



# Racing Hearts

**Author:** *Erica Lee*

**Category:** Romance, Lesbian Romance

**Description:** Ellie Finch has a plan for her senior year of college. She's going to lead her track and field team to an indoor and outdoor conference championship and qualify for nationals with her 4×400 meter relay team. That way, she and her best friend, Juniper, can have a free trip to California.

It's the perfect plan until Sierra What's-Her-Face, a freshman sprinter, takes Juniper's spot on the relay and also threatens Ellie's rank as the best 400 meter runner on their team.

To make matters worse, Sierra is standoffish, rude, and possibly homophobic – a fact that doesn't fly with Ellie, who has two moms and is also gay herself. But if Sierra is so terrible, why can't Ellie stop thinking about her? Should she believe the voice in her head telling her there's more to this girl than meets the eye?

**Total Pages (Source):** 81

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:02 pm*

## Prologue

Long legs. Tan skin. Beads of sweat dotting every inch of skin.

Ellie Finch licked her lips as she watched the blonde. She tried to pull her eyes away (or, at least, blink), butfuck,this girl was hot. When the blonde bent over in exhaustion, Ellie's eyes instinctively moved to the world's most perfect ass.Fuck.

"Earth to Ellie. Are you even listening to me?"

Ellie forced her eyes away from the track and over toward her best friend, Juniper, who was sitting beside her on the bleachers. "Um, yeah, totally," she lied.

Juniper rolled her eyes and crossed her arms in front of her chest. "Cool. So, do you agree?"

"Yeah, totally," Ellie repeated.That's the safe answer, right?

Apparently, it wasn't, because Juniper slapped her arm as soon as she said it. "Wow. Thanks a lot," she said sarcastically.

Ellie gave her best friend her sweetest smile. "Okay, I lied. I wasn't listening. I was focused on the race."

"Well, since you weresofocused on the race, I assume you noticed that Sierra What's-Her-Fuck just ran a time that's only a couple tenths off your best."

Ellie shook her head back and forth as she tried to completely free herself from her lustful haze and wrap her mind around what Juniper had just told her. Sierra... the girl who would be joining their track team next year (who also happened to be the girl Ellie had been checking out just seconds ago)... just ran a time that almost matched hers. Shit. It was great for the team, but not so much for Ellie—the girl who had won the 400-meter dash at every indoor and outdoor conference meet since her freshman year of college. The last thing she needed was for someone to join the team during her final season and strip that title away from her.

“I take it from your silence that you realize what that means. Everything we’ve been working for is ruined. So much for our all-expenses-paid bestie trip to California.”

California? What is she... damn. It hit Ellie like a ton of bricks. It now made perfect sense why Juniper looked so distraught over the results of this race. Ellie had been placed on their college’s 4x400 meter relay team in her freshman year, but it had taken three years and multiple graduations for Juniper to finally join the relay team with her their junior year. The relay team found their stride this past outdoor season and missed qualifying for the division III national track and field meet by just two spots. That was when Ellie and Juniper had decided that they would do whatever it took to get to the national meet in California their senior year.

What they hadn’t taken into consideration was the new class of recruits. If this girl was as fast as Ellie, she would get a spot on the relay for sure, which meant the slowest runner, Juniper, would get the boot. Shit.

“We don’t know that she’ll take your place.”

Juniper made a sound that was between a scoff and a laugh. “Yeah, okay. She’s good. Like, your level good. There’s no question that she’s going to be on the relay team. Plus, she’s scrappy. The way she races reminds me of you.” Juniper furrowed her eyebrows as she stared at Ellie as if she was trying to figure something

out. “But if you were paying such close attention to the race, you would’ve noticed that.” A smirk came onto her face. “Okay, spill. Which girl were you checking out?”

Ellie swallowed hard. She was feeling very lucky to share her mom’s genetics over her mama’s right now, since she knew, in this situation, her mama’s face would turn a deep shade of red and her blue eyes would get darker, which would give away that she was lying. Luckily, Ellie had her mom’s skin that barely ever became red from embarrassment, and her eyes were so dark to begin with (an even darker brown than the brown of her long wavy hair), that they couldn’t possibly get any darker.

She pointed to a random girl walking off the track. “Her. The redhead.”

Juniper lifted an eyebrow. “The one who took dead last? Not your usual type.”

Juniper wasn’t wrong. Ellie had a history of falling for women who were just as competitive as her. She had even dated a runner from one of their rival schools for a year, but the girl was two years older than her, and their relationship fizzled out once she graduated and they were no longer competing against each other. But damn, the angry sex they had when one of their schools beat the other was hot as hell. Ellie’s body still heated up from just the thought of it.

Ellie forced herself from her daydreams so she could focus on her best friend. “This is the Pennsylvania high school state track and field meet. No one competing here is bad.”

“Okay, fine. But I believe the key word there is high school. We’re about to be seniors in college. It’s gross to check out a high schooler.”

Ellie wanted to argue that the person she was checking out was technically going to be in college with them soon, but that would mean she had to admit to her best friend that she was checking out the girl who was about to shake up their senior year. And

definitely not in a good way. “So, why did we even come here if it’s a track meet for measly high school students?” Ellie asked with a laugh.

“Hm...” Juniper tapped her chin as if she was actually considering the question. “Maybe because you said we should come, and I agreed because I wanted to hold you hostage for another week before you leave me to go back to New Jersey for the summer.”

Ellie nodded. Juniper had her there. It had totally been Ellie’s idea for them to come to this meet. Because, why not? It was taking place less than an hour from West End, where they went to school, and multiple people competing were going to either be on their team or on one of the other teams in their conference. Ellie was serious about preparing for her senior season, and Juniper was serious about having an extra week of partying together before going home for the summer, so it had worked out for both of them. “Fine. That’s true. But in my defense, a lot of these people will be in college next year.”

“Yeah, like Little Miss Priss herself.” Juniper nodded her head at the hot blonde, who was standing beside the track having, what appeared to be, a serious discussion with her coach. “She just ran faster than most of us could dream of, and she can’t even smile. Seems pretty bitchy to me.”

Or maybe, she just takes the sport seriously. “I almost never smile during track meets. You call me out on it all the time. Does that make me a bitch too?”

Juniper scoffed and bumped her shoulder against Ellie’s. “Of course not, but that’s because I like you. We hate her.”

Ellie laughed. “Excuse me...we?”

“Yes, we. We’re best friends. That means we hate the same bitches.”

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:02 pm*

“But here’s the thing,” Ellie lowered her voice since there was no way of knowing if this girl had family or friends who were sitting around them. “We don’t actually know if Sierra is a bitch. All we know about her is that she’s fast.”

Juniper groaned as if Ellie’s reasoning didn’t make perfect sense. “She’s a bitch, because she’s coming to our school and fucking with our senior year. We can’t allow this to happen.”

Ellie laughed once again. “And what do you suggest we do about it? Tonya Harding her kneecaps or something?”

Juniper stared at Ellie with furrowed eyebrows for a few seconds without saying anything. “I have no idea what that means, but if it involves making sure she transfers before the season starts, I’m all in.”

“I was joking. I’m not going to bully this girl out of college just because she can run as fast as me. That’s ridiculous.”

“Fine, but do you have to welcome her with open arms like you do with the new recruits each year?”

“I’ll make you a deal. I promise to not be quite as welcoming if you promise not to be rude.”

“I can work with those terms.” Juniper nodded and stuck out her hand for Ellie to shake. “But once this girl proves me right and is a complete bitch, I get to say I told you so.”

Ellie accepted Juniper's hand and shook it firmly. "Deal."

She let her eyes wander back toward the track where Sierra was now stretching. Only time would tell what this girl's personality was like, but at least, no matter what, she was certainly nice to look at.

## Chapter 1

"Senior year, baby!" Juniper shouted as she and Ellie walked out of their apartment to head to their first track meeting of the year.

"Our year!" Ellie added with a whoop.

"Hell yeah. Sierra What's-Her-Fuck can eat shit."

Ellie put her arm around Juniper and pulled her

close, the two of them walking the short

distance from their apartment to the indoor track in tandem. "Be nice," she whispered as if she was a mom walking with her daughter

"Whatever. I'm always nice." Juniper smirked at Ellie. "Until someone gives me a reason not to be. Then all bets are off."

It wasn't a lie. Juniper was the type of person you wanted on your side. If she liked you, she would honestly lay down her life for you in the blink of an eye. On the other hand, if you got on her bad side, she could take you down with one look.

"Innocent until proven guilty, remember? We don't even know Sierra. Let's give her a chance. Plus, all you have to do is be the fourth fastest runner this year, and you're

in.” Ellie pulled away from Juniper and poked her in the side. “Come to the optional practices with me, and you can easily make that happen.”

Every year, the team had optional practices that ran from the beginning of the school year, until mid-October when official practice began. Unfortunately, most of the team took advantage of the fact that they were optional and skipped out on them. Juniper was one of those people, even though Ellie had been trying to convince her to go since they were placed as roommates their freshman year.

“And waste my month and a half of freedom that I get for the whole year?” Juniper scoffed. “As if.”

Ellie sighed. She loved her best friend, but their work ethics were on completely different levels. “Well, it was worth a try.”

Juniper put her arm back around Ellie and pulled her close as they reached the door of the indoor track. “For what it’s worth, it means a lot that you’ve never given up on me. Even if it is a lost fucking cause.”

Ellie opened her mouth to respond, but as soon as Juniper opened the door, the words got caught in her throat. Standing just a few feet from the door was Sierra, whose last name was escaping her right now thanks to Juniper’s habit of calling her What’s-Her-Fuck.

The state track meet wasn’t just a fluke. Sierra really was fucking gorgeous. It was actually unfair how good looking she was, especially since she was off-limits to Ellie for multiple reasons (one being the fact that she was most likely straight).

“Ugh, look at her over there, standing against the bleachers as if she owns this team already.”



Ellie looked over at Juniper then followed her line of sight right back to Sierra, the blonde's eyebrows furrowed as she stared down at her phone. Nothing about her appeared like the villain Juniper was making her out to be. "Oh my god. Come on. Give the girl a break."

"We'll see if you're saying the same thing after this meeting. I'm good at reading people, and I have a bad feeling about that one."

Ellie didn't want to point out that her best friend's bad feeling was nothing more than jealousy over this girl most likely taking her spot on the relay team. She understood. It sucked. She wasn't happy about it either. But that wasn't Sierra's fault. She had no way of knowing that she was ruining their plans for their senior year. Her only fault was being really freaking fast, and seeing as how she was part of their team, that wasn't much of a fault at all.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:02 pm*

Ellie was about to walk over and introduce herself to the new girl when her coach cleared his throat, signaling that it was time to start the meeting. “Everyone take a seat on the bleachers, please,” he said. His voice was firm, but warm, as it almost always was (well, except in the heat of the moment during some meets).

Ellie and Juniper walked to the bleachers and sat down where most of the other sprinters were already sitting. Ellie couldn’t help but watch Sierra as she hesitated for a few seconds before taking a seat at the bottom of the bleachers, not too far from where she had been standing.

Juniper nodded toward her. “See. Look. Already too good to join the rest of us.”

Ellie snorted. “She’s probably just nervous. She doesn’t know anyone yet.” Ellie still remembered that feeling from freshman year. If it hadn’t been for Juniper, who immediately took her under her wing with her can’t-be-bothered attitude, she would have done the exact same thing.

“That wouldn’t be a problem if she let the school give her a roommate from the team. I heard she declined so she could room with someone from her hometown.”

Ellie leaned closer to Juniper to whisper to her. “You know, for someone who claims to hate this girl, you sure know a lot about her.”

