred to Beasley from Amherst,” said Brianne. “She’s studying biology.”

“Is that so,” said Patricia, nodding. “How lovely. And what would you like to do with that?”

“I’d like to work with animals or study wildlife,” I said. “Maybe do field research.”

Patricia nodded, but she did look a little confused. I supposed that field research wasn’t a posh enough career path for her. But being a scientist was respectable in my book—and of course, I had great respect for anyone who worked with animals.

“Honey,” said Patricia, turning to Brianne, “that reminds me of that fundraiser we went to a while back... what was it for? The Hensleys’ daughter was running an animal rescue.”

“That’s right,” said Brianne. “Maybe you can hook Margie up. She needs a summer job.”

“That would be great,” I said. I needed something at this point, and all the prestigious and cool internships had filled up. I would be happy to work at a coffee shop, but I would prefer something that was at least remotely related to my career path.

So far, the conversation with Brianne’s parents seemed to be going well. She’d prepared me for the worst—she’d said her parents could be snooty—but this was manageable.

“We’ll send you Leah’s information,” said Patricia to Brianne. “I’m sure she could use more help. She hires Beasley students all the time.”

That made me feel a lot better about my prospects for the summer.

“Sounds good,” said Brianne. “Any other family members here for me to introduce Margie to?”

Patricia looked around the crowd in the barn. “Oh, looks like your sister’s here, Brianne.”

I gave her a glance. She knew what it meant. She’d forgotten to even tell me she had a sister.

“Let’s go say hi, then,” said Brianne. “See you guys.”

After we’d walked away from them a bit, I spoke up. “You forgot to tell me about your sister.”

“I know. Where has my brain been this past semester?” she said. “We don’t talk that much because she’s six years older than me and we don’t have that much in common. But she’s cool. Her name’s Annie.”

We approached a tall woman with Brianne's chocolate brown curls and gray eyes. In fact, if it weren't for the height and age discrepancy, they could have been twins.

Page 34

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 2:09 pm

“Hey, sis!” Annie waved and pulled Brianne into a firm hug. “And who’s this?” she asked, pulling away.

“My girlfriend, Margie,” said Brianne, smiling widely.

It was nice to feel like I was being shown off—like someone was proud of me, and proud to be seen with me.

“It’s great to meet you, Margie,” said Annie, shaking my hand. “And you’re a Beasley student as well?”

“That’s right,” I said.

“How did you two meet?” asked Annie.

Brianne paused, and I remembered when I’d cut her off, saying that we’d met each other randomly instead of me spilling a latte on her.

“I spilled coffee on her by accident, when I bumped into her,” I said. “And then I asked her to lunch and it went from there.”

I didn’t feel embarrassed about this story anymore. It was now the funny, cute tale of how we met. A real life meet-cute.

“That’s a good story,” said Annie, nodding.

The sisters launched into a brief discussion about Marcy—the lady whose wedding

this was—and other family members. I listened with some interest, partially because it was simply an opportunity to learn more about Brianne.

After we finished speaking to Annie, we wandered to the outskirts of the barn and people watched for a while. I was feeling more comfortable than I'd expected, but I was still eager to get a drink later on.

Now, it was time to sit for the ceremony, though, and we found Brianne's parents and sat with them.

The ceremony itself was lovely. There was a string quartet, and the acoustics in the barn were actually pretty good. Seeing the violinist just reminded me of watching Brianne play the other day and how magical it had been. She was really amazing—the way she closed her eyes and got completely sucked into the music was mesmerizing. Her passion was obvious.

The bride walked up the aisle, in a simple white dress, two flower girls in front throwing rose petals. I watched as the priest spoke the sacred words and the bride and groom spoke their vows. When they kissed, everyone cheered.

I found myself deeply affected by watching this. The bizarre thing was that I even started tearing up—though I managed to blink it back. I never before thought I'd be the person to cry at a wedding, but the pomp of the ceremony had touched something deep inside me.

Maybe it was because I was in love for the first time.

I hadn't before considered that I was in love. I knew I liked Brianne a whole lot, but love? I wasn't totally sure how to identify it. But now that I'd put the word to my feelings, I was sure that was what it was.

And now I finally knew what the big deal was about weddings. I knew what love felt like, why people made these grand gestures and celebrations for it. I could even, just maybe, imagine myself getting married. It was hard to think so far in the future, but the idea of spending the rest of my life with Brianne... Something about it was pretty pleasant.

There was a reception outside, and I saw that staff was changing out the furniture in the barn so we could eat dinner there. I followed Brianne straight to the open bar and we snagged ourselves glasses of wine.

I wanted to tell Brianne I loved her, but I felt inhibited. I didn't feel like I could really say how I felt right now.

But there was no hurry. I could wait.

I followed Brianne as she said hello and made small talk with various family members, introducing me to them. Somehow, I was able to impress them. They hadn't been half as snooty as I'd expected, and even Brianne said that she was surprised at their behavior.

"I don't normally get along so well with my extended family," said Brianne.

"Maybe everyone's in a good mood because it's a happy occasion," I suggested.

"It's possible." She shrugged.

I thought about telling Brianne how the ceremony had made me feel, but decided against it. It wasn't something to be shared now, around all these people, and all these distractions. It was something for a quiet night curled up together, when we were all alone, in our little world.

But it was hard to sit on it. Acknowledging how I felt had made me feel a little freer to take Brianne's hand, touch her shoulder, sit close to her. I felt happier than I could remember feeling in a long time.

My life had completely changed.

We sat down to dinner at a table with Annie and Brianne's parents. Annie's boyfriend was with us as well, and he and I bonded over not knowing anyone here. It was a remarkably smooth evening.

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 2:09 pm

When we drove back to Beasley that evening, I was exhausted but happy. I decided to just stay at Brianne's place since I'd moved a lot of my stuff over already.

When we got into bed, I rested my head on her chest and thought. No, now wasn't the right time either. The right time would present itself, and I would know when it happened.

I was thinking of all the things I wanted to tell her when I drifted off to sleep.

15

BRIANNE

Graduation had come and gone. I'd spoken with Kaitlyn about recruiting more people for our music group. We needed someone to do rhythm—a percussionist or maybe a bassist. We'd discussed some people we could talk to, though we weren't in a huge rush. Now that I was truly done with school, I felt like I could relax a bit.

Living with Margie wasn't without its hiccups, but it was smooth sailing for the most part. I disco

vered she was as fastidiously tidy as I was—but even more so. I suspected that she felt a little bad about living here rent free, so she made sure to keep the house extra clean. I'd told her that we could trade off on chores several times, but she'd insisted. If it made her feel better, then I was happy to let her do it.

Even though the relationship had happened pretty quickly, I felt comfortable. I'd

forgotten how good being in a relationship felt. But I didn't think I'd ever felt like this with Nicole. It'd been pleasant, but it hadn't felt as deep, somehow.

Maybe that was the nature of first love. Maybe experience made love richer.

But then, this was Margie's first serious relationship, so that train of thought didn't really make sense.

I needed to stop overthinking it and just enjoy.

Margie hadn't had that much stuff, and I was something of a minimalist, so that was convenient. Our lives fit together like cheap cardboard puzzle pieces—it needed a little finagling, but worked out in the end. I hoped that she'd want to continue living with me even after the summer ended, especially since it was going so well, but I didn't want to push her.

Mostly, I was surprised that I was so comfortable allowing her into my space. I'd grown quite a bit, shedding my prickly exterior (with her, at least) and allowing intimacy to grow.

And she'd made more friends. She got along great with my friend group now, and she was making her own friends at the EAC. Since we'd discovered they were decent people at the potluck, she'd been going to more of their hangouts. Most of them had gone for the summer, but a few had stuck around so she had people to hang out with.

My parents had also delivered with Leah Hensley's contact information, and Margie was to start working at the animal rescue soon. She was thrilled. While it wasn't the same as working with wildlife, since Leah's rescue focused on abandoned pets, it was still a good opportunity and I was happy for Margie. And best of all, it was paid.

I still hadn't made much headway on my own career. Here I was, a freshly minted

Beasley grad, and I was having trouble. It was probably because all the businesses around here were inundated with Beasley grads. It should have been as impressive as a degree from Harvard or Stanford or any of the other Ivies, but not in Rosebridge, apparently.

I was on my laptop, sighing as I looked over my cover letter template for the millionth time. Applying to jobs was the worst, much worse than applying for internships. This time I had to worry about job titles and salaries and benefits and other such details.

I was beginning to worry that I wouldn't find a job in Rosebridge at all. And if that happened, then I'd have to leave town, and I didn't know if my relationship with Margie would survive. I also hated to think of leaving her here. Sure, she had friends, but... I still felt protective.

Reluctantly, I'd started applying to jobs in New York City, Boston, and other places all across New England. It was driving me crazy that I hadn't gotten much interest from potential employers. Maybe I should have started job hunting much earlier.

My parents would support me as long as I needed them too, but I didn't want to be a mooch. I hated the idea of continuing to live off their money longer than was necessary.

I was looking over my cover letter until the words got fuzzy and all looked the same. I had to stop. Instead, I closed my computer and got up, wondering what to do with myself.

No classes. No tests. No homework. No job.

It was weird.

The only thing I could do was practice for the Shadetree show. Kaitlyn was good at doing covers, and she'd picked out some songs that would benefit from added violin. I supposed I could practice them.

Playing the violin usually got me out of my rut, but today, I was too consumed by anxiety.

What would happen if I couldn't find a job at all? I knew my parents would let me move back in with them—but I didn't want that. They had a pretty big house and I would have room to myself, but that wouldn't stop my mother from overseeing every detail of my life. I'd gotten used to a lot of freedom in college, and I wasn't prepared to give it up. And they lived far enough away from Rosebridge that my relationship with Margie would become long distance.

Margie was out with some EAC people, so I wouldn't see her until later. I looked out the window, seeing the golden sunlight paint everything in yellow. It was weird, but for the first time in a while, I felt a little lonely.

I decided to fix that by calling Annie. Now that we were both adults, maybe we could have more of a closer relationship. I normally didn't talk with people on the phone at all unless I needed something, so it wasn't my style, but...

She picked up after a couple of rings. "Hey, girl, what's up?"

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 2:09 pm

“Not much,” I said, feeling a little silly for calling at all. “I just called to chat. It was nice to see you at the wedding.”

“Yeah! I missed you,” said Annie. “What are you working on nowadays? Any plans for the summer?”