“You know what they say.” Juniper smirked. “Keep your friends close and your enemies closer.”

Their coach cleared his throat once again, and when Ellie snapped her head over

toward him, she found him staring at the two of them with his eyebrows raised. “If you ladies don’t mind, I’d love to start.”

If Ellie’s face turned red, it would’ve at that moment. It wasn’t the first time she and Juniper had gotten in trouble, but she hated every time it happened. She was serious about this sport, and even though she was sure her coach realized that, she never wanted to do anything to make him doubt it. “Of course. Sorry, Coach.”

Juniper snickered beside her, then brought her hand to her head in a salute. “Aye aye, captain.”

Coach Kraemer shook his head, but the smallest smile parted his lips. “Always a pleasure, Miss Blaustein.” He ran his eyes over the length of the bleachers, his face completely serious again. “Anyway, to say I’m excited about this upcoming season would be an understatement. We have a very strong group of upperclassmen coming back to lead this team and a freshman class that has a ton of potential. I have no question that if everything falls together correctly, both our men’s and women’s teams will finally win the conference championship we’ve been so close to these past few years.”

A few of her fellow teammates whooped, but the reminder of losing the conference championship by only a few points every year since she started at West End made Ellie cringe. Her knee inadvertently started to bounce in anticipation. This was finally their year. She could feel it in her bones. Now, she was almost tempted to whoop. She could barely focus on her coach’s words as her mind drifted to the upcoming season. Before she knew it, he was asking if they had any questions, reminding them of the optional practices which would be run by a few seniors (one of them being Ellie), and sending them on their way.

Juniper elbowed Ellie in the side. “Let’s get out of here.”

Ellie nodded absentmindedly. “Yeah, sure. Just give me a sec. I want to introduce myself to the freshmen.”

Juniper groaned, but she followed Ellie as she stood from the bleachers and walked over to where most of the freshmen were still huddled together, talking in hushed whispers.

Ellie waved then reached her hand out. “Hey! I’m Ellie Finch. I’m a senior sprinter on the team this year. I run the 400, 200, and 4x4.”

“Trust me, we all know who you are,” one of the girls said with a giggle as she reached out to accept Ellie’s handshake. “I’m Leonora. I’m a hurdler.”

“Leonora, I know exactly who you are too.” Ellie winked at her, which made the girl blush. “I’m very excited to see what you do this year.”

Ellie shook hands with all of the girls as they introduced themselves to her one by one. For the most part, Ellie already knew who most of them were since she had done her research once the coach told them who the newest recruits were.

There was only one freshman Ellie had yet to introduce herself to, but when she turned to see if she was still around, she caught her slipping out of the door of the indoor track.

She slapped Juniper’s arm as she told the freshman about a party at the men’s “track house” that weekend, then nodded toward the closing door. “Meet me outside. I gotta go do something.”

Ellie ran toward the door and swung it open, happy to find Sierra only a few feet away, walking slowly as she continued to stare down at her phone just as she had been doing earlier. “Hey, Sierra, hold up!” Ellie yelled as she ran to catch up to her.

Sierra's head twitched slightly in response to Ellie's voice, but she didn't turn around or stop walking. Instead, she wiped one hand over her face and shook her head, still staring down at the phone in her hands. That's weird.

Giving her the benefit of the doubt, Ellie continued to quickly follow after Sierra. She put a gentle hand on Sierra's shoulder once she was close enough. Sierra ran her hand over her face once again before finally turning around. Unlike the other freshmen, she didn't seem the least bit excited to see Ellie. In fact, she could barely even look at her.

Ellie cleared her throat and reached out her hand. "I just wanted to introduce myself. My name is Ellie Finch. I'm a senior sp—"

"I know who you are," Sierra said, cutting her off, her voice cold and distant.

Ellie waited for Sierra to introduce herself, but after a few seconds of awkward, lingering silence between them, Ellie realized that wasn't going to happen. She put her hands in her pockets and slowly rocked back and forth on her heels. "Well, I just wanted to say welcome to the team. If you need anything at all, feel free to reach out. I could give you my—"

"Thanks. I actually have to go."

Before Ellie could even comprehend what had happened, Sierra turned around and walked away. She was moving so quickly now, she was practically running.

The sound of clapping behind her caused Ellie to spin around. She wasn't surprised to find Juniper walking toward her, hands clapping together, and a shit-eating grin on her face. "Told you I'm a great judge of character." She nodded her head toward Sierra, who was barely even visible anymore. "Not very nice, huh?"

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:02 pm*

Ellie shrugged. “Maybe it’s just a bad day?”

Okay, even she didn’t really believe that.

### Chapter 2

Ellie couldn’t stop the wide grin from spreading across her face as she entered the school’s football stadium to meet up with the rest of her overachieving teammates for their first day of optional practice. She breathed in the crisp fall air and her smile grew even more. She loved this time of year.

She looked toward the track where a handful of girls and about a dozen guys from the track team were gathered. She sighed. That number was pitiful given how many of them there were on the team. Then again, this was mostly just sprinters and jumpers since the majority of the distance runners were on the cross country team and the throwers normally organized their own, separate practices.

It was disappointing that Ellie didn’t see any fresh faces among them, which meant the newest group of recruits didn’t feel the need to attend these practices. Well, except one, apparently. As Ellie’s eyes scanned past her teammates gathered around the track, they landed on another girl standing away from the group—Sierra.

I really need to remember to look up her last name, Ellie chastised herself.

She was about to walk over and talk to her when a hand landed on her shoulder. She turned around to find Chris Clemson, another senior on the track team, smiling at her. With his sparkling blue eyes, boyish grin, and perfect blonde hair, Ellie was sure she

would have a crush on him if it wasn't for the fact that she only liked women.

"What's up, Finch?" Chris asked, squeezing her shoulder before letting his hand drop back to his side. "How was your summer? Any new women in your life?"

Ellie had to stop herself from rolling her eyes. You'd think the guys on this team had never met a lesbian with the way they thought the only logical topic of conversation was other women. "Unfortunately not," Ellie said with a lighthearted laugh. "My moms were pretty much the only women in my life this summer."

When Ellie noticed movement in her peripheral vision, she turned her head slightly to see that Sierra's eyes had snapped toward Ellie and Chris, the furrowing of her eyebrows leading Ellie to believe she had never heard of someone having two moms before. Go figure. Maybe Juniper is right about her.

"Same for me." Chris chuckled. "Well, minus the whole two mom thing. How are they doing? I miss them."

Of course he did. Probably along with everyone else on the team. Even with living over three hours away, Ellie's moms were very involved, and everyone on the team loved them. "They're wonderful. Spent the summer trying to convince me I should switch my major to pre-med to take over the practice, though."

Ellie's mom, Brinley, was a doctor and she and Ellie's mama, Annalise, owned a medical practice in their hometown of Melsborough, a town in New Jersey that her parents had apparently fallen in love with after getting married there. Ellie couldn't blame them for that. She absolutely loved the town she grew up in and would be happy to end up back there if that's where life took her. Unfortunately for her parents, she was not interested in joining the practice. Not that her moms actually cared what she did. They only wanted for her to be happy. They just liked to joke about her joining the practice, mostly because her mom thought that meant she could retire

sooner.

It wouldn't be that hard for her to switch her major to pre-med, even this late in her college career, because she was an environmental science major, which meant she had already taken many of the required science classes. Even though she wasn't exactly sure what she wanted to do with her degree yet, she had no question that she didn't want it to involve medicine. She had plenty of time to figure out the rest of her life. For now, her focus was on her track career.

Speaking of which... "I was thinking we could start off easy and just go for a loop around campus and through town today."

"Easy for who?" Chris asked as he elbowed her in the side.

As sprinters, they preferred being on the track over going for a long jog, but Ellie especially hated it, and Chris knew that. Freshman year they had bonded over the fact that neither of them could keep up on such runs even though they were supposed to be the two fastest freshmen.

Ellie groaned. "I know. I really don't want to do it, but I'm afraid if I tell them we're starting out with ten 200s, no one will come back."

"Aw, but I love that workout," Chris said playfully.

"Me too." Ellie smirked. "That's why we're doing it tomorrow."

"Not taking any prisoners this year. I love it." Chris clapped his hands together and took a few steps closer to the group of athletes waiting for instruction. "All right, everyone. Today we're doing the campus loop. For those of you who don't know..."

Ellie let his voice fade out as he described the route they would be running. It's not



like she needed to listen since she knew it like the back of her hand. She walked in the direction of Sierra and stopped when she was a few feet away

“Excited for the season?” Ellie asked. She knew Juniper would kill her if she knew she was still trying to be nice, but Ellie couldn’t stand feeling like a freshman was left out, even if that freshman didn’t realize that gay people existed.

Ellie waited for Sierra to respond, but when the response never came, she cleared her throat.

Sierra’s head snapped toward Ellie and those blue eyes were so intense, they made the hair on Ellie’s arms stand up. “Were you talking to me?” Sierra pointed toward Chris. “Sorry. I was trying to listen to the directions.”

At least she said sorry, even if it didn’t exactly sound sincere. “All good,” Ellie said as cheerfully as possible. “It’s cool if you missed anything. We all tend to stick together for these runs. No need for heroes today.”

Sierra opened her mouth to say something, but was cut off by the sound of a phone ringing. Sierra snapped her mouth shut, took her phone out, and stared at it for a few seconds before looking back at Ellie. “I need to take this. It’s okay if you start without me.”

Sierra hit a button on her phone, then walked away, talking in whispers to the person on the other end of the phone.

“Good to go, Finch?” Chris yelled over to her.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:02 pm*

“Almost.” Ellie pointed her thumb at Sierra. “Just waiting on one.”

The fact that they were waiting for her didn’t seem to bother Sierra. She spent another five minutes on the phone before walking over to join them.

“Everything okay?” Ellie asked when she noticed the tense look on Sierra’s face.

“I’m fine,” Sierra snapped before walking right past her to join the rest of the group.

Sierra’s time with the group didn’t last long. They were barely into the run when she pulled ahead and never looked back. So much for doing this as a team.

After a grueling run, Ellie made it back to the track with the rest of her teammates just in time to see Sierra packing up her things and walking away.

Juniper was definitely right. There was no point in Ellie trying with this girl if she wasn’t going to put in any effort, especially if trying meant going against her best friend’s wishes. If Sierra wanted to be cordial, the ball was in her court now.

\*\*\*

As the weeks passed, Sierra continued to be in attendance at every optional practice, but her attitude didn’t improve at all. She came, did the workout as instructed, and left without another word. It was actually starting to piss Ellie off that this was the girl who was most likely going to get her best friend booted from the relay. This girl might be fast, and dedicated, but she didn’t appear to be a team player at all.

Ellie was so frustrated with her, she actually considered not going to the last week of optional practices because she needed a break from being ignored. She wasn't sure why it bothered her so much, but it really made her blood boil every time she was around Sierra and Sierra acted like she had no interest in Ellie. Half the time, it seemed like Sierra could barely even look at her. It was infuriating.

Ellie hadn't missed one practice, optional or not, since freshman year, though, so there was no way she was going to start now, especially when she had such fierce competition on her own team. Luckily, she was somehow able to convince Juniper to actually attend the last few optional practices with her. Okay, she knew exactly why Juniper had agreed. It was only because Ellie made a deal that she would drink at one more party with her if she came. Ellie wasn't against drinking and would do it when she wasn't in season (which wasn't too often, much to her best friend's chagrin), but as soon as official practices started, she stopped. There was always a big party at the track guys' house after the first week of official practice to celebrate making it through, so Ellie had told Juniper that she wouldn't only go, but would also drink this time.

"Be honest with me, am I going to completely die today?" Juniper asked as they walked to the track together.