I hesitated. Should I tell her about my problem with finding a job? Maybe she could help, somehow, even though she didn’t live in the area. It was worth a try, at least.

“I’m having trouble finding a job,” I said. “It’s harder than I expected. I guess all the Beasley grads were my competition, and now it’s too late.”

“That’s tough,” said Annie. “You’re majoring in marketing, right?”

“Right,” I said. “But I’m not too attached to it anymore. I don’t even know what I want to do, to be honest.”

“Well, that’s a pretty versatile degree. All kinds of organizations need marketing help. Have you looked outside of marketing and PR agencies? Because you could be the marketing expert for a nonprofit, or something like that,” said Annie.

This was exactly what I needed to hear. I immediately thought of Leah Hensley’s animal rescue and wondered if she needed a marketing assistant. Helping to promote the welfare of animals would be a very worthwhile use of my skills.

“That’s a great idea,” I said. “I guess Mom and Dad got me stuck on the idea of doing something prestigious...”

Annie laughed harshly. “Eh, forget what they think. It’s your life. You have to do what you want to do. I mean, you’re a college grad now. You’re an adult. You can do whatever you want to do. You can even abandon marketing altogether and go into another field.”

“Without a degree?”

“Degrees matter less and less the older you get. You’ll see. I bet with all the extracurriculars you’ve done, you have skills that can apply to all kinds of other jobs,” said Annie.

I wished someone had told me all this much earlier. At least someone was telling me now. I was increasingly feeling better and better about my situation. Not only would I avoid getting stuck in a stuffy cubicle job—like Nicole, I thought smugly—I would also be able to do work that actually mattered, if I could a worthwhile nonprofit.

“That’s really good to know,” I said. “Thanks, Annie.”

“Of course! That’s what big sisters are for. Career advice.”

I laughed. “How are things in Pittsburgh?”

“Good,” she said. “Noah and I might adopt a dog soon.”

“That’s exciting,” I said. Our parents hadn’t been keen on pets growing up, so that was an experience we’d both missed out on.

“Yep. We’re getting the dog of our dreams. We’ve been to a few shelters and rescues recently, and it’s hard not to just bring one of the dogs home with us right then and there.”

“I can imagine.”

“And what about you?” asked Annie. “What about Margie?”

“We’re living together now,” I said, feeling like a mature adult suddenly. “Just for the summer, though I hope she decides to stay on past that.”

“If it goes well, then why not?”

“She has one more year to complete at Beasley, so I think she’ll want to,” I said, my heart warming at the very thought.

“That’s good to hear. And how are Mom and Dad? How was graduation?”

I ended up on the phone with Annie for another half hour, telling her all about the mundane details of my life. And she told me the mundane details of her. It was nice to have such a pleasant conversation with her. I could see us getting closer over the years, as the difference in our ages mattered less and less.

When we hung up, I felt a lot better. And I was immensely grateful for the advice she’d given me. Bolstered by her encouragement, I opened my laptop again, looking for jobs in fields I hadn’t considered before, especially nonprofits. I liked the idea of spending forty hours a week actually doing some good in the world.

I stumbled upon one that looked interesting, which was located right here in Rosebridge. It was called Human Nature and it basically helped schoolchildren learn more about nature and conservation. I explored their website and liked what I saw.

They were looking for a part-time marketing assistant to help more families in the area learn about their programs. It also seemed like they wanted to expand beyond the Rosebridge area and start growing the scope of their organization.

I decided to apply—why not? I liked the organization’s mission. Even though it was part-time, that was fine. I could look for other part-time gigs. If anything, it was definitely worth applying.

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 2:09 pm

When I broadened my search, I found even more opportunities. A small bakery called Cake My Day was also looking for marketing help—someone to handle their social media, specifically. There were a lot of part-time offerings from small businesses. If I combined enough of them...

I wondered if I could even start my own little marketing consulting firm. A one-woman operation that handled different tasks for organizations too small to hire a full-time marketing manager.

Annie had been completely right. My opportunities had widened considerably when I looked beyond my initial parameters. I felt much more optimistic about this, especially because I knew a lot of other Beasley busin

ess school grads were even more ambitious than me and wouldn't be going for these small, part-time jobs.

Satisfied, I closed my laptop. I'd needed this surge of confidence.

I heard the door open and Margie stepped in, a smile on her face. I went up to kiss her, hugging her tightly.

Things were looking up.

Working at Leah Hensley's animal rescue was an absolute blast. It was a no brainer, of course—I basically just had to take care of animals all day. It was hard work, but it was important. I learned a lot about caring for special needs animals, as well as some of the wildlife we cared for before transferring them to wildlife rehabbers.

Leah and Jean were easygoing and fun to hang out with, since they weren't that much older than me, and Jean herself had gone to Beasley. It helped that they were also queer ladies, so that was something we'd bonded over early on.

I was still getting used to the whole "being gay" thing. Or bisexual, I supposed, though no label felt truly correct. Someone suggested that I was asexual, or demisexual, and though they kind of fit, I wasn't sure about them, either. I supposed that words were at best, approximations for how I really felt. What really mattered to me was that I was in love with a woman, and that made me not-straight.

I was just finishing cleaning the bird cages. I'd managed to bond with Denise, an Amazon parrot, pretty early on, which had impressed Leah because she'd been previously abused and didn't like humans much. She watched me as I scrubbed the bars of her cage, gently letting out soft squawks.

"Cleaning up after you is hard work," I said, though I felt good about what I did. I loved all the animals here. I couldn't have been happier.

After I finished making sure they had fresh food and water, I left the birds and made my way down to the living room. The funny thing about this rescue was that it was in Leah and Jean's house. It was strange that my workplace was someone else's house, but I liked how casual it was.

Leah was sitting on the couch with a cat on her lap, scratching its ears and checking her cell phone. She looked up when she saw me.

“Taking a break?”

“Yeah,” I said, sitting down next to her. “Just finished up with the birds.”

“Nice. I’m still amazed that Denise likes you so much.”

I shrugged. “Me too.”

“It’s probably your demeanor,” said Leah. “I think birds are particularly sensitive and like people who are gentle and predictable.”

“That makes sense,” I said, always glad to get into animal talk with Leah. It was great to have another animal nerd to nerd out with.

Jean walked into the room just then, along with another Beasley student who helped out part time, a girl named Maureen. Maureen was sweet, and we’d chatted a bit. She was a potential friend.

Right now, though, she was gathering her things, ready to head out. We waved at her, and Jean sat on the couch opposite us.

“The heat really gets to me,” she said.

“Totally,” said Leah.

There was a comfortable silence as we all enjoyed the air conditioning. The barn out back, where a lot of other animals were kept, was cool enough for them, but didn’t have A/C. But I liked being there. It was nice to be surrounded by all the animals. I found the sounds and smells comforting, somehow. I was one of those people who clearly liked animals better than people, or at least, was more comfortable with them than my own species.

I closed my eyes and leaned back, listening to Jean and Leah talk about some event they were planning. I realized they sounded just like any married couple.

Part of the reason I liked working here was because I got to see an actual married gay couple being happy and doing their own thing. I knew plenty of other queer people my age, but actual grown-up adults, who had jobs and paid bills... I didn't run across them that often. It helped me see a possible future for myself, one where I was as happy with my life as they were.

Though I was pretty happy with my life to begin with. Living with Brianne was a blast, and my life at Beasley had improved dramatically. I loved this job, and would probably try to continue working part-time with them during the school year. Life was great.

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 2:09 pm

But after college seemed like a void, the same void Brianne was facing now. It was hard to imagine the stepping stones that would take me from here to where Leah and Jean were.

I opened my eyes. They'd stopped talking and were on their phones, the only sound being the cat purring like a motor. After a moment, Jean got up to tend to something in another room.

"Leah?" I asked, wondering what I was doing even as I said her name.

"Yeah?" She looked at me with inquiring eyes.

"This is a really random question, but... how did you know when you and Jean were like, really meant for each other?" I asked.

"Well, that's deep, isn't it?" said Leah, smiling.

"Sorry. You don't have to answer if you don't want to..."

"No, it's fine," said Leah. "I just don't get asked questions like that very often. I guess... I guess we helped each other grow. And when we saw the people we'd become, we realized we were perfect for each other. We wanted to keep growing together and journeying together."

I pondered that for a moment. Brianne and I certainly had grown together. She'd helped me grow more than I ever thought possible. I'd completely transformed.

“I guess you have someone in mind? Brianne, right?” asked Leah.

“Yeah. You know her?”

“Our parents are friends so I see her around at events occasionally,” said Leah.

“Ah,” I said. “Well, she’s really helped me grow over the past few months. I started out with absolutely no friends. Zero friends. And now I have so many... I have no idea how it happened. She helped me become more confident.”

“I would never have guessed. You and Maureen got along so easily. In fact, you seem like a really easygoing, affable person,” said Leah.

I nearly blushed at the compliment. It was amazing to me that someone could now perceive me this way. “It wasn’t always like that.”

“Do you think Brianne’s grown too?” asked Leah.

“I think so. She’s become... softer, more relaxed. It’s hard to put it into words. But she’s mellowed out quite a bit, I guess. I don’t know how someone as anxious as me could have had that effect on her, but there it is.”

“Love is a mysterious thing,” said Leah. “Do you love her?”

“Oh, definitely,” I said. “I just... I need to tell her. I don’t know when. I’m waiting for the right moment. I’ve been waiting for the right moment for a long time.”

“Well, here’s my suggestion. Don’t wait too long,” said Leah. “Because the perfect moment doesn’t exist.”

I blinked at her. I hadn’t been expecting her to say that.

“It doesn’t,” she continued. “You just have to say it when you feel it. When you want to say it.”

“I guess you’re right,” I said. There was no good reason for why I’d been putting it off. I should have just told her back at the wedding.

“I know I’m right,” said Leah, smiling. “Because after you say it the first time, you’ll say it every day. Every morning, every night. All the time.”

A warm glow filled me. That sounded lovely. “You’re right,” I said. “I’ll tell her tonight!”

Leah laughed. “Go get ‘em, tiger. You want to tackle the small animal room next?”

I nodded and stood, watching as Leah gently pushed the cat off her lap. Disgruntled, it jumped off and ran behind the couch in a flash of orange.

I followed Leah up the stairs and into the small animal room. She hadn’t yet showed me how to care for them—she’d started me on birds because I was the most interested in working with them—so today was to be another training day.