Ellie shook her head. "Not any more than you normally do on the first day of official practice." Ellie felt a devilish grin spread across her face.

"Great." Juniper groaned. "So, I am going to die."

Ellie put her arm around Juniper. "Don't worry, I'll take it easy on you."

"Uh-huh, sure." Juniper pushed away from Ellie, causing her arm to drop back to her side.

She was saying something else, but her words faded into the background as Ellie's eyes latched onto someone walking in the distance. Even though Sierra drove her insane, she still often found herself unable to look away from her, and now was one of those times.

She was walking next to someone, and it looked like the two of them were having a heated discussion, but Ellie couldn't focus on the other person. Sierra was shaking her head and waving her arms in the air, and even though it was none of her business (and frankly, shouldn't be any worry to her), Ellie wanted to know what she was saying. Even though she wished she didn't, Sierra intrigued her. Maybe it was just the fact that Sierra was so hot, but it felt deeper than that. A part of her wondered if there was more to this girl than she was seeing on the surface. Orit had just been way too long since Ellie got laid and her libido was doing the thinking for her.

"What the hell are you staring at?" Juniper asked, causing Ellie to jump in surprise.

"No one. Nothing." Ellie cleared her throat then turned her body toward her best friend, so Sierra was completely out of her field of view.

She watched as Juniper's gaze moved to where Ellie had just been staring and held her breath as she waited for her friend to lecture her for checking out the enemy. Juniper furrowed her eyebrows and continued to stare as if she was calculating something. "Why does that girl look so familiar?"

Seriously? Juniper doesn't recognize her own teammate and sworn enemy? What the fuck?

Ellie wasn't sure how to answer her best friend's question without getting herself in trouble. Ellie opened her mouth and was about to make up a lie about why she was staring at the enemy, but she stopped when a sly grin came onto her friend's face.

Juniper snapped her fingers. “Fuck. I know who that is!” She waved a finger in Sierra’s direction, not even trying to hide the fact that she was pointing at her. “That’s the same girl you were checking out at the PA state meet this summer.”

Wait. What. Ellie turned to look in Sierra’s direction once again and blinked as she focused on the girl beside her. The girl had red hair and was sporting a no-fucks grin that didn’t match the tense look on Sierra’s face. And shit. Juniper was right. That definitely was the girl Ellie had supposedly been checking out at the track meet. Why was she here now? What was she doing with Sierra? What were they talking about? More importantly, why did Ellie care?

Juniper laughed as she brought her hands in front of her mouth to amplify her voice. “Yo, fresh meat, is your friend single?” She nodded toward Ellie. “I think this one has a crush on her.”

Shit. This wasn’t good. Ellie didn’t need some random girl she’d never met thinking she was checking her out. The girl’s smile changed to a scowl as she turned to whisper something to Sierra before storming away.

Sierra’s face was red, and she glared at Ellie and Juniper as she stormed toward them, head shaking the whole time. “Teresa’s not gay!” she shouted so loud that it caused the redhead to momentarily look back before continuing to quickly walk away from them. “She’s straight, so don’t even think about going for her. She practically has a boyfriend. Maybe a few.” Sierra rolled her eyes as if the thought of someone preferring the same gender was insane.

Before Ellie could even think of how to respond, Sierra pushed past them and hurried away.

“Wow. Tell me you’re homophobic without telling me you’re homophobic!” Juniper shouted after her.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:02 pm*

Sierra's shoulders dropped slightly from her accusation as if she was ashamed, but she didn't correct them. If she truly wasn't homophobic, she would have, right?

Great. Not only was this girl putting Ellie's position as the best 400 runner on the team at risk, but she was also a bigoted prick. Ellie was done being nice. Two could play at this game, and she refused to go down without a fight.

### Chapter 3

"Does everyone know what today is?" Coach asked while clapping his hands together, the wide grin on his face very telling of how excited he was.

Ellie couldn't have answered him if she wanted to. Her mouth was dry, and her leg was shaking uncontrollably (a fact that Juniper had pointed out multiple times since they sat down for Coach's pre-practice meeting).

"Don't all speak at once," Coach said with a laugh. "It's time trial day for the sprinters. All of the short sprinters will be running the 100m dash, then taking a breather before doing the 200m dash. For the long sprinters, you'll just be doing the 400." He chuckled once again as he looked around at all of them. "Now, this isn't anything to be nervous about. I can see the look on some of your faces and can tell you think this time trial is make or break. That's not the case at all. It's just something fun to see where we're at."

Ellie tried not to roll her eyes at him. This might be fun for other people, but for her, it was riddled with expectations. Her whole team had certain expectations of her, and if she didn't reach them, she would be letting multiple people down. On top of that, the

stakes were even higher this year. She couldn't let Sierra beat her. This might not mean anything, but it did set the tone for the whole season, and Sierra beating her would give the impression that Ellie was no longer on top. She might act outwardly humble, but the truth was, Ellie liked being the best. She thrived on being the best.

"You look like you're going to throw up," Juniper whispered to her. "You heard Coach. Nothing to be worried about." Juniper gently nudged up against her. "Plus, it's not like anyone has a chance in hell of beating you."

Ellie nodded slowly even though she wasn't convinced that was true. If the way she did during practice was anything to go by, Sierra's time at States hadn't been a fluke. Ellie had told herself she was going to be really good about working out this past summer, but if she was being completely honest, she had slacked a bit. She was sure she had probably still done more than ninety-five percent of the team, but she wasn't so sure that she had done more than Sierra. That girl had a fire in her eyes that most people didn't. She was serious about this.

Ellie chanced a look at her and saw that fire in her eyes at that very moment. Oh yeah, she was definitely ready for this. She wanted to beat Ellie just as badly as Ellie wanted to beat her.

After their coach was done with their meeting, Ellie led her fellow sprinters in warm-ups then waited for her coach's next set of instructions. He called the short sprinters out onto the track first so they could do the 100m dash. Ellie wanted to cheer on her teammates, but she was too jittery to stay still, so instead, she paced back and forth.

Much too soon, her coach said it was time for the long sprinters to take the track. Ellie took a deep breath and blew it out, while shaking her hands to try to get some feeling back in them.

This is it. You got this. This is your school and your race. No homophobic asshole is

going to take that from you.

She was brought back to reality by the feeling of someone slapping her butt. She turned to see Juniper wink as she walked past her onto the track. “Can’t wait to watch that fine ass all the way around the track.”

Ellie would normally laugh at her friend’s ridiculousness, but she was too nervous at this moment to find the humor in it. She followed Sierra onto the track and watched which lane she took, making sure to take one on the inside of her so she’d be able to see her the whole time. When her coach told them to get on their marks, her heart practically beat right out of her chest. She could feel that heartbeat throughout her whole body. It was pounding in her ears so loudly she could barely hear her coach tell them to start.

She didn’t start out too well, and Sierra immediately began to pull away from her. That was okay, though. The second half of the race had always been Ellie’s strong point. When most people began to lose steam was when she kicked it in. If she could just stay close enough to Sierra, she was sure she could catch her and pass her by the end. By the time they made it to the halfway point, Ellie had caught up to almost everyone who started in the lanes ahead of her, which meant she would pull ahead even more as she ran around the turn.

She could tell the distance between her and Sierra was bigger than that caused by the staggered start, but this was the point where she kicked it in. She took the turn hard and tried her best to steady her breathing as she came to the beginning of the last 100 meters. Sierra was a few feet ahead of her, but if she pushed herself hard enough, she would catch up. She had to. She didn’t have a choice.

Little by little the distance between them closed. Soon, Ellie was right beside Sierra. She was barely hanging on at this point, but she only had to push a little bit further. Unfortunately, Ellie was used to her opponents slowing down at this point, but Sierra



only got faster, matching her stride for stride. When they were mere feet from the finish line, Ellie tried to kick it up a gear, but her legs wouldn't allow it. All of her worst nightmares came true when Sierra inched ahead of her and crossed the finish line right before her.

Ellie didn't know whether to throw up or cry. Honestly, she might do both. The sky seemed to close in around her and she became claustrophobic. She could barely breathe, and it had to do with more than just the exertion from the run. With one stupid, unimportant race, it felt like everything she had worked for throughout her whole college career was crashing down.

Ellie almost toppled over when a heavy hand landed on her shoulder. Luckily, that same hand held on to her to keep her steady. She blinked her eyes to focus on the person in front of her and found her coach with a wide grin on his face. "Woowee! What a race! This is going to be quite the season. This championship is ours, and I have no question our relay will finally make it to nationals. You girls are amazing!"

He held a stopwatch in front of Ellie's face, and she had to blink once again to make the numbers clear. When she saw the time, her eyes almost shot out of her head. It was faster than she had ever been at this point in the season. In fact, it was even faster than she had run at her first few indoor meets of last season, which was crazy with such little training. Normally, she'd be ecstatic, but there was one problem. That time was fast, but it wasn't the fastest. She couldn't believe she had let someone beat her, and getting beaten by someone like Sierra made it even worse.

She looked around, her eyes searching for Sierra. Her body heated up in anger when she found her. For the first time, Sierra had a huge grin on her face. She was high-fiving their teammates as if they were all old friends. As if she hadn't spent the first two months of school completely ignoring them and acting like she was too good for everyone.

It was fucking infuriating. Ellie wanted nothing more than to grab her things and get as far away from the track as possible. The problem was, to get to her stuff, she had to walk past Little Miss First Place. Whatever. It's not like Sierra would say anything to her. She had done a great job of blowing her off so far. Why would she start to give Ellie the time of day now?

When Ellie stormed past her, Sierra didn't even look away from their other teammates to notice her, which only served to piss Ellie off even more. She whispered obscenities under her breath as she packed up her things and pretended to stretch so her coach didn't get mad at her.

When she heard a throat clear, she looked up to see Sierra of all people standing next to her. Ellie was so feral she had to hold back a growl.

Sierra looked unsure of herself as she rubbed the back of her neck and stared down at Ellie. "Just wanted to say good race."

"Yeah, sure, you too." Ellie wanted to be the bigger person and leave it at that, but something about this girl only being willing to acknowledge her after beating Ellie in her race, rubbed her the wrong way. "Make sure to tell your friend I said hi, by the way. If she ever gets tired of boys, I'd be happy to show her what a woman is capable of." Ellie added a wink to really piss Sierra off.

Within seconds, Sierra's face was beet red. If looks could kill, the daggers she was shooting at Ellie would have knocked her dead on the spot. "Fuck you! Stay the fuck away from her."

Wow. That was definitely not the reaction Ellie was expecting. Sure, Ellie had done this to get a reaction, but she wasn't expecting such an intense reaction. It was one thing to have a problem with gay people. It was another thing to have such a big problem that it made you this angry to have your friend hit on by someone of the same

gender.

Her anger made Ellie even more annoyed, because really, who did this girl think she was? “Wow. I thought maybe I read the situation wrong, but apparently, you really are homophobic.” Ellie raised an eyebrow. “If you hate gay people, maybe college athletics isn’t the best place for you.”

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:02 pm*

Sierra clenched her jaw and glared at Ellie. “Don’t act like you know me.”

“Fine.” Ellie crossed her arms in front of her chest. “Don’t get used to being a winner. That ends today.”

As soon as Sierra huffed away, a pit formed in Ellie’s stomach. Even if Sierra deserved it, Ellie didn’t like having issues with people. Part of her wondered if she took things too far, but then again, it was on Sierra that she got so heated over a girl liking another girl. Ellie really hadn’t said anything wrong. At least, that’s what she was going to keep telling herself.

“That was fucking amazing,” Juniper said as she flopped onto the ground beside Ellie.

“What was amazing about it? I lost.”

Juniper scoffed. “I’m not talking about that lame fake race. Who really cares about that.” She nodded toward Sierra’s disappearing form. “I’m talking about how you just made Sierra your bitch. That girl didn’t know what hit her.”

Now, Ellie’s stomach hurt even more. She didn’t want to be the mean girl, even if Sierra deserved her wrath in this case. “It wasn’t that great. She just needs to learn there’s no room for homophobes on this team.”

“Oh, I think she learned it,” Juniper said with a laugh. “Do you think she’s super religious or something?”

“I honestly don’t know.”

“Well, either way, good job showing her who’s the boss around here.” Juniper stood up and held her hand down toward Ellie. “Ready to head back to the apartment?”

Ellie shook her head. “Go without me. I think I’m going to go for a walk and give my moms a call.”

“Aw, how sweet,” Juniper said sarcastically before sticking her tongue out at Ellie. “Tell them I said hi, and I miss them.”

“Will do.”

Ellie waited for most of her teammates to stretch and gather their things, before standing up to leave. When she was a few feet from the track, she called her mama—one person she could always count on to be the voice of reason for her.

“Hey, sweetie, how are you?” her mama asked as soon as she picked up the phone.

Her voice was soft and soothing, and it made Ellie feel like she was being wrapped in a warm hug. If she was being completely honest with herself, she could really use an actual hug from her moms right now.

“I’m good.” It wasn’t completely a lie.

“Okay, spill. What’s wrong? And if it’s about your mom, be careful what you say. You’re on speakerphone right now.”

“Hi!” Her mom’s faint voice came through the phone, and it was like music to Ellie’s ears.

This was exactly what she needed—a good talk from her moms. Ellie wasn't embarrassed to admit that her moms were two of her best friends. When it came to parents, she was extremely lucky. Hell, when it came to family in general, she was lucky. Even her older brother, Nate, was pretty cool (even if she would never admit that to him).

“We had our time trials today.”

There was silence on the other end that seemed to drag on forever before her mama finally spoke. “Uh-oh. You don't sound happy. What happened?”

“You know the new freshman recruit I told you about who's really fast?”

“Yes...” Clearly, her mom was going to make her say the words.

“She beat me.” Ellie's voice cracked as she tried to hold back tears. She knew in the grand scheme of things, this was nothing. It was actually pathetic to cry over a teammate beating her at a time trial that didn't even count for anything. Plus, most people would say this was just a sport. It had never been just a sport to Ellie, though. Ever since high school, her whole life had revolved around track.

“Aww, honey, that's...”

Before her mama could finish, her mom cut her off by playfully shouting, “Fuck that girl!” The way her mom laughed hysterically told Ellie she was most likely getting glared at by her mama right now.

“Don't listen to your mom,” her mama scolded. “Remember what I always say—focus on what you can do in every situation. This isn't a bad thing. It'll help you to be even better.”

“Says the woman who is perfect at things she even has no experience with,” her mom added in the background, the teasing in her voice telling Ellie that this was some kind of inside joke between her moms.

I don't want to know.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:02 pm*

“All I’m saying is that this is a great opportunity to push yourself even harder. Together, you and this girl will both be able to do really great things. Isn’t that what you want for the team?” her mama asked.

Of course she wanted that for the team. “Yeah, I guess you’re right. There’s just one little problem.” More like, significant problem.

“What’s that?”

“I... well, I don’t really get along with Sierra.”

“Really?” Her mama’s voice sounded genuinely concerned. “I’m surprised to hear that. You get along with everyone.”

“Yeah, not this girl. Something about her rubs me the wrong way.”

“It’s not the fact that she’s fast, is it? You shouldn’t ruin what could be a perfectly good friendship just because—”

Ellie couldn’t handle getting a lecture from her mama, so she cut her off. “She hates gay people.”

“That’s a pretty big accusation. Are you sure about that?”

“I’m pretty sure.” Ellie told her moms about the way Sierra looked at her when she heard her talking about the two of them. She hesitated before explaining the other piece of evidence because she wasn’t proud of how she acted and was sure her moms



wouldn't be either. "Then, the other day, Juniper caught me checking out..." Was she really going to tell her moms she was checking out the girl who was supposed to be her enemy? "Well, if I'm being completely honest, I was checking out Sierra. She might be infuriating, but, yeah, apparently my eyes didn't get the memo. Anyway, Juniper thought I was checking out the girl she was walking with and made a joke to Sierra about how she should set us up. Sierra got mad, likemadmad. It was so weird."

"Maybe Sierra was jealous that you weren't checking her out," her mom joked.

"Ha. Good one. Definitely not." She swallowed hard then took a few deep breaths before saying the next part. "Today, after the race, I was pissed that I lost, so I might have made a comment about her friend."

"What kind of comment?" her mama asked softly.

"Just a joke about taking her on a date. I figured if Sierra was actually homophobic, that would really piss her off. And guess what? It did."

"I think maybe you should have a talk with Sierra," her mama suggested. "Whether you like it or not, the two of you are teammates now. As a senior on the team, I think you know by now how important it is for all of you to get along, or at the very least, respect each other."

"Yeah, I know." Even though she realized what her mama was saying was true, she didn't know if she'd be able to take her advice. There was something about Sierra that made her more frustrated than anyone ever had before, which was crazy since she barely knew Sierra. Hell, she couldn't even remember Sierra's last name.

"Whatever you do, don't let this girl get to you. Focus on yourself and on making your senior year the best ever. That's what's important."

“Okay, I will.” She would start with the party this weekend. God knows she could use a drink (or a few) at this point.

## Chapter 4

“Do you think we should pregame before the party?” Juniper asked, already pulling alcohol out for said pregame without even waiting for Ellie’s answer.

Drinking before even getting to the party was probably a terrible idea, but Ellie deserved to make bad decisions every once in a while. Especially since this would be her last chance to make this sort of bad decision.

“Let’s do it.” Ellie took two cups out of the cabinet, set them on the table, and poured a generous amount of vodka in each one.

When she went back to add more, Juniper put a hand on her arm. “Whoa, slow down killer. We’ve got all night.”

Ellie looked at the cups that were practically overflowing. “You’re right. I’m sorry.” What is up with me lately?

Juniper tilted her head as she stared into Ellie’s eyes as if she was looking for answers in them. “Are you okay? You seem really off lately. Is this about the time trials?”

Ellie sighed as she walked to the refrigerator to grab a drink to mix with the vodka. “I guess so. I know it’s ridiculous, but I’m really upset that I let a freshman beat me.”

Juniper grunted in agreement. “It certainly doesn’t help that she’s such a bitch.”

Ellie took a sip of her drink and cringed as the burning liquid made its way down her throat. “My moms think I should talk to her. You know, become civil since we’re

teammates and all.”

Juniper shook her head and took a big gulp of her drink as well, seemingly unbothered by how much alcohol was in it. “I love your moms, but they’re wrong this time. We need to find a way to make her not be our teammate anymore.”

“And how do you suppose we do that without being complete bitches?”

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:02 pm*

Juniper smirked. “What’s wrong with being bitches? Some people deserve it.”

Maybe she was right. Maybe Sierra really did deserve it. No. If that little fight at practice the other day had Ellie so shaken up, she couldn’t imagine how she’d feel going out of her way to be mean to someone. It just wasn’t her personality, even if Sierra seemed to bring out that side of her. “No. Absolutely not. Think of how pissed Coach would be if he found out.”

Juniper furrowed her eyebrows as if she was considering this, then nodded. “That’s true.” Juniper took another big sip of her drink. She slammed it down on the table and her eyes lit up. “I know! You can just act super gay in front of her. Kiss some girls and shit. She’ll hate that. If she’s at the party tonight, you can kiss me!”

Ellie rolled her eyes. “You’re straight.”

Juniper shrugged. “Never stopped me from kissing a girl before.”

“You’re also my best friend. I don’t go around kissing my friends. Things could get messy.”

Juniper lifted an eyebrow as she brought her drink back up to her lips and smiled at Ellie over the cup. “Afraid you’ll fall madly in love with me?”

“Yep, that’s exactly it.” Ellie snorted out a laugh. “It would never work anyway. I highly doubt she’s going to the party tonight. Does she even have any friends on the team?”

Ellie didn't realize how mean that sounded until Juniper spit out her drink from laughing. "Wow. I like this feisty side of Ellie." Juniper shrugged. "I'm not actually sure if she has any friends on the team, but I heard Chris invite her to the party, and she asked if she could bring a friend. That's not exactly ayes, but it's definitely not a no."

Ellie's stomach turned. This was supposed to be her night to let loose and have fun with her friends. She didn't want to deal with the sick feeling she got every time she was forced to be around Sierra. She picked her cup off of the table and held it out toward Juniper. "In that case..." Before she could overthink what she was doing, she drained the rest of the liquid from the cup. She coughed as the last of it made its way into her mouth. Fuck, I'm going to be so drunk.

"Alright. I guess it's time to party!" Juniper drank the rest of her drink as well, then took two shot glasses out of the cabinet and filled them with more vodka. She slid one toward Ellie, then picked up the other one. "Cheers."

Ellie knew this was a bad idea, but she couldn't stop herself from giving in. "Cheers," she repeated.

\*

By the time they left their apartment, Ellie was already so drunk she could barely walk, which made their two-block journey seem much longer. Juniper giggled as she struggled to hold Ellie up while they walked together.

"I don't know if I've ever seen you this drunk." Juniper laughed and tripped over something on the ground, before not-so-smoothly saving herself from a face plant by grabbing onto Ellie even harder.

"I'm not drunk," Ellie lied.

Juniper laughed again. “Uh-huh. Sure you’re not.”

They stumbled through the door, and the first person Ellie saw was Sierra What’s-Her-Fuck, standing with a group of people in the kitchen. Of fucking course. “Maybe we should go back to our place. I think I’m starting to feel sick.” Ellie’s best friend didn’t need to know that the feeling wasn’t from the alcohol.

Juniper slapped her on the butt. “You got this, babe. Keep it in.”

Ellie nodded. Juniper was right. She was a senior on the track team. She wasn’t going to let a freshman run her life.

Ellie turned to go left in order to avoid Sierra, but before she could walk that way, Juniper grabbed her arm. “Just because you’re a lightweight doesn’t mean I don’t need another drink. Let’s go.”

When they reached the kitchen, Ellie realized that the same redhead from the state meet was standing next to Sierra, but she had her hands resting on Chris’s biceps.

“You know, I did track in high school. I even thought about trying to walk-on to the team here.” The redhead ran her hands over his muscles. “If I had known the guys on the team looked like this, maybe I would have.”

Chris smiled dumbly as if he had never received a compliment from a pretty girl before. It wasn’t even like she was that pretty. Sierra was...nope not thinking that way about my current enemy.

“Well, for what it’s worth, even though you’re not on the team, you’re welcome at these parties anytime.” Chris flashed a grin that Ellie was sure was supposed to look suave, but it definitely was not.

Now Ellie might actually throw up. Heterosexual flirting was always so cringe.

It got even worse when the redhead giggled obnoxiously as if he had just said the funniest thing in the world. Apparently, Ellie wasn't the only one bothered by their flirting. Sierra looked seriously annoyed as she tightly wrapped her hand around the redhead's arm. "We should go," she said sternly.

Redhead giggled again as she turned to face Sierra. She held onto Sierra the same way she had just done with Chris. "Aw, don't be so uptight, SiSi. There's plenty of guys here for you, too." She raised her eyebrows and leaned in close to her, so close that if Ellie didn't know any better, she could have sworn they were going to kiss. "What do you say, Si? Should we put on a show for them?"

When Redhead licked her lips, there was no question what she was asking Sierra to do.