“God, they’re so cute,” I said, looking at the rabbits, guinea pigs, chinchillas, an

d hamsters who all lived in this room. They were so skittish, but so fuzzy and round and adorable.

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 2:09 pm

“They’re definitely among my favorites,” said Leah. “Here’s the chart for this room.”

She handed me a clipboard. These animals were really easy to take care of, especially since none of them were special needs. It was primarily important to keep their cages clean, though, since they were poop machines.

It was tough work to move the cages around and clean them, but we took breaks to play with the animals—it was important to socialize them. And it was a good reprieve from the manual labor.

When I got back to the house that night, I was exhausted. I hadn’t been the most fit person to begin with, so I was definitely going to develop some muscles by the end of the summer.

Brianne had made dinner for us, and we sat down to eat.

“This is delicious,” I said, digging into the chicken pesto pasta she’d made. “Seriously.”

“Thanks. I’ve been trying to improve my cooking and other skills and it’s been going great. Figure I should use this time to learn more about adulting before I actually do it.” She laughed.

As we continued stuffing our faces, I wondered if this was the right time. But then, of course, the advice Leah had given me was to stop holding out for the “right time.”

“Brianne... I love you,” I said, looking up from my plate.

Her eyes widened slightly, and she broke out into a smile. “I love you, too.”

There. It had happened. And the best part was... It felt absolutely right.

When we’d finished putting our dishes away, we curled up on the couch and put on a show we’d been working our way through. Brianne massaged my shoulders, which I appreciated, and worked her way down to my hands, making sure every muscle was kneaded. I felt boneless in her arms, completely at peace.

Eventually, I started losing the plot of the TV show. It was time for bed. I sat up and kissed Brianne. “I love you,” I said again.

17

BRIANNE

Work was apparently going great for Margie. She always came back with great stories about the animals, telling me I needed to visit the barn sometime. She was also getting along great with Leah and Jean. Bizarrely, she even told me that Leah’s sister-in-law was married to the movie star Callie Hinderbrook, which I found very hard to believe, but I couldn’t imagine why they’d lie about that. When I looked Callie up on Wikipedia, I found out that she was right.

On the other hand, my search for a job was still going pretty slowly. The places I’d applied to hadn’t gotten back to me yet, so I’d sent in follow up emails—which was just as irritating, because it made me feel kind of desperate. At least they hadn’t outright rejected me.

And to think that Nicole had been hand-picked by Robinson. I still found it irritating, but there was no point in dwelling on it.

The front door opened and Brianne walked in with a great big grin on her face. I never got tired of seeing her smile like that, since I remembered how she used to be—always so shy, dejected. Now it was like I was seeing her personality shine through on her face.

“You look cheerful,” I said.

“I am cheerful,” said Brianne. “We just got some baby bunnies at the rescue. I’ve got pictures.”

She came and sat next to me on the couch and pulled out her phone, bringing up the pictures of the bunnies. They were really incredibly cute. I would have to make a trip out to see the rescue sometime.

“Sounds like you’re having a blast,” I said.

“Yeah. I mean, I knew I was going to like working with animals, but I wasn’t expecting to like it so much. I just love bonding with them and making them feel loved.” She sighed in contentment.

God, she was just so cute. Even though her clothes were a little dirty and she was sweaty from all the work she’d done, I still wanted to scoop her up into my arms and pull her close.

So that was exactly what I did.

I hugged her to me and started kissing her neck, loving her natural scent. She smelled like sunshine and hay, probably from working in the barn. And her skin was so warm... She turned around and started kissing my lips, and soon enough, we were full on making out.

This was definitely one of the benefits of living with my girlfriend.

Even though she usually seemed exhausted when she came home, she sometimes had the energy for more sensual activities. And now she definitely had the energy, probably because she'd been in such a great mood.

I wondered if Brianne would be ready to have oral sex tonight. It was the one thing we hadn't done yet. Was she ready for something so intimate?

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 2:09 pm

I continued kissing her with gentleness, as if I was preparing for what might be coming later. It was hard to hold back when I felt the overwhelming need to just pin her down and make her come, but I couldn't do that—not yet, anyway.

So with the utmost delicacy, I trailed my lips down her neck, which was so tender, so warm, and we took a pause to undress, eagerly ripping the clothes from each other's bodies. I worked my way down to Margie's lean shoulders, her breasts, her nipples, stopping there to suck on them and swirl my tongue around them. There was nothing quite like enjoying someone's body—truly savoring it, really—like this.

My pussy was incredibly wet right now, so I reached down and helped myself out a little to ease the tension. Of course, as much as it eased the tension, it increased it, making it even more difficult to go at such a slow pace.

But that was part of the fun.

Margie wasn't faring much better. She moaned and whimpered under my touch, and when I slid three fingers inside her, pumping hard to hit her g-spot, she let out gasps and her body tightened. She was already so close to the edge, so I had to back away.

"I think it'd be hot to put my lips on you," I said, my lips tickling her ear. We'd discussed it before, briefly, and I wanted to wait until she was ready. "What do you think?"

"Y-Yes," said Margie. "That. That's what I want."

"You're sure?"

“Yeah.”

“Excellent.”

We made our way to the bedroom. When we got on the bed, I took her by the shoulders and gently guided her on her back on the mattress, easily moving her legs and hips into position.

I didn't know why, but I loved this position. I liked that I could see her face when I glanced up, holding her thighs tight as she clenched them in anticipation.

I pushed a teasing finger into Margie, reveling in how it made her squirm.

“How do you like that?” I asked, a wicked grin spreading across my face. I knew it felt good, and I knew she was getting impatient.

“It's amazing,” said Margie breathily. “More.”

“If you say so.”

I inserted two fingers, then finding it easier, three, slowly pumping them in and out. I had to go deep enough to find Margie's g-spot, because that was when the real fun began. When Margie let out a sharp moan, I knew I'd found it.

“Now I bet you're really enjoying yourself, aren't you,” I said.

“Oh yeah. I can only imagine how your lips will feel on my clit...”

“You don't have to imagine,” I said. “You want me to do it?”

“Yes, please,” said Margie. She opened her lust-filled eyes and looked back at me.

The pure lust in her eyes was what drove me wild. I could feel my wetness dripping down my thigh. I bent down and prepared myself to give her the best oral pleasure ever, lowering my body into a comfortable position and placing my tongue right in her fragrant lips.

I couldn't imagine how incredible it was going to feel for her. It would be her first time receiving oral sex from a woman. As I flicked her clit with my tongue, my fingers pumping inside her, causing Margie to whimper in a delightfully erotic way, I could feel pleasure start to spread through my own body. It was incredibly hot.

"Tell me if you need me to stop," I said.

"No, no, keep going," said Margie. "I crave you."

Well, that was fucking hot. Crave. That was a good word. It was exactly how I felt right now, so I took her invitation and started going hard, wanting her climax to be like fucking fireworks.

"You feel amazing," I told her. "All silky and smooth and wet for me."

"Y-You do too," said Margie. She was already so full of pleasure that her eyes were rolling back in her head. It felt damn good to have this effect on someone I loved.

I pressed my cheeks against Margie's thighs, and used my other arm to keep her thigh in place. My face was buried in her pussy, and I was relishing her salty-sweet taste and smell. I couldn't get enough of her. And the whimpers that came from the head of the bed made my own clit throb.

"Oh, please..." she whimpered, barely coherent.

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 2:09 pm

I increased my pace, knowing she was getting close. Margie was doing really well for someone who was having a new experience. I knew it could be difficult to orgasm from oral sex with a new person, but damn, she was into it. I adjusted my position and kept it up even though my jaw was starting to go stiff. I could feel the stirrings of tension coiling in my abdomen. I was going to need release again after this.

“This... good... ugh, God...” muttered Margie, completely lost.

She couldn't even form complete sentences. That was really a testament to how good of a job I was doing. Bolstered by this, I settled into a quick rhythm, trying to build the orgasm I knew was there. I was single-mindedly focused on finding release for her.

Finally, it happened. Her whimpers became more drawn out and turned into moans, and I felt her pulse around my fingers, her thighs jittering with the tension. She bucked against me, fucking my face.

After she came down, it took a moment for me to want to break away from her delicious core, but I did, Margie breathing hard.

“I th-think I gotta clean up,” said Margie, clumsily reaching around for a tissue, with which she cleaned herself. She had made a small wet spot on the bed, unsurprisingly.

“That was incredible,” I said.

“Wow. Just wow,” said Margie, her eyes hazy with orgasmic euphoria.

I crawled toward Margie, and she nestled into my shoulder. We sat there in the silence and darkness, listening to each other's hearts beating hard. It took a while for both of us to calm down.

"God, Brianne, I love you so much. It's impossible to think that it's possible to love someone this much," s

aid Margie.

"I know," I said quietly, stroking her hair. After giving her an awesome orgasm, I wanted to deliver all the tenderness I could.

"I definitely want to do that again," said Margie, and we both laughed.

"Yeah. Not gonna lie, sex is pretty fun," I said. "And there's so much more we can do. We could get kinky, maybe... Try all kinds of things..."

Margie sighed, a deep, contented sound. When I closed my eyes, I found myself completely dozing off.

18

MARGIE

I was panicking just slightly.

My mother wanted to come up to Rosebridge.

I was from a town outside of Baltimore and it was a seven hour drive, so it was a big deal she was coming all the way up here. It was primarily to visit a great-aunt of mine in Concord—I wasn't close to her, but her health was declining, so my mother

wanted to pay a visit and see me on the way.

There was a lot about my life that was different now, and I hadn't counted on her coming up here. She didn't travel often, and this trip was really unexpected. I had no idea how she would handle the fact that I was not only dating a woman, but living with her.

I thought about maybe just getting lunch with her down at the Riverwalk, so she wouldn't have to see my house, or Brianne, or maybe showing her the animal rescue, but it wouldn't be fair to leave Brianne out of this. She'd introduced me to her parents, and I wanted to introduce her to my mom.

I had to do it, no matter what she ended up saying. I wasn't financially dependent on her, because we were low income, so it wasn't like she could cut me off. I had to show her my true self and hope she accepted me.

I texted her back and told her that we could plan lunch for the following Saturday. I went back and forth about whether I should tell her I wanted to bring Brianne... and eventually I told her, asking if I could bring a friend. I didn't want it to be a surprise, and when she asked who my friend was, I could tell her.