"Kiss! Kiss! Kiss!" one of the guys shouted while a few others hooted and hollered along with him.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:02 pm*

Sierra shoved Redhead away from her. "I'm not doing this. Not..." Sierra shook her head profusely. "Just drop it, okay?"

"I know someone who will make out with you!" Juniper shouted before shoving Ellie toward the group.

Ellie's immediate reaction was to say that she absolutely would not make out with a girl so the guys' team could get off to it, but that all changed when Sierra's eyes flashed to hers and were filled with rage. Seriously, could this girl get any more homophobic?

Ellie shrugged and smiled at the redhead. "I'm down if you are."

The redhead smirked at her, but before either of them could make a move, a loud sound of something banging on the counter stole their attention. Ellie turned toward the sound and found Sierra's hand wrapped tightly around the cup she had clearly just slammed down. She glared at Ellie one last time before storming past her and out the door.

Now that Sierra was properly pissed off, Ellie only had one thing left to do. She stalked toward the redhead and stopped just inches in front of her. She tried her best to ignore the guys who were practically drooling all over themselves. Pervverts. She ran a finger up the redhead's arm, then brought her fingers under her chin.

She moved the littlest bit closer before pulling away and letting out a loud cackle. She stuck her middle finger in the air and waved it at her male teammates. "Go watch some porn, you fucking perverts."



The room was silent until Chris burst into laughter and ran over to put his arm around Ellie. “Okay, I knew I loved you before, but that was amazing.”

As sounds of laughter took over the room, Ellie felt anything but amazing. If Sierra had gotten what she deserved, then why did Ellie feel so bad about it?

## Chapter 5

In the two weeks following the party, Ellie was happy to find that no one talked about what had happened there. She didn’t want to hear about how great it was when she felt so slimy over it. She had almost made out with a girl she knew nothing about while a bunch of guys watched with hungry eyes. And for what? To piss off her teammate? If that was the goal, it had definitely worked. Sierra couldn’t even look at her at this point.

So much for the talk that she had promised her moms she would have. There was no way that was happening now.

She wasn’t going to let herself worry about that tonight, though. It was the weekend after Halloween, which meant the big haunted farm about an hour from their school had a discounted night. A group of them had gone to it every year since they were freshmen, and it scared the shit out of her every time. She absolutely loved it.

Juniper grabbed her hand as soon as they were parked at the farm. “I hope you don’t like having feeling in your hand, because I’m going to be squeezing the shit out of it all night.”

Ellie laughed. “Don’t worry. I’m used to it.”

“Ready to get the piss scared out of you?” Chris asked as he draped an arm over Ellie’s shoulder.

“Hell, yeah. I’ve been waiting for this since the weather started getting cooler.”

They met the rest of the senior sprinters by the front gates and bought their tickets. They all agreed to do the haunted hayride first since that had been the lamest part of the farm in the prior years.

After taking their seats at the front of the large wagon, Ellie looked around for any signs of an actor that might pop up and try to scare them.

“Seriously? What’s she doing here?” Juniper asked, her tone one of complete disgust.

When Ellie turned around, she saw the last person she wanted to be there—Sierra. She was with that redheaded girl again, as well as two guys. Cute. A double date. Ellie had to hold back a gag. If she was on a date, Sierra probably would think the world was about to catch on fire, but of course, it was fine for the perfect little straight girl.

When Sierra looked over at them, Juniper lifted her and Ellie’s intertwined hands and kissed Ellie’s knuckles, then winked at Sierra. Sierra didn’t look as angered by that as she did at the party, but she still moved her eyes toward the ground as if she couldn’t stand to watch what was happening, even if it was completely innocent.

“Dude, she’s such a bitch,” Juniper whispered much too loudly.

“Who’s a bitch?” Chris asked.

Not trying to hide the fact that she was talking about her, Juniper pointed across the wagon.

“Sierra?” Chris asked. “Nah, she’s not so bad. I think she’s just shy.” He gave Sierra and her friend a sweet smile and small wave.

Juniper chuckled. “You’re only saying that because her friend gave you a blowjob at that party she brought her to.”

“Wait, she gave you a blowjob?” Ellie asked. She was shocked she was just hearing about it now. Chris normally loved to brag about his conquests to her.

“She sure did.” Chris leaned back and rested his head against his hands. “You definitely made the wrong choice not kissing her. That girl is amazing with her mouth.”

Barf. “Dude, I didn’t need to know that.”

## Page 11

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:02 pm*

Chris grinned widely as if he was very proud of himself for grossing her out. “What’s scarier for you—talking about dicks or having a guy sneak up behind you with a chainsaw?”

Right as Ellie processed what he was saying, the sound of a chainsaw rang in her ears. She jumped out of her seat and partially onto Juniper’s lap. “Shit. Fuck. Fuck. Shit.”

When she finally calmed down and started to catch her breath, she noticed that everyone on the hayride was laughing at her. Well, almost everyone. Sierra honestly just looked miserable.

“How do we always seem to end up in this position?” Juniper joked as she pushed Ellie off of her.

Ellie was sure Juniper said that to try to get a rise out of Sierra, but Sierra was too busy picking at the hay while her date whispered something in her ear to pay attention to them.

The rest of the ride had some scary moments, but none of them had gotten Ellie as much as that first man with the chainsaw. Once the ride ended, Ellie paid close attention to which direction Sierra and her group went in so she could suggest going to the opposite haunted attraction from them.

That attraction was a haunted walk through the woods with no lights except from a small flashlight that their guide was holding. Usually, they saved this one for last since it was so terrifying, but thanks to Sierra, that didn’t happen this time.

Even with Halloween being over, the line for the haunted walk was very long. The longer they stood, the more Ellie realized how much she had to go to the bathroom.

“What the hell is wrong with you?” Juniper asked.

Ellie made a point of dancing around even more. “I really have to pee.”

Juniper rolled her eyes. “Well, you’re going to have to hold it. We’re so close to the front now. We haven’t waited in line this long for you to miss it.”

“I know. I know.” Ellie brought her hand to her crotch to emphasize how uncomfortable she was. “I just really hope I don’t piss my pants. With how much I have to go, it might actually happen this time.”

Luckily, even with all of the jump scares, Ellie was able to make it through the haunted walk without any accidents. As soon as they were back onto the main portion of the farm, she pointed toward the porta-potties, which looked much too far away at that moment. “I’m going to run to the bathroom. You guys get in line for the next thing, and I’ll meet you once I’m done.”

She wasn’t sure if her friends responded, because she was already sprinting away. Thank god I’m a runner. She made it into the bathroom just in time and was so relieved, she barely took notice of how disgusting it was.

After washing her hands, she headed in the direction of where her friends would be waiting in line. Luckily, since they had been here a few times, she knew a back way to get there so she hopefully didn’t piss off quite as many people when she skipped the line. Also, this way she could avoid the crowd, since no one ever came back to the area she was about to walk through.

She took her phone out of her pocket to text Juniper, but staring down at it while she

walked proved to be a bad idea since she soon walked right into something. When she brought her eyes up to see what she had hit, it was none other than Sierra. Of course. Just my luck.

She was about to say a quick apology and walk away, but stopped when she saw the glistening in Sierra's eyes and the tears running down her cheeks. She could pretend she didn't notice and keep walking, but she knew if she did that, she would feel guilty for the rest of the night, if not longer.

"I know I'm probably the last person you want to ask you this, but are you okay?"

"I'm fine," Sierra snapped, quickly wiping at her eyes, even though it was no use because more tears immediately started to fall.

Walk away. Just walk away. She's giving you an out. "You don't look fine."

Sierra laughed through her tears. "And now you suddenly care? You didn't care at practice or at the party when you..." Sierra shook her head. "Just forget about it. You clearly hate me. You don't have to act like you don't just because I'm upset."

"I..." What was Ellie even supposed to say to that? It was true. Sierra was far from being her favorite person, and there was a good reason for that. "Okay, well have a good night. I'll see you at practice on Monday."

When Ellie started to walk away, she assumed that was the end of their conversation, until she heard Sierra's voice from behind her. "You know, at one point I was really excited to be on a team with you. I guess it's true what they say about never meeting your heroes."

Ellie bristled from her words, the cool temperature seeming to drop even more from what had just hit her. If Sierra was so excited to be on the team with her, why had she

been so rude to Ellie this whole time? Even when she first tried to introduce herself, Sierra had completely blown her off. That didn't seem like the actions of someone who considered Ellie her hero. Never meet your heroes. The words rang inside her head. All she ever wanted was for her younger teammates to look up to her. Now she had someone who, at one point, had considered her a hero, and she had somehow ruined it.

So much for not feeling guilty tonight. Still, nothing made sense when it came to Sierra. Nothing added up. She wanted to ask Sierra for answers right now, but she was afraid she would also break into tears. They were already threatening to fall, even without pushing this any further.

Instead, she put her head down and continued to walk away. When she finally found her friends in the line, they were practically at the front.

“Did you end up taking a shit while you were in there, too?” Chris asked with a laugh. “It took you forever.”

Juniper scrunched up her nose. “Oh, please tell me you didn't. There's a special spot in hell for the people who poop in porta-potties and make the experience even more miserable for the rest of us.”

Ellie shook her head. “I didn't take a shit. There was just a long line.”

Juniper rolled her eyes. “There's a long line for everything tonight.”

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:02 pm*

Ellie tried to smile, but she couldn't get herself to. She was still too shaken up from what had just happened with Sierra. When Juniper became distracted by one of their other teammates, Ellie scooted closer to Chris. "What do you know about Sierra?" she whispered to him.

Chris stared at Ellie for a long time as if he was confused about her question. "What do you mean?"

"Sierra is an enigma to me. I can't figure her out."

Chris nodded slowly. "She is pretty shy, and I think she's kind of reserved. I figured you and Juniper must know more about her since you hate her so much."

Ouch. Ellie knew Chris wasn't trying to be rude, but that one hurt. As if I don't already feel guilty enough. Ellie shrugged, trying to blow off his comment. "I don't know. She just doesn't seem to be trying very hard to fit in with the team. It also doesn't help that she's a big homophobe."

Chris's head shot back as if she had given him whiplash. "A homophobe? Where the hell did you get that idea?" he asked with a laugh. "I literally heard her talking to someone about her two moms just a few days ago. Seeing as how she wasn't saying that they are disgusting humans for loving each other, I'm going to say with a lot of confidence that she is not homophobic. I'm actually pretty sure she's gay."

"What?" The question came out so loudly that the rest of her friends looked over at them. Now, Ellie was really confused. She looked around to make sure her friends were no longer paying attention, then whispered to Chris again. "What are you



talking about? How do you know this?"

Chris shrugged. "I don't for sure. I've just gotten some vibes."

Ellie rolled her eyes. "This is a college track team, Chris. Even the straight girls give off gay vibes."

Chris laughed. "Dude, I know. It makes my life so much harder. How am I supposed to know who's willing to hook up with me?"

As Chris continued to go on about the perils of a straight man trying to date, Ellie's mind wandered back to Sierra. Chris was probably wrong about her being gay, but if she had two moms and wasn't actually homophobic, that changed so much. It meant everything Ellie thought she knew about Sierra wasn't true.

It made sense that Sierra would perk up at hearing that someone else on the team had two moms, but that didn't explain anything else that had happened. Ellie's head was really spinning now. She had no idea who this girl was, but she wanted to figure it out. Hell, right now, it felt like she needed to.

## Chapter 6

### Sierra

Sierra couldn't believe that Ellie Finch had just caught her crying at a haunted farm. Honestly, what were the fucking chances? Also, why did Ellie suddenly act like she cared? Did the girl find a heart when she saw someone with tears in their eyes?

Sierra knew that their issues weren't solely because of Ellie. When they first met, Sierra had been short with her, then at the first optional practice when Ellie tried again, Sierra blew her off a second time. She knew she wasn't acting like herself, but

she couldn't help it. She was heartbroken. That word didn't even come close to describing what she was feeling. Her heart was completely shattered right now.

Sierra had become friends with Teresa McBride when Teresa moved into town in eighth grade. Sierra's mom, who was the school principal at the time, had pushed her to befriend the new girl, and Sierra did it to make her happy. It didn't take her long to realize how much she enjoyed being around the girl with flowing red hair, a wicked smile, and the world's most carefree attitude. The two of them quickly became best friends, and by the beginning of their junior year, Sierra realized that what she felt for Teresa went beyond friendship.

Throughout that year, she had seen signs that maybe Teresa felt the same way, but that wasn't confirmed until the summer before their senior year when Teresa kissed her underneath the stars. It was like the beginning of a fairytale.

When Teresa asked Sierra to keep their relationship a secret, Sierra went along with it. As the girl with two moms, there was nothing stopping her from shouting it from the rooftops, but she understood how it might be harder for someone who didn't grow up in the same situation as her.

In fact, Teresa's situation was about as opposite as it could get. Her mom died during childbirth, so she was raised by her single dad, the pastor. Even though he was never rude to Ellie, she could see the judgment in his eyes whenever she mentioned her two moms. When he suggested she invite them to his church sometime, she knew it wasn't out of love.

So, of course Teresa was scared to come out. He was all she had, and she was at risk of losing him. Teresa was very persuasive, and she had somehow convinced Sierra that it was for the best if she didn't even tell her family about them. The prospect of keeping it a secret became more appealing when they decided to go to the same college and room together. Sierra was so in love that nothing sounded better to her

than waking up to the love of her life every morning. Her moms might have been progressive, but Sierra highly doubted they would have let her live with Teresa if they knew they were together.

Teresa had made so many promises about how different things would be when they got to college, and in a way, that was true. Instead of being out at school and living as their authentic selves, Teresa had broken up with her the week they arrived. She told Sierra that she had been thinking about it a lot, and since she was bisexual, it made more sense for her to go for a guy. That way, she would never have to come out to her dad.

Teresa had shared that with Sierra right before it was time for her to leave for the first track meeting, so of course, she wasn't in the right mindset when Ellie introduced herself. Right after walking away, she had vowed that she would do better the next time Ellie tried to talk to her.

Unfortunately, that also fell on a terrible day. Even though Teresa had told her they couldn't be together, they had still slipped up a few times, and Sierra was holding on to the hope that Teresa would change her mind. Teresa had chosen to call Sierra right before her first optional college track practice started to tell her she had a date that night. The last thing Sierra wanted was for her new teammates to see her cry. She knew she probably came across as a bitch that day, but it seemed like a better option than looking like an emotional mess.

So, yeah, she knew she hadn't made the greatest first impression on Ellie, but listening to her and Juniper constantly whisper about Sierra, as well as all the dirty looks they gave her, seemed like a bit much. They had made the assumption that Sierra was homophobic without even getting to know her. If they talked to her for even a few minutes, they would realize that wasn't true. She had been hesitating to come out to anyone in case Teresa changed her mind and decided to secretly date again, but she could have at least assured them that she very much supported her non-

traditional family.

Ellie and Juniper had made up their minds about her and there was really nothing Sierra could do. She had tried to be nice after the time trial, especially since she figured Ellie wasn't too happy about taking second, but Ellie was a complete jerk to her. On top of all of that, after telling Ellie to stay away from Teresa, she still made out with her at the track party. Of course, Ellie didn't know the real reason why Sierra had given her that warning, but as teammates, the least she could do was find any other girl to make out with.

Teresa was very hush-hush about exactly how their kiss had gone when she got back to their dorm room that night. All she said was that she didn't kiss and tell then asked Sierra if she wanted to hear about the blowjob she gave to some random guy that night. Sierra's heart still clenched as she thought about how she had told Teresa that she obviously didn't want to hear about that, then rolled over in bed and cried herself to sleep. These days, she cried herself to sleep more times than not. If Teresa noticed, she didn't say anything.

Teresa had kept one promise—that was the one to continue being best friends with Sierra. She told Sierra how much she didn't want to lose her, and even with how much she was hurting right now, Sierra preferred to have Teresa in some capacity rather than not at all.

It wasn't good for her mental health, though, especially on nights like this. Teresa had made plans with two guys from their English class to come to the haunted farm, and she swore to Sierra that it was just as friends. As soon as the guys picked them up, Sierra could tell that was another lie. Teresa sat in the front seat with one guy, holding his hand throughout the entire car ride. The guy who was sitting in the back with Sierra kept giving her a look that asked if he could do the same. That would have maybe been fine if Sierra had any interest at all in guys, which she didn't. She couldn't say anything, since she was sure Teresa would get mad at her if she did,

which was what led to her crying in the middle of a haunted farm.

When Teresa and her date started making out and Sierra's "date" clearly wanted to do the same thing, she had to admit to him that she didn't know this was a date and wasn't interested. He had huffed away from her, which had left Sierra to cry alone. She was alone, at least, until Ellie Finch showed up out of nowhere. Seriously, how was this her luck? She really wanted to know what she had done in a prior life to deserve what she was going through now, because it must have been really fucking bad.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:02 pm*

“There you are!” a voice cried out from a few feet away.

Sierra looked over to see Teresa and her date coming toward her. Teresa was waving her arms around while her date seemed to be searching for someone—most likely his friend.

“What the hell happened?” Teresa asked. “I turned around and you were gone.”

“Turned around and I was gone?” Sierra’s blood boiled. “You had your tongue shoved down your date’s throat for at least five minutes before I left.”

“Where is Quinn?” Teresa’s date asked as he continued to look around.

Sierra shrugged. “I really don’t know. He stomped away when I told him this wasn’t a date.”

“What do you mean? This is a date.” Teresa’s newest man looked genuinely confused.

“I wasn’t told it was a date, so I just thought it was four friends hanging out.”

Teresa’s date looked flabbergasted that Sierra would think that. “Two guys and two girls. Of course it’s a date.”

Sierra didn’t even try to hide her eye roll. “So guys and girls can’t just be friends? That doesn’t work too well when one of the girls is a lesbian.” The words were out before Sierra could stop them, and just as she had suspected, Teresa glared at her.

“You set my buddy up with a lesbian?” Teresa’s date asked her.

Teresa put her hands in the air as if she was completely innocent in all of this. “I didn’t know. She never told me that.”

“Whatever. I need to find Quinn. Get another ride home.”

Teresa watched her man of the hour leave then returned her glare to Sierra. “What the fuck was that all about?”

“Seriously, T? You brought me here under false pretenses and now you’re mad at me?”

Teresa shrugged as if she had no clue what she could have possibly done wrong. “Quinn is a nice guy. You two get along well in class. I figured you could at least give him a chance.”

“I’m a fucking lesbian!” Sierra shouted louder than she meant to, causing herself to blush when a crowd of people looked over at her.

Teresa shrugged again. “How was I supposed to know?”

Sierra was sure her face must have been beet red, because her body was on fire with anger. “Are you fucking kidding me right now?”

Instead of responding, Teresa searched around them. “I can’t believe you did this tonight. Colt was really cool and a great kisser. Now I’m sure he’ll never speak to me again.”

“And that’s the kind of person you want to be with?” Sierra asked with a scoff. She knew she wasn’t perfect, but she always treated Teresa well, whether they were friends or more than friends. Even at their worst moments she never would have left

Teresa somewhere without a ride.

Teresa threw her hands into the air. “I don’t know who I want to be with. All I know is I want to have a little fun. I’m not trying to find my soulmate.”

Sierra stabbed her finger into her own chest. Her tears were falling again, but she was too overcome with emotions to care. “You used to tell me I was your soulmate. Remember? It was only a few months ago. Or have you completely erased us from your mind?”

“There is nous,” Teresa spit back at her. “There never was and there never will be. Get over it.”

That one hit Sierra hard, straight to the chest. The impact of those words caused her to stumble backward slightly. Ever since ending things between them, Teresa had never denied that there had once been something between them. She said they couldn’t be together anymore and she refused to listen when Sierra tried to reason with her, but she never denied the beautiful relationship they once shared.

Sierra shook her head. The tears were draining from her eyes like a faucet now, but she was too weak to stop them. “Don’t say that. Please don’t say that. Don’t deny what we had. Don’t minimize it into nothing. I can’t handle that.”

“You know what? I was really trying to be your friend, but I don’t know if I can do this anymore.” She motioned her hand in front of Sierra. “All of this is too much. I want to have fun, not deal with your constant up and down emotions.”

“But... but you’re my best friend.” Sierra hated how weak and frail her voice sounded. She hated that Teresa had so much control over her.

“I know.” Teresa’s voice softened. She closed the space between her and Sierra and



took Sierra's hands in hers. "I would love to be your best friend, but the way you've been acting lately has made that impossible."

Was it really Sierra's fault they were in this position? Should Sierra have gone along with everything Teresa wanted so she could salvage their friendship? It didn't feel that way, but she couldn't stop herself from questioning everything she had done since they got to school. Pushing Teresa to talk. Breaking down every time Teresa talked about a guy. Being in a shitty mood ninety-eight percent of the time. Maybe it was her fault they had gotten to this point.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:02 pm*

Teresa squeezed Sierra's hands once before letting go of them. "This doesn't mean things have to be weird. We can still be cordial toward each other and respectful roommates, but we need to stop trying to hang out outside of that. I can't be your person anymore."

Sierra wanted to fight her, but how could she? And what was the point? When Teresa made up her mind about something, she stuck to it. Fighting her now would only make things worse. "Okay. Yeah. You're right."

"Good." Teresa smiled as if it was the easiest thing in the world. "Want to go find ourselves a ride, roomie?"

Sierra nodded, but she waited until she could stop the tears from falling to follow Teresa into the crowds of people. She didn't need anyone else, stranger or not, to see her crying tonight.

When they made it to the exit, they silently walked out to the parking lot together. Sierra had just pulled out her phone to call them a rideshare when a hand landed on her shoulder.

She turned around to see Chris from the track team grinning at her. "You ladies heading out?"

Before Sierra could answer, Teresa answered for her. "As soon as we can find a ride. This one scared ours away."

"Come with me," Chris said. "I have two extra seats. There's only three of us in my

car.”

Three of them? Oh no. Sierra was sure she knew who the other two were and she couldn't get into a car with them, especially not after the night she had.

“That's perfect!” Teresa said.

Sierra had no fight left in her, so she didn't even try. This was just the fucking cherry on top of one of the worst nights of her life.

Juniper stepped out from behind Chris and when she noticed it was Sierra that Chris had just offered a ride to, she didn't try to hide her disgust. “Seriously, Chris? I get shotgun.”

As if the night couldn't get any worse, Sierra ended up sitting right in the middle of Teresa and Ellie in the back of Chris's small car. Teresa refused to look at her, but even worse than that, Ellie wouldn't stop looking at her.

Sierra wanted to crawl out of her own skin the whole drive back to the school. The drive seemed to stretch on forever, and Sierra had to hold back tears the entire time.

When Chris finally stopped in front of her dorm, she jumped out of the car behind Teresa and took a deep breath. It was nice to feel like she could finally breathe again.

Unfortunately, that feeling didn't last for long. The small dorm room she shared with Teresa seemed even smaller after their fight. Neither of them said a word to each other as they got ready for bed. The tension between them could be cut with a knife, and Sierra hated it. How was it possible that the girl who had been her whole world a few months ago was now like a stranger to her?