Ugh. There were just so many logistics to handle. I didn't want her to find out I was queer along with meeting Brianne, but I didn't want that to come as a surprise when we were all sitting down in the same place.

My mother was generally a pretty mellow woman, but she could get angry on occasion. And when she got angry, it was bad. I didn't want that to happen, and I didn't want to break my bond with her. It had become so strong when my dad had left, and I didn't have any other siblings. She was the closest family I had.

She texted back immediately, which sent a shiver up my spine.

> MOM: Lunch would be good. Let me know what restaurants are good. Who's your friend?

I hesitated, my heart pounding. This was it. I was going to tell her.

> MARGIE: Her name is Brianne. We're dating, actually.

Page 42

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 2:09 pm

I was so reluctant to send it, but I did. Did I want to wait for the response? Or did I want to run to the barn and absorb myself in mucking out the goats' stall? Neither seemed like an appealing option.

Before I could make my decision, she'd replied.

> MOM: Interesting. Invite her to the lunch.

Was that approval? Or was she going to berate us for being gay at the lunch itself? I had no idea. I wanted to believe she'd be accepting because she'd never explicitly said anything anti-LGBT, but I wasn't sure.

Well, what was done was done. Now I just had to wait for Saturday to come and see what happened.

I put my phone down with my other things and got up to head out to the barn. Working with the animals always made me feel less stressed.

I'd been secretly hoping that Brianne would have something better to do, but she didn't. She was coming for the lunch.

Of course, because she'd prepared me for the pitfalls of interacting with her family, I had to do the same for her, and I did. I told her that I wasn't sure how my mother felt about me dating a girl. I decided that I wouldn't tell her we were living together. There was no reason for her to see where I was living, anyway.

I was terribly nervous as I drove us over there, but Brianne kindly stroked my arm

and told us that no matter what happened, we'd be together at the end of it. If it went badly, we could have a pleasant evening to ourselves to recover.

I parked the car in the Riverwalk's lot and walked to the main strip of restaurants. The Indian restaurant that Brianne and I never made it to had a lunch buffet, and my mom liked spicy food, so it was perfect.

We waited outside. She hadn't been entirely sure when she would get into town, and I didn't want to keep her waiting, so we'd decided to just come early. It was a pleasant day, and we could sit at the benches outside the restaurant.

I wished she would get here already, though. My palms were damp, I was so nervous.

My phone buzzed, and she told me she'd just parked. Five minutes later, I saw her striding up the path to the row of restaurants. She looked a little different from the last time I'd seen her, at Christmas, but I couldn't put my finger on what had changed, exactly.

"Hi, honey!" she said, walking up to me and squeezing me tightly in a hug. "And you must be Brianne," she added, smiling at her.

So far, so good. But I'd have felt a lot more at ease if she'd explicitly told me she was okay with me being gay (or whatever I was). I didn't know why she hadn't just said anything earlier, apart from the ominous "interesting."

"It's nice to meet you, ma'am," said Brianne.

"Call me Rebecca," said my mother. I was reminded of the same exchange when I met Brianne's parents. I supposed we were at the age where we didn't have to call our peers' parents Mr. and Mrs. anymore.

We went into the restaurant and got set up with the buffet. They had a wide variety of rices and curries out for us to sample, and I loaded my plate up with a little bit of everything. But I was still so nervous that it was hard for me to even want to eat. I thought I might have gotten too much food, considering how my appetite had disappeared.

“So, honey, how’s school going?” she asked, when we’d all sat down to eat. “You told me all about the friends you have...”

“Yeah, I do have good friends,” I said, glad I could tell her the truth now. “I like hanging out with Brianne’s friends, I made friends at the Environmental Action Coalition, and now I’m working at an animal rescue for the summer, so I’m meeting even more people.”

She beamed. “How wonderful! And Brianne, what are you studying?”

“I actually graduated last month and I’m looking for jobs now,” she said.

“Congratulations!” said my mother. “I’m sure a Beasley grad like you will have no problem finding anything.”

She didn’t know that poor Brianne actually was having trouble. Being a Beasley grad didn’t mean much in Rosebridge itself, where Beasley students were a dime a dozen. I personally believed Brianne would find the right job soon, though.

“Thank you, Rebecca,” said Brianne politely.

I was glad she, at least, was great with parents, probably from all those random parties her parents made her go to. I could tell she was charming my mother.

I told her a little bit more about the classes I took, the animals at the rescue, and the

town itself. There was a lot to catch up on; even though we did talk regularly on the phone, the words flowed so much easier in person. But I was waiting for the other shoe to drop.

“So,” she said. “You guys are dating? How did you meet?”

“Uh... I bumped into Brianne and spilled her coffee all over us,” I said. I wondered if her asking these questions was her way of showing her acceptance.

“How funny,” she said. “And how long have you been together?”

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 2:09 pm

“Um... just a couple months,” I said. “We just became official recently.”

I knew Brianne would probably wonder what I was playing at, since we’d been official for a while. But I needed an explanation for why I hadn’t told my mom about her earlier.

“Great. It’s good to see you in a

happy relationship, honey,” she said, turning to Brianne. “I hope you’re taking good care of her. I was so worried when she decided to transfer.”

“We take good care of each other,” said Brianne. “She’s fit into Beasley just fine.”

So that was it, then. It was so anticlimactic. She’d accepted it without question and I’d worked myself up for nothing. I had nothing to be worried about—she’d accepted me the way I was, and not only that, she was happy for me.

I wondered what my dad would have said. I didn’t remember much about him, since he left when I was young, but there was a reason he and my mother had split up. The area I came from was kind of rural, so it was likely he didn’t share the same views as my mother.

Good thing he wasn’t in my life anymore, then.

After lunch, we decided to walk around the Riverwalk a bit, so my mother could get the Rosebridge experience. Since it was a beautiful Saturday afternoon, there were tons of people around, painting a picture of Rosebridge as a happy, cheerful place,

which it certainly could be. The three of us sat on some benches near the river.

“I think you’re really happy here,” she said. “You’ve found people you really click with. I guess transferring really was the right decision.”

“It wasn’t that, Mom,” I said. “It was finding out who I really was that changed things. I didn’t know... before... that I was... into girls.”

A bolt of anxiety still went through me when I said that.

“That would certainly help, wouldn’t it?” She smiled and took my hand. “You know I’ll love you no matter what, right?”

“I know, Mom,” I said. “Thanks.”

I finally could breathe a sigh of relief. The day had gone even better than I’d expected. She hadn’t even made a big show of accepting me—she’d been all casual about it instead. I felt like a huge burden had been lifted from my shoulders, like tension was being released.

And when Brianne and I made it back to our home that evening, I felt, in some intangible way, like I could finally move forward with my life.

19

BRIANNE

“Thank God,” I said.

“What happened?” said Margie, her eyes wide.

“I got the Human Nature job. They liked me at my interview and said I’d be perfect,” I said, glad I’d finally gotten something. And this gig had been one I’d really wanted, too, because it seemed so interesting and worthwhile—something that actually made the world a better place.

“That’s awesome! Congrats!” Margie came and kissed me on the lips, throwing her arms around me.

“I feel a lot better now. If I can score another part time job, I’ll be set. And maybe I can turn it into a marketing consultancy. How cool would that be?” I said, feeling like my dreams could take flight once again. I knew my parents wanted me to become a marketing executive at a fancy firm eventually, but that wasn’t the life I wanted for myself. The cool thing about this Human Nature job was that it was so flexible. I didn’t have to lock myself into the 9-5 slog.

“That would be awesome. I’m sure you can do it if you want to,” said Margie, her eyes shining up at me.

I appreciated her support. To make this good day even better, I was supposed to be playing at the Shadetree show with Kaitlyn this evening. This month’s show focused on the outdoor sculptures they had displayed on the terrace, where we’d be playing. There would be food trucks and outdoor activities for kids, too. It was going to be a blast.

I checked the time on my phone and realized that I had to pick up my pace if I wanted to get there in time. We had to arrive early to set up, and Margie was giving me a ride. Emily was still in town, and she was going to join us. Sadly, Miriam, Tracy, Siobhan, and the rest of the crew weren’t around.

But that was fine. I remembered that one practice session, with just the four of us, where I felt the energy in the room elevate the music. We had a good rapport

together.

I made sure to dress up stylishly—I wasn't in a rock band, but I was a musician, after all—and make sure I had all my supplies. And then we were off.

Every time I showed up at Shadetree, I was amazed by the place. It was just so damn cool, and I couldn't something so cool had showed up right here in Rosebridge.

I immediately spotted Kaitlyn and Emily on the terrace, talking with Professor Barley. When we walked over, they waved at us.

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 2:09 pm

“I’m thrilled we’re going to have you here today, Brianne,” said Professor Barley. “Everyone loved Kaitlyn’s performance last month.”

I smiled at her. “Thanks for the opportunity, Professor Barley. It’s awesome to be able to play for a crowd.”

After she left to take care of other preparations, Kaitlyn and I took our instruments out and started tuning up. Some early birds started trickling in, and we started jamming and improvising, making sure the guests had something pleasant to listen to while they perused the incredible art. Kaitlyn and I had agreed that we’d take turns at some point so we could each have a chance to look around.

Once it hit 7:00, we took out our notes for the covers we’d prepared and started on them. More and more people starting coming, and the whole thing had the atmosphere of a fair. There were a couple of food trucks, lots of chattering children, and even a few well-behaved dogs.

One of the things I loved about street performance—after I’d actually started doing it—was getting to see how people reacted to my music. When I increased the tempo, they started getting more excited, and when I decreased the tempo, they became more relaxed. The same thing started happening as Kaitlyn and I moved on to the more energetic songs in our set. It was cool to be able to control the energy of the crowd from where I was.

And it was also fun to play the violin outdoors. Most of the time, I was in my room or in the orchestra room. I never got to play in the sunshine and breeze. There was something freeing about it, like the notes could float into the air like dandelion seeds,

carried on the wind and heard from a distance. And my violin sang like a nightingale as I pulled a wide range of notes from it, adding vibrato and other effects to jazz it up.

I had so much more respect for Kaitlyn now than I had starting out. I used to think she was lesser than me because she didn't have a formal music education and played on the street instead of concert halls. But what I didn't realize until I actually got to know her was that we both loved music, and that was all that mattered. We loved playing our instruments and sharing music with audiences, wherever they were, and that was the most important thing. It didn't matter that we came from completely different backgrounds. What was the point of enjoying music if you used it to separate yourself from other people?

Margie nodded at me, indicating that she and Emily were going to explore a bit more. There were some new exhibitions inside the building as well, where people were escaping to get some relief from the sun, though it was quickly becoming cooler.

After our first set finished, I told Kaitlyn I wanted to take a break and explore inside. After this break, I'd take over for her. I'd prepared some cool early 20th century jazzy pieces which I thought would be a perfect transition into the night.

I carefully packed my violin back up—I didn't want to risk it getting damaged—and headed inside in search of Margie. I found her pretty easily because there weren't as many people inside as outside. She and Emily were gawking at a large, humanoid sculpture, and I couldn't tell if it was nude or not.

"Um," I said, wrapping an arm around Margie, "what the hell is this?"

"That's what we're trying to figure out," said Margie. "Is that his dick, or what? I have no idea."

We dissolved into laughter and moved on to the artist's other works, which were

clearer. “I feel like this would look good in my house,” I said, gesturing to another humanoid shape.

“I’d probably get scared of it at night,” said Margie. “I’d get up to use the bathroom, see it in skulking in the corner, and flip a shit.”

We burst into laughter again. It felt good to be out and laughing with my friends. I felt like I’d been so anxious, so uptight, for so long, and now I could finally let loose. Every puzzle piece of my life was coming together. I knew how lucky I was, and I didn’t want to lose the feeling.

“You know, the art store is open, finally,” said Emily. “They’re having special hours for it tonight so people can see what it’s about.”

“Oh wow,” said Margie. “We definitely have to check it out, then.”

We followed Emily through the warehouse and into a corner studio that had been transformed into a store. Even though it was small and I wasn’t particularly knowledgeable about art supplies, I could tell it was pretty comprehensive and had good quality stuff.

“This is... awesome,” said Margie.

“Thanks,” said the store clerk, looking up. “We figured a lot of people would appreciate us adding an art supplies store. Helps us fund our programs, too.”

“I think I’m going to end up spending some money here,” said Margie.

“Me too,” I agreed. I’d been having an itch to get back into painting recently, and this felt like the right time to do it.

We walked through the aisles, looking at devices which were completely inexplicable and others that I was practically drooling over. Margie and I ended up picking out some paints and canvases and brushes, figuring we could start on our journey to take up painting again together.

“Good haul,” said Emily.

“Thanks,” I said. “I feel inspired, now.”

“Good,” said Margie. “I just have no idea what I actually want to paint.”

“Paint the animals,” I suggested, as we walked back outside—it was time to relieve Kaitlyn. “Maybe if you get good at it, people will pay you to paint their animals. One of my mom’s friends does that.”

“Not a bad idea,” said Margie.

I stowed the painting mater

ials with my violin case, took my violin out, and sat down, ready to go. I started off with a little improv, so it would be a jarring transition, but when I started playing the jazz pieces, the night started to become a deep shade of blue. It was perfect. String lights lit up the whole place magically, along with larger street lights. They had the effect of illuminating the sculptures interestingly, transforming their shapes with long shadows and bright spots.

Page 45

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 2:09 pm

I got lost in my set, enjoying the easy, groovy feeling of the songs I was playing. It was thrilling to see that people were actually into it, too. People were swaying as they talked and looked at the art, and it was because of my music! I felt powerful, in a way. It was like being the DJ in a club, controlling the mood and the energy.

The night was so fun that it inevitably came to an end. After most of the people left, Kaitlyn and I packed up, and Professor Barley came over to give us our check. She'd even allowed us to set out a tip jar, which was kind of her.

I felt satisfied, totally content, as Margie drove us home. I was exhausted from playing for so long, but I was so happy. I ended up falling asleep in the car, and when I woke, it was like I'd been magically transported.

"Someone's a sleepyhead, huh?" said Margie, laughing.

"Oh, shush," I said, though she was right. I was dead tired.

After brushing my teeth and changing into PJs, I went right to bed, and she joined me. She gave me a kiss and said "I love you."

"I love you too," I said, feeling drowsy already.

If life could continue to be like this, I thought... I'd be the happiest woman in the world.

EPILOGUE

MARGIE

THREE YEARS LATER

I couldn't believe something as simple as a coffee could help me find the woman of my dreams, the woman who I was going to spend the rest of my life with.

We'd stayed in Rosebridge proper for a while, especially since it was easier for Brianne to build up her marketing consultancy there, but eventually moved to the outskirts, like Leah and Jean had. We were still friends with them after all this time, and I still liked to help out at the animal shelter, when I wasn't doing field work.

During my senior year, I'd found a biology professor who was interested in working with me on a longterm project, so I'd applied to do a masters at Beasley. I'd been accepted for the program, and now this professor and I were doing fieldwork on the local bird populations. I had to wake up at 4:30 AM on some days to set up the mist nets, but it was worth it. I was finally doing what I loved. When I graduated at the end of the year, I would try to find other field work opportunities in the area. There was a lot of ecological research to get involved with that I never could have imagined before.

Our painting endeavors had gone so well that we'd both been accepted to various shows at Shadetree. Brianne wanted to spring for a studio space for both of us eventually, when both of us could afford it. I didn't have much time to paint now, with my research, but it was something we enjoyed together.

All in all, life was good. I didn't want anything to change. Well, once I was done with my masters, I wanted to travel more, and I was open to the idea of moving away from Rosebridge. But it was so peaceful and beautiful up here, it was hard to imagine living anywhere else. Later on, I knew I'd want kids, but that still seemed so far in the future. It was like the world was my oyster.

But there was one thing I was sure of. I wanted to marry Brianne. In fact, I was so sure that I'd actually gone out and bought a ring. I wasn't sure when the right time to propose would be, and I knew Brianne wasn't the kind of person who was into big, fancy celebrations. I would just have to carry it in my pocket and wait for a good moment.

But I knew I couldn't just keep waiting, like Leah had told me so long ago. I just had to go for it.

So one day, as we were enjoying the hiking trails in our neighborhood, I realized that I was coming up on the perfect moment. It was summer again, and the forest was alive with birdsong and the calls of other creatures. It perfectly encapsulated what I loved about Rosebridge.

There was a cliff on this trail that had a beautiful vista of the distant hills and mountains, and we often brought picnics here. It was the perfect place for a proposal—beautiful, and with meaning for both of us.

We sat down when we reached the cliff, enjoying the view. The sun was a couple hours away from setting, so it painted the whole vista in shades of gold. It was incredible. This was what I loved about living in New England. Soon enough, the leaves would change colors and the whole place would be like a rainbow.

I snuggled up to Brianne and rested my head on her shoulder. Now was the time.

“Brianne,” I started. “I have something to ask you.”

“That’s funny,” she said, “I had something I wanted to talk to you about too.”

“What?” I sat up and looked at her. “Um, is it urgent?”

“Depends. Is yours urgent?”

I narrowed my eyes at her. What was she getting at? And what was with that mischievous smile on her face?

“Well... I wanted to ask you... Brianne, will you marry me?” I pulled the ring box from my purse and snapped it open.

“Of course I will,” she said, “but only on one condition.”

“What’s that?”

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 2:09 pm

She fished around in her purse and took out a box. “Only if you’ll marry me too.”

She cracked it open and displayed a ring.

“Hell yes,” I said, amazed that she’d been thinking the same thing. I mean, we’d discussed marriage, so it wasn’t a surprise, but... it was so funny to think we’d both been carrying rings around, waiting for the right moment to propose. It was downright adorable.

We slipped the rings onto each other’s fingers. It felt like a magical moment, like time had slowed down, and I wanted to capture it forever. The sun glinted off the silver rings, making the tiny diamonds on them sparkle. They weren’t super fancy, since neither of us could afford a huge diamond, but that didn’t matter—it was perfect. It was exactly what I wanted—a token of my commitment to Brianne.

And then, of course, we started making out. Even though we were a little grimy from the hike, it didn’t matter. I loved being here, alone with her and the wilderness around us, feeling like we were in our own little world. It was so beautiful. Life was beautiful. I was overwhelmed with all these thoughts and moaned in delight.

When we broke away, we just looked into each other’s eyes. Her gray eyes looked warmer in the golden sunlight, and her face softer, somehow. I remembered fleetingly how intimidating I’d found her when we’d first met. I hadn’t imagined that someone with such a sharp expression could carry such tenderness, have such a big heart.

But I’d found that person and now she was mine, and I was hers. And that was the way it was going to stay—forever.

ALSO BY H. L. LOGAN

Want to read Kaitlyn and Emily's story? Check out Rhythm!

"I don't know if I can do relationships anymore."

Kaitlyn has been struggling with her romantic relationships for awhile, but this last relationship was the straw that broke the camel's back. Now she is not sure if she wants to keep dating. Which isn't a huge deal, she's never been a very conventional girl and she'd like to focus on her passion for music. But when an old friend offers Kaitlyn a place to stay in the beautiful college town of Rosebridge, she meets someone who makes her want to give love one more shot.

"My educational success is the most important thing to me."

Emily worked very hard to get into a successful engineering program and she dedicates all of her time and attention to her schoolwork. Unfortunately, that means she has neglected to date any women during her time at college. Which isn't a huge deal, she never thought dating was very important. That is until she meets Kaitlyn, a free-spirited musician who challenges Emily to live a little.

"I didn't know this would be so hard."

As Kaitlyn and Emily's love begins to

grow, they find hardships that threaten to tear them apart. And once again, Kaitlyn begins to doubt whether love really can conquer all. Emily loves Kaitlyn with all her heart but is it enough to bridge the gap?

Get your copy today!

Or keep reading for a preview!

All of my stories can be read by themselves, but if you'd like to stay in the loop and see which characters are going to be next to get their very own happily ever after, be sure to sign up for my newsletter!

CHAPTER 1 - KAITLYN

"You don't have to do this." She looked up at me sadly. "It doesn't have to be like this."

I took in a deep breath, glancing around at my packed bags. I had such a weird blend of suitcases, all hand-me-downs I'd collected from friends or thrift stores. One was mint green with a floral background, a pattern you'd expect to see in 1950. Another one was made of this shoddy, navy blue fabric, and it looked like it could burst at any moment.

But that wasn't the odd part, the fact that they were all varying sizes and colors. No, the weird thing was, no matter how each of them looked, they all made me feel the same: lonely.