It wasn't fair. Life wasn't fair, and Sierra had no idea how she was possibly going to

make it through the rest of this year if things continued the way they were right now.

## Chapter 7

Ellie

The whole rest of the weekend after going to the haunted house, all Ellie could think about was Sierra. She couldn't shake the feeling that she had severely misjudged her. Maybe Sierra wasn't the monster Ellie had made her out to be. The problem was that such a wedge had been driven between the two of them now, Ellie wasn't sure where to start with making things right. Plus, she couldn't make things better with Sierra without pissing off her best friend, which made her wonder if it was even worth it. It didn't seem like Sierra had any interest in even holding a conversation with Ellie, so maybe it made more sense to let it be and keep everyone happy. At least, as happy as they all could be with the clear tension.

By the time practice rolled around on Monday, Ellie had convinced herself not to push Sierra to talk to her. At least, she thought she had come to that decision until she saw Sierra and pictured the tears in her eyes the other night. She thought about how fragile Sierra looked and how much it stung when Sierra admitted Ellie was her hero at one point—a title that Ellie had successfully squashed.

Throughout practice, she couldn't stop herself from sneaking peeks at Sierra. Who was this girl? What was her story? More importantly, why was Ellie suddenly so desperate to know it?

By the end of practice, aside from a few stolen glances, there had been no communication between the two of them. The next day, things went the exact same way. Fate must have been on Ellie's side, though, because the next day Coach Kraemer asked her and Sierra to stay after practice to practice some handoffs.

Sierra didn't look happy to be stuck with Ellie, but she still followed their coach's instructions and stuck around until it was just the two of them left. Even though the tension between them was very obvious to Ellie, their coach didn't seem to notice. In fact, the shit-eating grin hadn't left his face since he requested them to stay.

"I can't even begin to tell you girls how excited I am to see what you two do this year. This is our year, and so much of that has to do with the two of you." Coach's face became stern, a look that Ellie could tell he was struggling to keep. "Now, getting down to business. I think if we keep you at anchor, Ellie, and have you hand off to her, Sierra, that the other teams won't know what hit 'em. I figure it doesn't matter if we're in the lead or five seconds behind, once you two step on the track, we're sure to win. I don't want anything to slow you two down, which means the handoff between the two of you needs to be perfect." Coach looked at Ellie. "I know that's where you struggled a bit last year."

Ellie was annoyed at him for pointing that out, even if it was true. For some reason, she and Juniper had never been able to perfect that last handoff, which was strange since they were so in sync in every other part of their lives. "Whatever we need to do, Coach, I'm in."

"Me too," Sierra said beside her, sounding more confident than Ellie had ever heard her before.

Coach's smile came back in full force. "I knew I could count on you two. For now, I'm planning to keep the first two legs of the relay the same, which is why I only asked you two to stay tonight."

Ellie's stomach dropped. If he was keeping the first two runners the same, and Sierra was the third leg, that meant Juniper's spot had officially been given to Sierra. Ellie was not looking forward to that conversation, but she didn't have time to worry about that right now. They had work to do.

“Where do you want me?” Sierra asked. Her tone was serious, but there was something different about her voice when she wasn’t yelling at Ellie. It was smooth like warm butter on bread. The sound made tingles run up Ellie’s spine.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:02 pm*

What the hell? Ellie shook these thoughts away and stood at the spot she would be in if she was actually waiting for a relay handoff.

“Go back about fifty meters and start from there. I know it’ll be tough, but try to keep your speed around what it would be at the end of a race,” Coach instructed Sierra.

Sierra nodded in understanding, then walked to the spot coach had told her to. When they both looked over at him, he nodded in silent instruction.

Ellie watched as Sierra took a deep breath and bounced up and down a few times. Her limbs were long and graceful like a gazelle, and at that moment she appeared more relaxed than usual, like this was where she felt most at home. Ellie understood that feeling completely. It was the exact same for her.

Sierra brought her eyes up to meet Ellie’s, and it felt like all of the air was pulled from Ellie’s lungs. Those eyes... there was something about them. They were blue and deep like the ocean, and Ellie wanted to stay lost in them forever. She wanted to search within them and find out what secrets they held. She tried to look away, but she couldn’t. This was the first time Sierra had ever looked her in the eyes, and even though there were so many reasons she shouldn’t be thinking like this, Ellie found herself hoping that it wouldn’t be the last.

“Ready?” Sierra asked her, and Ellie nodded in response.

Get ahold of yourself, Finch.

Ellie watched Sierra running toward her and counted her steps as she decided the best

time to start running. Most times with Juniper, she took off too early and had to slow way down to grab the baton. Then there were times she would try to overcompensate, and Juniper ran right into her. As she turned to start running, she wondered which of those things would end up happening with Sierra.

Much to her surprise, when she looked behind her and reached out her hand to grab the baton, it was at the perfect spot. The handoff wasn't flawless, but it was pretty damn close. It was definitely better than any handoff between her and Juniper, but she would never repeat that out loud.

"Wow! What a start!" Coach shouted. "Let's do another to see if that was a fluke."

After five more nearly-perfect handoffs, it was clear that it hadn't been a fluke. For whatever reason, the handoff just worked with Sierra and Ellie.

"Wow," their coach said the same way he had after every single handoff. He pointed his finger back and forth between the two of them. "Not many people have it, but you two do."

"Have what, exactly?" Sierra asked before Ellie could.

"Chemistry. Ellie, it's like you just know when Sierra is at the right spot without even looking. Almost like you feel it in your bones. Do you know what I mean?"

More than you know. Ellie was very aware of Sierra. Every move Sierra made, Ellie felt. She had no idea why, but she did. Chemistry, though? That word seemed a bit strong for two people who were good at relay handoffs.

Ellie shrugged to try to play it cool. "I guess I do, maybe."

"Well, I think I've kept you girls here long enough for today," their coach said.



“Thanks for always being willing to go above and beyond.”

Ellie knew this was her chance to talk to Sierra, so she quickly packed up her things. Apparently, she wasn't fast enough, because by the time she stood up, Sierra was already walking out the door of the indoor track facility.

“Hey, wait up!” Ellie yelled as she ran after her.

Sierra didn't stop completely, but she did slow down, which was honestly more than Ellie expected. When Ellie caught up, she walked in stride with her. “Can we talk?”

“I don't know. I had a really bad weekend. I want to get back to my dorm, so I can get my homework done and go to bed.”

“This weekend is kind of what I wanted to talk to you about. Or, at least, part of it. Are you—”

Before Ellie could finish her sentence, she was cut off by the sound of her phone ringing. She pulled it out of her pocket to find it was Juniper calling, and hit the ignore button. She'd be okay if she had to wait a few minutes.

“Sorry. I just wanted to ask—”

Ellie's phone rang with another call from Juniper. I guess I better pick up in case it's an emergency. She held up a finger to Ellie. “One second. Sorry.”

Before she could even say hello, Juniper shouted on the other end of the phone. “It's official, isn't it? That fucking bitch took my relay spot, didn't she? I swear to god, that homophobic son-of-a—”

Ellie looked over at Sierra and it was clear from the down turning of her lips and

slightly red tinge to her cheeks that she had heard what Juniper said. Ellie took a few steps away from her in case Juniper had any other choice words to say about her. “Hey, could we talk about this once I get back to the apartment?” Ellie asked Juniper before she could continue. “It shouldn’t be much longer.”

“Ugh.” Juniper groaned. “The fact that you want to talk about it in person means I’m right. Howfuckingawesome.”

“We’ll talk soon, okay?” Ellie spoke gently, because she could tell how fragile her best friend was right now. “Make some popcorn and pick out a Hallmark Christmas movie. I’ll break my no Christmas before Thanksgiving rule just for you.”

“Pulling out the Hallmark Christmas movies? Shit. This must be even worse than I thought.”

## Page 16

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:02 pm*

Although Ellie could still hear a bit of stress in her best friend's voice, it did sound lighter now, which meant her plan had worked. Ellie said goodbye to her, put the phone back into her pocket, then turned her attention to Sierra.

The only problem was Sierra was no longer there. Ellie looked around and found her disappearing far in the distance. So much for our talk.

Great. Ellie was pretty sure she had just driven an even bigger wedge between them. Not only that, but now, she also had to talk her best friend off a ledge. This was definitely no how she expected her senior year to go.

### Chapter 8

#### Sierra

It had been a week since Sierra and Teresa decided to be cordial roommates, and it felt like years. Track practice should have been her one escape, but that wasn't much better than her dorm room, thanks to Ellie. She was so hot and cold that it gave Sierra whiplash. One moment, she was whispering with Juniper and laughing as the two of them clearly talked about Sierra, and the next, she was giving Sierra a longing look, as if Sierra owed her that conversation they never ended up having. She hadn't attempted it again since Sierra walked away after hearing Juniper call her a bitch on the phone, but it was obvious there was something she wanted to say. Part of Sierra wanted Ellie to just leave her alone, but there was another part of her that wished Ellie would say what she had to say to put Sierra out of her misery.

Sierra knew who she needed to talk to, but she had been avoiding it, because it meant

she had to be honest about the secret she had been keeping for over a year. She and her twin sister—the only blood relative Sierra knew—never kept secrets from each other. At least, that had been true, until Teresa convinced her to keep this one. She couldn't do it anymore, though. If she continued to hold it in, she might pop.

“Hey, stranger! What's up?” her sister, Sienna, asked as soon as she answered the phone. Sierra wasn't sure what her biological parents had been thinking when they named their identical twin daughters Sierra and Sienna, but since they disappeared after placing them in foster care before their second birthday, she was never going to find out.

“Not too much. School and track are kicking my ass, but what else is new?”

Sienna laughed lightly. “That was about to be my line. What's new? I feel like I never hear from you anymore.”

“I know. I'm sorry.” Sierra was ashamed. She had always been close to her sister, and even though she wouldn't say they weren't close anymore, they had definitely drifted apart over the past year and a half.

The worst part was that Sierra knew it was all her fault. At first, it was because she was so wrapped up in Teresa and the change in their relationship, but then it was because she felt like there was so much she couldn't tell her sister. It only got worse when things ended with Teresa. Sierra knew if she talked to her sister too much, the whole story would come spilling out of her, and she wasn't willing to let that happen. Until now, at least.

“It's okay.” Her sister's voice was soft and sweet. “Tell me what's going on. I know you have something to say, so just say it.”

Sienna had so much to say, she didn't know where to start. “How are you?” she asked.

“We haven’t talked in so long. I don’t want this conversation to be all about me.”

“First of all, we text every day. Secondly, this conversation isn’t about me. There’s clearly something on your mind. You need to let it out.”

Sierra’s heart warmed from her sister’s words. She was so lucky to have her. She hated the fact that they were at schools hours away from each other, which was, unfortunately, not something she had thought too much about when her head was up Teresa’s ass.

“I’m gay.” Sierra didn’t realize those were going to be the first words out of her mouth, but her lips had made that decision before her brain could catch up.

“Obviously,” her sister answered right away. “And?”

Sierra shook her head at the phone. “What do you mean ‘obviously’? Also, and what?”

In the silence she could almost hear Sienna rolling her eyes. “I’m your twin sister. The person who has been by your side since birth. Do you really think I wouldn’t realize that you’re gay?”

“Well, I mean...” Sierra’s mouth opened and closed. Had she really been that obvious? “Do you think moms know?”

Sienna laughed. “I’m not sure. Probably not. For two women who love women, their gaydar seems to suck most of the time. It wouldn’t surprise me if I found out it took them forever to realize they were gay themselves. I mean, come on, they told us they’ve known each other since middle school, and I don’t think they started dating until at least college, maybe after. Who does that?”