"We both know that I do."

Julia shook her head in anguish, sinking down into the couch I was sitting on and resting a gentle hand on my shoulder.

"It's going to hurt," she whispered to me.

"Yeah," I nodded. "It always does. But just because it hurts doesn't mean it's wrong. Sometimes the right thing and the painful thing are one and the same."

I spoke so casually about it, as if it wasn't tearing me apart inside. But this was hurting me just as much as it was hurting her. The break-up was mutual, which theoretically would make the whole process easier, but it hadn't. If anything, it seemed to make it harder.

I still cared so much about Julia. We'd been together two years, and the first one had been amazing. Really, truly, brilliantly amazing. She was smart, funny, and very organized, which I'd admired. She was still in school to become an accountant when we'd met, though she'd since graduated and gotten a job at a local firm.

When she was in school, our relationship seemed to make sense. Though our personalities were drastically different, our lifestyles had meshed together well. I wasn't a student, never had been, but I lived a similar lifestyle.

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 2:09 pm

I was always up late, constantly with friends, frequently going out, and always stressed about being dirt poor. I used to eat ramen in Julia's studio apartment at two in the morning and rub her back as she studied. Back then, we'd worked. Back then, neither of us had considered how much things would change in the future.

But they had drastically changed. And we went from that carefree, fun, college couple to a couple that was constantly in conflict. I loved her so much, but love wasn't enough when you woke up one day and found you were completely incompatible with your partner.

She didn't have late nights anymore. No, she went to bed early because she went to work early. Staying in, eating Top Ramen, and binge-watching television was no longer enough for her. She had money now, and she wanted to spend it eating at nice restaurants and going to culturally-enriching events I couldn't afford.

Suddenly the fact that I was a wayward musician waiting for her big break was no longer appealing to her. She stopped seeing me as this fun, adventurous, creative soul and began to view me as unmotivated.

Which I wasn't at all. I was quite motivated to succeed with my music; I just wasn't motivated to find any other career paths. I knew my talent, I knew my calling, and it was music. I was going to make music work for me.

But now that Julia was this big corporate badass bringing in tons of money, poor musician was not enough. And while I would've liked to be angry at her for this, I really couldn't be. She didn't want my lifestyle, that was fine. I couldn't fault her for growing into someone new. Nor could I fault myself for not being what she wanted.

I stroked the outside of one of my suitcases, one with a velvety edge. Fiddling brought me comfort, and I could use a lot of comfort.

“Do you know where you’re headed yet?” she asked me.

I nodded. “I’ve spoken to an old friend who has an extra room. She’ll let me stay in it while I get back up on my feet.”

“In town?” she asked.

I shook my head. “In Rosebridge.”

“Rosebridge?” she gasped. “But that’s, like, twelve hours away. That’s in a completely different state!”

I looked at her suspiciously. “So?”

“So... you’ll be so far from me.”

I raised an eyebrow. “That’s the point, isn’t it? We aren’t together anymore, Julia. Of course I’m going to be far away from you. I mean, does it even matter? Even if I found a place in town, I might as well be twelve hours away. You’ll never see me anymore.”

She sighed. “I guess that’s true, but... I don’t know. In my head, I imagined you’d still be living in town. Maybe a small part of me was hoping that you’d...” She paused. “That you’d find your way back to me.”

“No,” I corrected her. “You were hoping I’d become someone different. Someone with goals, a plan, someone who would be compatible with your high octane lifestyle.”

She looked down guiltily, because she knew that I was right. She wanted the best of both worlds. She wanted to keep me, and at the same time, she wanted me to be totally different from who I actually was.

“I never asked you to change,” I reminded her.

She nodded. “I know that.”

“Don’t ask this of me, not again. I’m fine breaking up if that needs to be done, but I don’t want to do that. This isn’t what I wanted. So please stop pushing me to try and change, because I’m scared I won’t say no to you. And if I don’t say no to you, I’m going to give up on my dreams for you. I’m going to become someone I’m not.”

And, really, it wasn’t as if my dreams were that unrealistic. I wasn’t one of those naïve twenty-three-year-olds who believed I was going to make it somehow. I didn’t expect to rise to celebrity status or be discovered. I didn’t want fame. I didn’t want to be rich.

I only wanted to make a living with my music. With street performances, making beats for other aspiring musicians, doing live performances, just my guitar and me. I was even open to doing lessons for children in the future, to both teach them what I knew and have a steady stream of income.

So it wasn’t as though I wanted everything to fall into my lap. I just wanted music to be a part of my career. Really, I wanted music to be a part of my entire existence. I wanted to live and breathe music.

No, that would never make me a rich woman, which I fully acknowledged. But I didn’t need to be rich to be happy. I just needed to be a person who could pay her bills. A person who was free to live her life without the constraints of a job that she hated. My end goal was not to make a ton of money, and I was really, truly fine with

that.

But Julia never would be. She liked high-end, especially now that she was making a ton of money. She wouldn't ever be happy with a partner who made a meager living giving guitar lessons to kids.

"I just don't know what comes next, Kaitlyn," she said to me softly.

"Next comes both of us moving on with our lives. You finding a person who fits your lifestyle, me finding someone who fits mine. Before that will likely be a lot of heartache, but eventually we'll both find redemption in someone new."

She nodded but didn't say a word. Like me, she knew it to be true, but she didn't want to allow herself to believe it. She didn't want to truly believe it was over, because that meant the pain would begin. I felt similarly.

"Why Rosebridge?" she asked, seemingly only because she wasn't ready for me to leave.

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 2:09 pm

Although I was being offered a temporary free room in Rosebridge, that didn't make my reason for choosing the location immediately obvious. Julia knew that I had plenty of friends from all around the country who I'd met while traveling. And, not to toot my own horn, but I'd always been quite charismatic. I would have no problem finding a room with plenty of other people.

But I had chosen Rosebridge for a reason.

"I really liked it when I visited her. It had a nice vibe, as most college towns do. It seemed very liberal, and my friend said that there were quite a few popular street performance groups. And that's where I need to go, somewhere people might be willing to throw a couple bucks at me to hear me play some amazing music. I need to go where I could potentially make a living."

Although where we currently lived was a college town as well, it didn't have much of an arts community. It was where you went for a business degree or law school. I couldn't even think of a place where street performance might be appreciated. It just wasn't that kind of city.

"Right, of course, because you couldn't make money doing anything else..." she said bitterly.

Now I was starting to get annoyed. "What did I just say? Don't do this, don't guilt me for being me. I'm not the one who changed, you are. I've been the same person as I was the day you met me. I'm the same girl you fell in love with. So don't push me to be another person."

“And am I not the woman you fell in love with?” she asked.

I didn’t know how she could ask it. I didn’t know how she couldn’t already know my answer. And I probably should have refrained from the answering the question, but I couldn’t.

“No,” I said softly.

Her jaw dropped. “But you said...”

“That I still love you,” I finished for her, “and I do. Because I continued to love you after you changed, but... you really did change. You’re the one who messed this relationship up, not me.”

It was quite the accusation, but it was true. I had refrained f

rom saying it, because I hadn’t been looking to hurt her, but she didn’t seem to care about my pain. And, maybe, as I was walking out the door was the best time to express how I really felt.

“It’s really over, then?” she asked. “You truly don’t want what I do at all? Not even a little bit?”

I looked at her skeptically. “Did you really think there was a chance that wasn’t true? You really think I’d be moving out and on with my life if there was any way I could see myself fitting into your vision of the future?”

“I just don’t see what doesn’t appeal about it to you! What’s wrong with steady jobs? What’s wrong with steady income?”

“Uh, I don’t know, how about working your life away for a corporation who doesn’t

give a shit about you? What about wasting hours of your life doing work you hate?”

“And then, because you do the work you hate, you can provide for your loved ones! You can take long, extravagant vacations and buy whatever you want!”

I shook my head. “There’s nothing I need to buy. There’s no material item I could get that would make me feel good about my life. All I really ever wanted was you, and... and I know I’m not going to have that anymore, so... no.”

“You still could,” she pushed. “I really think you’d adjust and see how perfect it all could be...”

This was it; this was when I needed to excuse myself. Because I’d meant what I’d said. I wanted her, and I was scared of being alone, so I feared what I might give in to. And I didn’t want to be a different version of myself. I liked who I was.

“I’ve got a train to catch,” I told her as I stood up and started to collect my vastly different suitcases.

I could see tears welling up in her eyes. “I’m not ready for what comes next,” she muttered.

“And neither am I. But we’ll both get through it, eventually.”

I was not tearing up. I refused. I refused to cry in front of her. I was going to stuff these feelings down and not revisit them. Not on the train, not when I reached my friend’s apartment, not any time in the future.

I’d done enough crying. Now, I needed to move forward.

I gave one last glance around her apartment, taking it all in. It was perfection; it truly

was. From the actual hardwood floors to the granite slab countertops, it was luxury as I'd always imagined. And I couldn't help but think about how this luxury was all she needed. This was what she wanted; this was what would make her happy.

But not me. I would never be happy this way.

I looked at her one last time before heading toward the door. "Goodbye, Julia."

She didn't say a word as I walked through the door.

CHAPTER 2 - EMILY

I threw my textbook onto my bed, deciding that I absolutely had to be done for the night. As tempting as it may have been to continue to force myself to work, I couldn't do it. Not again.

There were only so many all-nighters you could pull before sleep deprivation hit you. And it was definitely hitting me.

It was my last year at Beasley, though, and I supposed this was just how the last year was supposed to go. After this year, I'd have my degree in civil engineering, and it'd all be worth it.

I collapsed onto my bed, feeling the soft blue blanket that sat atop my comforter against my cheek. I could fall asleep right here and now, if I didn't still need to get up and brush my teeth.

Knowing me, after I brushed my teeth, I'd come back to bed and stay awake while having a minor existential crisis. At least, that was how every other night of my week had gone.

I'd always been a person who was prone to overthinking. I'd analyze every aspect of my life until I started to feel either very calm or very panicked, depending on the current state of my life. You'd think right now, I'd be feeling very calm, considering I was theoretically exactly where I'd always wanted to be in life.

I was about to get my degree. I had a pretty good job in Beasley's cafeteria in the

meantime. I loved my living situation. There wasn't anything really going wrong in my life, nothing that should have been causing me real stress.

And yet, real stress had found me, as it always did.

It was like the closer I got to graduation, the more stressed I became. Graduation should've been a good thing, but the thought of transitioning from college life to real life was more than a little daunting.

It prompted me to ask some hard questions of myself. The biggest and worst question being, had I made a mistake? Was any of this really what I'd even wanted?

I used to think I'd enjoy civil engineering. And of course, civil engineers made good money, which had factored into my decision to become one.

But lately, I wasn't sure. I definitely didn't enjoy my classes; the subject matter didn't interest me whatsoever. My last year of college was probably the worst time to figure that out, but the closer I got to graduation, the less I was able to lie to myself. I didn't like my major.

It wasn't the end of the world; plenty of people ended up discovering they didn't like their majors. Even more, plenty of people worked jobs they didn't enjoy. In fact, I'd argue that most people ended up working jobs they didn't enjoy. So after college, I'd likely fit right in. And at least if I wasn't enjoying it, I'd be making good money doing it.

It didn't change the fact that it was frustrating, though. It wasn't really what I'd pictured when I'd graduated high school. I'd always imagined I'd fall into a job I loved, a field I loved. Though I should've known better, because the things I loved didn't really make good money.

I'd always been naturally creative at heart. While I'd always been able to make myself more organized and focused for school, it wasn't my natural tendency. I'd always liked to do things like draw and, even more so, sing. Music had always been a passion of mine, though I hadn't learned any instruments, since it hadn't been something I had time to truly explore.

Music among many other things. Because of the push of my parents, I'd always been very driven in school and had done anything I could to find educational success. That was the only reason I'd even been able to end up at an Ivy League school like Beasley. If it hadn't been for my impeccable grades in high school, I likely would never have gotten in.

Because of this, I hadn't had many friendships either. And forget about relationships, I wouldn't even have known where to begin. My only real friend in college was my roommate, Abby.

She was my complete opposite, but she was an absolute doll to me. She didn't have the same focus for school that I had. She enjoyed going out, partying, living life to the fullest, while I stayed in and studied. But she had never made me feel weird about it. Unlike with other people, I'd never felt insecure about who I was around her.

I heard the front door bang shut, and I knew what that meant. Abby must have gotten home. Very likely by the sound of the door, she was drunk again, too.

I decided this was the perfect time to force myself to brush my teeth and go to bed. That way, I could check on Abby at the same time and kill two birds with one stone.

As I opened up my bedroom door, I glanced down our narrow apartment hallway and called her name. "Abby?"

"I'm home!" she said excitedly, as if I hadn't figured that out on my own.

“You don’t say,” I said. “How was your night?”

She came stumbling down the hallway, kicking off her high heels and grinning at me.

“Oh my god, it was so fun! I wish you’d come out. We monopolized the karaoke machine all night!”

She knew I didn’t like to go out, but she always pressured me to go with her whenever King’s Tooth, our campus pub, had karaoke. I had gone with her and her friends once, and she had never let up since then.

I rolled my eyes. “You know singing in front of people really isn’t my thing.”

“Unless you’re wasted,” she reminded me, “and it should be your thing! You’re so damn good. Like, you’re literally the only

one of us that can sing, and you’re the most embarrassed. I sound like a dying cat, but I still go up there.”

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 2:09 pm

“No, you don’t...” I said unconvincingly. And we both started laughing, because, yeah, she really was a very bad singer.

“It wouldn’t hurt you to loosen up every once in awhile,” she told me. “And, hey, maybe if you went out with us, you’d find a cute girl and—”

“Stop,” I cut her off. “You know I can’t date right now.” And even though I’d never dated, I had told Abby that I had no interest in men. Unlike some people, she didn’t come back at me with some stupid shit, asking ‘how I knew I liked women if I’d never dated one.’ Uh, it could have something to do with the fact that I felt it in my bones. That no guy had ever caught so much as a two second glance from me, yet I had to force myself to stop staring at the cute girl in my calculus class.

“At some point, you’re going to have to actually live life, you know!” she reminded me. “School is going to end, life is going to begin, and you’re going to have little to no real world experiences.”

I wished she hadn’t said that, because she was compounding my worst fears right now. I was so good at school, but I was terrified I was going to be so bad at real life.

“Come on, let’s brush our teeth,” I said, changing the subject. I knew when she was drunk she often forgot about basic things like brushing her teeth before bed.

“Good idea!” she said. “I’m probably about to crash at any moment.”

Which I knew. She rarely lasted fifteen minutes before falling asleep when she came home from a night of drinking.

I stared in our white-framed bathroom mirror, looking at my tired eyes from over-studying once again, and I tried to avoid thinking about what Abby had just said. I couldn't obsess over it tonight. I couldn't have another late night when I spent too much time thinking about my future.

For now, I had to put it out of my mind and focus on the important things: getting through this last year with a good enough GPA to land me a decent job.

CHAPTER 3 - KAITLYN

I'd been to Rosebridge before to visit my friend, but I saw it in a whole new light now that I knew I'd be living here. A much better light, I might have added.

It had a completely different feel compared to the town I'd lived in with Julia. It didn't feel as stuffy and as corporate as Englewood had. The buildings were more unique; the town seemed to be alive with college students walking around and laughing. And on just the walk from the train station to my friend's apartment, I ran into a quirky-looking art studio called the Shadetree Collective. Yep, this was my kind of town.

My friend, Ryan, seemed excited to have me. I'd thought he would be. It was another one of the reasons I'd reached out to him instead of anyone else. He had recently broken up with his live-in girlfriend and was living alone. I'd thought with him, my presence would be less of a burden and more of a comfort.

When I arrived, he grinned and pulled me in for a big hug. We started immediately chatting about what we'd been up to, though unlike him, I hadn't been up to anything new since the last time I'd seen him. I was still just making music and trying to make a living from it.

He'd graduated from Beasley University since the last time I'd seen him. Although he

wasn't as snobby about it as Julia often was, he also had a fancy new corporate job at a nearby law firm. It was very prestigious and paid well, which was why he didn't mind cutting me some slack financially while I got back on my feet.

Also unlike Julia, he hadn't moved apartments after he'd gotten his new job. He still lived in the same small place he had when he used to split the rent with college roommates. So he was still living pretty cheaply while getting paid quite a bit. My half of rent would probably be a drop in the bucket for him, a negligible amount of money he wouldn't even notice if it got deposited into his bank account every month.

I had to admit, on some level, I was jealous of that, though I'd never have admitted it to Julia. I wasn't materialistic, but I did occasionally fantasize about what it would be like to not have to worry about money. Not enough to get a regular job, of course. It was just one of those small desires you thought about now and again.

Ryan only had time to talk to me for about fifteen minutes before he had to head to work. But he showed to my room, which was fully furnished, thankfully, since I didn't have any furniture to call my own. Julia had bought every piece of furniture she owned; it was all hers.

"It's all stuff my girlfriend picked out, sorry if it's not your style," Ryan had told me, as if I possibly cared about the style of the free furniture I was getting to use.

"Why do you get to keep it, then?" I asked. "If it was her furniture."

"I said she picked it out," he reiterated, "but I was the one who paid for it. Common problem in our relationship... I let her keep some stuff when she moved out, though. But she was going back to live with her parents, so she didn't need all this furniture."

After he left, I tried to get comfortable, though I was anything but. I didn't think the furniture was too bad, actually. Everything was some version of teal or mint green...

including the wooden desk that housed a computer in the corner of the room. But the teal comforter was extremely soft, and the bed was memory foam, which I'd grown accustomed to at Julia's.

But that was kind of the problem. That was why I couldn't get comfortable. No matter what, I kept thinking of Julia. Even here in Rosebridge, everything reminded me of her. Something as small as memory foam could send me into a spiral of thoughts of her. I hated it.

When were these feelings going to pass? I'd experienced break-ups before, but they'd never hurt quite like this. I'd never been with anyone as long as Julia, so that made sense. When would thoughts of her stop haunting me, though? When was I going to be able to feel comfortable in a place without having her by my side?

At the moment, it felt a long ways off.

After Ryan left, I knew I had to get out of the house. He likely wouldn't be home until past six. I'd been planning on sleeping when I got here, even though it was the middle of the day, because it'd been a long trip. Twelve hours on a train was no joke.

But I'd managed to sleep for most of that trip, so unfortunately, I was feeling pretty well-rested. Which only meant I was wide-awake and able to think about Julia way too much.

There were things I could do, though. I could go explore the city. Hell, maybe I could even take my guitar and try to make some money.

But, no, probably not today. I was a little bit worn out emotionally, so playing for people in public didn't feel like something I could handle at the moment. Maybe today, I'd just scout for possible locations where my music might be appreciated.

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 2:09 pm

I grabbed my wallet and the house keys that Ryan had given me and left.

Rosebridge was like no city I'd ever lived in before. It was picturesque, exactly what you'd imagine when picturing a small artsy college town. It wasn't the first artsy college city I'd been to, but it was the nicest looking and the cleanest. Other colleges I'd been to were downright dirty, with frat houses that had beer bottles out on their lawns and litter in the streets.

Not Rosebridge, though, Rosebridge was pristine. I'd been expecting I was going to have to spend some money to distract myself, but I actually didn't have to. Just walking around was pleasant enough for me. I'd glance into restaurants and window shop as I walked by, but I really didn't feel the need to go into any of them. I was enjoying the soft breeze and smell of freshly-cut grass. Seriously, why did it smell so much like plant life? I didn't care; it was my favorite smell.

The one unfortunate thing was that, on the streets outside Beasley and the town's Riverwalk, it was pretty bare. There didn't seem to be a lot of foot traffic, which was the opposite of what you'd want when you were performing for money.

So I decided to venture into the college to see if there were more crowded places. Sure enough, as I walked closer to the college, things seemed to pick up. As long as I didn't get kicked out for soliciting, there were definitely a few good corners where I could hang out as people walked by.

The campus was bigger than it'd seemed from the outside and was about as picturesque as the rest of Rosebridge that I'd walked through. And, as weird as it sounded, the people looked picturesque, too. So many well-dressed college students

were giggling with each other as they walked out of their classes. Why did this place feel so open and friendly?

I decided to stop when I came across the Beasley campus pub, King's Tooth. They had a sign indicating they had a lunchtime happy hour. I figured, why not? I could have used a drink... or twenty.

It wasn't what I'd been expecting. Usually campus bars are really kitschy, but this one was decorated very simply. It definitely wasn't over the top in any way, which I appreciated. In my experience, the simpler the bar, the better the drinks.

I sat at the bar and smiled at the bartender, a young blonde guy with blue eyes who was looking a little bored before he noticed me sit. When he did, he perked up immediately and put on his customer service smile.

"What can I get you?" he asked.

"Whatever lager you've got on tap."

He nodded. "You've got it."

He poured it and handed it over to me. The glass was cold as ice, which I always appreciated.

I sipped it and knew immediately what it was. "Stella?" I asked.

"You know your beers!" He smiled at me, with a little bit of surprise on his face. "Is that fine?"

"Absolutely," I nodded. "One of my favorites, actually."

“Perfect,” he said, and turned his attention to someone who had just walked in. Given it was the middle of the day, it was pretty empty. There were two guys sitting over at a table sipping mixed drinks, but, besides them, it was just me and whomever had walked in.

I turned around to see a dark-haired college girl walking in, adjusting her glasses as she stepped up to the bar a

nd sat a few seats away from me.

She was cute, no denying that. But pretty much everyone I’d seen so far was cute, so that was hardly a surprise. Even the bartender was a good-looking man.

“Could I get a Long Island, please?” she asked the bartender with a polite smile.

“Sure thing.” He nodded as he stepped away to make her drink.

She sighed and leaned her head on her hand as she tapped on the bar counter. Not tapping as if she was frustrated with having to wait or was impatient; it was more that she seemed to be fidgeting.

I glanced over at her, questioning whether or not I should start a conversation with her. Before Julia, I used to be pretty upfront when I was considering flirting with someone.

But things were different now. I wasn’t as secure as I used to be, not nearly as brave. I wasn’t sure how to go about putting myself out there again.

Besides, I probably shouldn’t be putting myself out there at all. I’d only barely broken up with Julia. I shouldn’t have been trying to get involved with anyone else.

On the other hand, I had to start making friends at some point. If I was going to live here, I had to put myself out there. So, hey, maybe I would strike up a conversation with this girl, and she would end up being cool. Not like it had to lead anywhere.

In fact, it probably would lead nowhere, because I couldn't even be sure if she was a lesbian. I might have been sort of getting that vibe right now, but I couldn't be sure.

“Long day?” I asked her as the bartender handed her the Long Island and she started gulping it quickly.

“You have no idea.” She rolled her eyes.

“Care to talk about it?” I asked.

She shrugged. “It’s stupid. It’s just that I stayed up late studying for this final, and then I forgot to set my alarm, so I woke an hour late for class and only had thirty minutes to take the test. Though I guess I’m lucky my professor even allowed me to take it at all.”

“Yikes,” I said, trying to imagine what that might feel like. I’d never taken school too seriously, and I’d never gone to college, so it was hard to imagine stressing over a test that way. “Were you able to finish?”

“Not even close.” She shook her head. “Hence, the drink.”

“Right.” I nodded. “Ah, that blows. I’d be drinking, too, if I were you.”

She nodded toward my beer. “Well, you are drinking. What’s your reason?”

I laughed. “Oh, no real reason for me. I was just wandering around the campus and decided to drop in. I’m new to Rosebridge, so I was doing some exploring.” I extended my hand. “My name’s Kaitlyn, by the way.”

“Kaitlyn, hello. I’m Emily.”

“Nice to meet you,” I told her, before feeling someone tap my shoulder behind me.

It startled me, so I jumped back a little bit before I saw one of the guys from the other side of the bar standing in front of me.

“Oh, sorry to scare you!” he said in a soft, deep voice. He was tucking his chin-length brown hair behind his ear and smiling at me. “I just had a quick question.”

This was a little weird, but I was an outgoing person, so I didn’t mind someone randomly initiating a conversation with me.

“Are you single?” he asked. “Because you’re very cute, and I was wondering if I could possibly get your number.”

Well, this almost never happened to me. I often was approached by other lesbians but pretty much never by men.

Though I did date men now and then. I had a preference for women, but every once in a while, I met a guy who caught my attention. But in those cases, I was the one doing the chasing and not the other way around.

Without looking him up and down, I tried to assess if I was attracted to him. He was cute, no denying that. His dark, long hair perfectly framed his very symmetrical face. He was objectively pretty attractive.

But, eh, he didn’t hold my interest. Not really. For a guy to win me over, there had to be some extra factor that drew me in. Or maybe I was just uninterested in him because I had a woman on the other side of me who I found way cuter. Either way, I didn’t want to entertain this.

“Sorry, I’m taken, actually.”

“Oh, that sucks,” he said, frowning. “Well, couldn’t hurt to ask. Have a good day.”

“You, too.” I smiled politely as he made his way back to his friend, shrugging at him as if to say ‘oh well.’

“Taken, huh?” Emily asked me.

Right, I didn’t really want her thinking I was taken because she was cute, and, even though I shouldn’t have been looking at girls, I couldn’t help myself. I didn’t want her thinking I was totally straight, either.

“If taken means uninterested in him,” I said, as I grinned mischievously at her.

She seemed to get my point, that I was a lesbian. Or, at least, mostly lesbian, I guess. Bisexual didn’t feel like the right word to describe me, because while I was attracted to both genders, I so heavily leaned toward women.

She smiled back, and a look in her eye made me think she might have actually been interested in me, too.

“So, what brings you to Rosebridge?” she asked.

I had to think about how I was going to answer this. Should I lie so the conversation was kept more casual? Say I just moved for a change of pace?

Or did I answer honestly and admit I’d just had an awful break-up? It was too personal for a conversation with a stranger, but, at the same time, I wanted to vent a bit. And there was always the possibility I’d never see this stranger again, so, why not?

“Actually, just had a pretty bad break-up with my ex-girlfriend,” I said. “I mean, the break-up was mutual, but still awful.”

“Aw, I’m so sorry to hear that,” she said, sounding genuinely empathetic. “You wanna talk about it?”

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 2:09 pm

I finished off my beer and turned to her. “You know, I actually do,” I said confidently.

I wasn’t feeling super confident about pouring my heart out to a stranger, but whatever, alcohol would help that. I asked the bartender for another beer.

“So, mutual, but bad?” she questioned me.

I nodded. “Mutual, but bad. You know when you’re with someone, and you love them, you care about them, but you realize you’re just not going on the same life path? Like, you wish you were, and you’d do anything to make that a possibility, but, no matter how you try, you’re just... not?”

She frowned. “Actually, I don’t know what that’s like... though, it sounds terrible!”

I laughed. “You must have had pretty perfect relationships, then,” I answered as I sipped my beer.

“Something like that...” she said, continuing with her Long Island.

“Are you in a perfect relationship now?” I asked.

“No, actually, I’m in a horribly toxic relationship with Beasley University these days.”

“Ahh...” I smiled. “A relationship you’re not ready to end, I take it?”

“Not yet, not quite. See, I’m a little financially dependent on the outcome of our relationship, so I’m waiting it out a year until I can get on my feet.”

I liked this kid; she was cute and smart. I liked a little wit with my flirting.

“A year until graduation, huh? And what degree, might I ask?”

“Civil engineering.”

“Wow, nice. I’d always wished I’d had the brain for a STEM degree. Decent job security and good money.”

“That’s what I’m hoping for,” she told me, “but who knows how it’ll really turn out. What about you? What line of work are you in? Or, what degree are you going for, if you’re still in school?”

“Not in school.” I shook my head. “Never was, actually, and I have no plans. I’m a musician, actually. Yes, a starving musician, the stereotype holds.”

She looked me up and down. “Don’t look starving to me.”

“I guess you can thank my ex for that,” I told her. “She had the money. She kept me well-fed. I was the heart in the relationship, she was

the function.”

“And that’s what killed it, I take it?” she asked.

“Pretty much. Eventually someone working at a big fancy corporation making ridiculous amounts of money isn’t going to have interest in a failing musician, no matter how creative and loving she may be.”

She frowned. "I'm sorry."

"Oh, don't be," I said, trying to play it off. "I'm really looking for a change of scenery. And I'm excited to be a little more independent. Where my ex and I used to live, there was no opportunity to do street performance and earn a little cash."

"Is that how you make money, street performance?" she asked.

"Oh, that and other things. I plan to start offering guitar lessons pretty soon here, and I'd love to get a paying gig now and then. But, honestly, street performance is a love of mine. I love the bare-naked interaction you get with other people, you know? It's just so raw and real. If I could get paid to do that for the rest of my life and just make enough money to get by, I'd be happy."

She nodded, seeming to take all this information in slowly.

"I really admire that," she finally said. "I've never been the kind of person who's comfortable without security. I'm not really one to want a lot of money or luxury in life, so I'd be fine just getting by and paying my bills, but the uncertainty of it all would drive me crazy."

I smiled. Usually, when I talked about my career ambitions or lack thereof, I felt like people were judging me. She seemed to genuinely appreciate my point of view. It was a nice change of pace.

"It certainly isn't for everyone, but I've always been naturally spontaneous. I don't know, it's hard to explain, but something about a scheduled and certain life bores me to death."

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 2:09 pm

She laughed. “I’d bore you to death, then. Everything about my life is scheduled and certain.”

I looked at the way her mouth wrinkled softly in the corners as she smiled, and I was in awe of just how beautiful she was.

“I don’t think you could ever bore me,” I said, rather boldly.

She started to blush and smile but didn't say anything in return.

“Hey, I was going to order a shot, do you want one?” I asked her.

She paused, thinking on this for a moment. “Well... yeah, sure, that sounds good.”

“Perfect,” I said, trying to hide my enthusiasm. When I flirted so boldly like this, I really preferred to play it cool, to a degree.

I was about to wave over the bartender, who was out on the floor wiping off tables, when Emily’s phone vibrated. I glanced over at her and watched her read a text message. I knew it wasn’t good news for me when her face fell.

“Oh, no, I’m sorry... I can’t take that shot, I actually have to go.”

“Really? Right now?” I asked, hoping she could stay at least a few more minutes.

“Yeah, right now, sorry. Emergency with my roommate. But it’s been lovely chatting with you!” she said, as she grabbed her keys and stood up from the bar counter.

“Right, yeah, nice talking with you, too.” I nodded at her as she started to walk out of the bar. “Have a good one!”

“You, too!” she hollered back, as she left out the front door.

The second she did, disappointment and regret washed over me.

Shit, why hadn’t I asked for her number?