Sierra knew this was as good of a segue as ever, so she might as well say the next

part. “I kind of did that.”

“Not really. It was only a few years for you and Teresa.”

Her and Teresa? Sienna not only realized she was gay, but also knew she had been dating Teresa? Now Sierra’s head was really spinning. “Teresa?” she asked dumbfounded, the sound of that name rolling off her lips causing her heart to ache.

“Well, yeah, you two are obviously together. Right?”

Even though Sierra knew her sister didn’t mean to, those words were like a knife to her heart. They weren’t obviously together anymore because Teresa had ripped her heart from her chest and left Sierra to bleed out on the floor. Sierra couldn’t talk because tears were stinging at her eyes. God, she was so sick of crying. It felt like it was all she ever did any more.

“Are you still there?” her sister asked. “Are you okay?”

“No.” That one word came out so weak and broken, that now Sierra did burst into tears. Thank god she was alone in her dorm room. She didn’t need anyone to see her like this. “I’m not okay at all. My whole world feels like it’s falling apart, and there’s nothing I can do about it.”

“That bitch broke your heart, didn’t she?” Sienna practically growled into the phone. “I knew I never liked her. Harrison thought I was just jealous, but deep down, I could tell she was no good.”

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:02 pm*

“Wait. You and Harrison talked about me and Teresa?”

Harrison was Sienna and Sierra’s older brother. He was also adopted and ten years their senior. Even with the age gap, Sierra was pretty close to him, but they had never been close enough to discuss their love lives together. It had taken almost a year for Sierra to meet her brother’s now-wife after they started dating.

“Only briefly. He asked me about you two after he visited for Christmas last year and saw you together. I told him I was pretty positive you were dating, but I didn’t think I was a fan of the relationship. He told me I was jealous, because you were so close to someone other than me.”

“Well, I’m sure you’ll be happy to hear that you were right.” Sierra laughed through her tears. “She completely shattered my heart, Sienna.”

“Oh, honey, I’m not happy to hear that at all. What can I do? Should I drive to West End this weekend? Do you want to meet up at home? Seriously, whatever you need, tell me, and I’m there.”

Sierra wanted to tell her sister to hop in her car right now and come to see her, but there was no way she could ask her to do that. “That’s not necessary. Seriously. I’m sure you’re busy. Plus, we’ll see each other soon for Thanksgiving.”

“As long as you're sure. I hate the thought of you going through this alone. Do you have friends from the track team you can talk to? Or at least, hang out with to take your mind off of things?”

Sierra laughed again. She was starting to get closer to some of the underclassmen sprinters, but the track team wasn't exactly a safe space for her right now. Since she was being honest, she decided to tell her sister about all of those troubles as well. She let the whole story spill out, barely taking a breath between words.

"Let me guess," her sister said after Sierra finished. "Ellie Finch is hot, isn't she?"

"Wait. What?" After everything Sierra had just told her, she was confused how that was what her sister had taken from it. Ellie was hot. Sierra couldn't deny that, no matter how much she wanted to. But that had nothing to do with the story she had just told her sister.

"I don't know. I just figured this girl must be hot if she has you this frazzled."

Sierra shook her head as if her sister could actually see her. "She has me this frazzled because she's made my first semester a living hell."

"Hm."

"What?" Sierra let out a long sigh. She hated when her sister gave her a non-response like that.

"It sounds like her best friend has done even more to make your first semester hell, but you barely focused on her."

That wasn't true. Okay... it kind of was. But Sierra had a perfectly good reason for that. "Ellie drives me crazy, because there's random moments where she'll suddenly act like she cares. I think it would be easier if she just flat-out hated me like her friend. The back and forth gives me emotional whiplash."

"Plus, she's hot," Sienna said with a laugh. "I just looked her up. This is the girl you



used to be obsessed with, right?”

“Obsessed with?” Sierra had no idea what the hell her sister was talking about. She was never obsessed with Ellie Finch.

“Oh, come on. Don’t act like she’s not the whole reason you chose West End. You used to get a lady boner just from talking about how fast she was. It’s part of the reason I knew you were gay.”

Sierra wanted to deny it, but she knew her sister was right. When Sierra started considering what school she wanted to go to, she took notice of Ellie right away. Obsessed might be too strong of a word, but she’d be lying if she said Ellie had nothing to do with choosing the school she did. “Okay, whatever. You’re right. I guess that’s why they say you should never meet your heroes.”

Sierra cringed when she pictured Ellie’s face after saying those exact same words to her. There was so much pain in her eyes, Sierra almost felt guilty about it. Almost. This girl was part of the reason her freshman year wasn’t going anything like she planned, so she couldn’t get herself completely in knots over it.

“I’m sorry she disappointed you. You could definitely do worse, though. I mean, you have done worse. Teresa is a cunt.”

Why was her sister acting like Sierra was actually considering dating this girl? She was trying her best not to kill her. Dating her was the last thing on her mind. “What am I supposed to do?” Sierra asked Sienna as if she could wave a magic wand and make everything better.

“The first thing you need to do is request to switch roommates for next semester. You can’t keep living with Teresa. It’s awful for your mental health.”

Even with everything going on between them and how miserable it was to share a room right now, the thought of switching roommates had never crossed Sierra's mind. Switching roommates felt so final. It was like she was giving up on Teresa, and she wasn't sure if she was ready for that yet. "I don't know. If I switched roommates, moms would start asking questions."

"Who cares? I don't think our two moms are going to be super disgusted that you like women."

"No, but they will probably be upset that I lied to them so I could live with the girl I was dating."

"Eh, they'll get over it. You know the most important thing to them is that we're happy. They wouldn't want you to be struggling."

"I'll think about it." Even as she said the words, Sierra knew it was a lie. If she switched from her room with Teresa, the two of them wouldn't have any reason to see each other anymore, which means Teresa would be completely out of her life. Even with all of the pain Teresa had caused her this year, Sierra couldn't imagine losing her completely. "Any other suggestions in the meantime?"

"Just get through these next few weeks. Call and text me anytime you need to. Keep reminding yourself that soon you'll be home with the people who love you the most."

## Page 18

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:02 pm*

Sierra took a deep breath and blew it out. Just talking to her sister had already made her feel so much better. “Thanks, Sienna. I love you too.”

Thanksgiving break couldn’t come soon enough.

### Chapter 9

Ellie

“Ellie Finch, is that you? I swear you must’ve grown five inches from the last time I saw you.”

Ellie smiled at the gray-haired woman sitting at the front desk of her family’s medical practice. Ellie’s parents liked to joke that when they bought the practice, Mrs. McCain was part of the package. Even though she was well past retirement age, Mrs. McCain still worked there a few days a week. She always joked with Ellie that she had to in order to keep Ellie’s moms in line. “Hey, Mrs. McCain. Are my moms around?”

When Ellie had arrived home to an empty driveway a few minutes earlier, she decided to pull right back out and drive the few minutes to the practice, since she figured that’s where her moms would be.

Mrs. McCain nodded. “Your mom is cleaning up in the back and your mama is with her last patient of the day. They were hoping to be out of here before you got home, but the last patient is a talkative old woman.” Mrs. McCain rolled her eyes. “You know how they can be.”

Ellie was sure the woman her mama was with right now was younger than Mrs. McCain, but she liked that Mrs. McCain didn't seem to realize how old she was. "I know. Not everyone can be as young and fun as us, right?"

"This is why you're my favorite." Mrs. McCain winked at Ellie. "You're even more charming than that handsome brother of yours. Will he be coming home for Thanksgiving?"

Ellie nodded. "Nate and his girlfriend, Kaya, will be here on Wednesday. They are staying through the weekend." Ellie couldn't help the smile that spread across her face at the thought of seeing her brother. She hadn't seen him since going to visit him and Kaya this past summer. The two of them had lived in Vermont for over a year, so Ellie didn't get to see them as often as she'd like.

"Is this the same girlfriend who came home with him for the holidays last year?"

"Yep. He's actually been with her for over three years now."

Mrs. McCain raised both eyebrows. "And he still hasn't proposed? What is he waiting for?"

Ellie shrugged. "He just turned twenty-six, and she's only twenty-four, so I don't think they're in a hurry to settle down."

Mrs. McCain shook her head. "Kids these days. By the time I was twenty-four, I was married with two kids and a third on the way."

Ellie found that completely insane, but she wasn't going to say that to such a sweet older woman. She pointed toward the back of the practice. "I'm going to go find my mama, but I'm sure I'll see you before I head home."

“Don’t count on it. As soon as this last patient is done, I’m going to be running out that door.”

Ellie knew the frail woman in front of her wouldn’t be running anywhere, but she was willing to humor her. “Make sure you don’t run anyone over on your way out.”

“No promises.” Mrs. McCain winked. “Make sure you tell that brother of yours to come in and visit me this week, okay?”

“You got it.” Ellie gave Mrs. McCain a little wave as she walked away.

As soon as she reached the hallway, one of the exam room doors opened up and her mom, Brinley, stepped out. Her mom’s long hair was pulled back in a ponytail just like Ellie’s, and with her mom’s tattoos covered up by her long sleeves right now, it was like Ellie was looking into a mirror.

A wide smile spread across her mom’s face as she reached her arms out toward Ellie and pulled her into a tight hug. “I thought I heard you out here,” she said before placing a kiss on the top of Ellie’s head. “How are you, sweetie?”

“I’m good.”

Before Ellie could say anything else, a woman who was at least ten years younger than Mrs. McCain walked out of the exam room.

Ellie’s mom pulled away from her and pointed down the hallway. “Margarette will get you checked out and schedule a follow-up for you, Mrs. Stone. As always, it was a pleasure to see you.”

The woman, apparently named Mrs. Stone, turned toward Ellie. “This can’t possibly be little Eleanor, can it?”

Ellie's mom put an arm around her shoulder. "It is. Pretty hard to believe, huh?"

"So hard to believe. It feels like just yesterday that she and her brother were running through the office playing tag. Then again, my grandbabies aren't so little anymore either."

"Oh yeah. I think they were in school around the same time as Nate."

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:02 pm*

“That sounds about right.” Mrs. Stone laughed. “It’s so hard for me to keep track anymore.” She winked at Ellie then walked away without saying anything else.

Ellie’s mom pulled her closer and whispered in her ear. “Fun fact. Mrs. Stone’s daughter-in-law owns the barn where your mama and I got married.”

“Huh. Small world,” Ellie said as she watched the woman disappear into the front.

“More like, small town,” her mom said with a laugh. “Should we go find your mama?”

“Sounds great.”

Ellie’s mom kept her arm around Ellie as they made their way down the hall together. They were almost to the end when Ellie’s mama, Annalise, came around the corner. Annalise’s eyes lit up as soon as she saw Ellie. “My baby!” she said as she rushed over to her and pulled her into a tight hug. “How’s school? How’s track? Have you figured things out with your new teammate yet? I want to hear everything.”

Ellie knew that her mom meant well, but her head was spinning from all the questions. She had come home to getawayfrom school. She didn’t want to have to think about it now. “Any chance we could talk about all of that later? I could really use a break from school.”

“Of course, sweetie.” Annalise placed a kiss on Ellie’s head. “Let’s just enjoy each other’s company for now. I’ll wait for another day to grill you. Deal?”

“Deal.” Ellie gave her mama another hug. She was so happy to be home.

\*\*\*

By Wednesday, Ellie thought she might actually get through break without being forced to talk to her moms about what was going on at school. Unfortunately, her brother ruined that for her within minutes of getting to their parents’ house.

“Where’s my favorite sister?” he asked as soon as he walked into the house.

Ellie ran down the stairs from her bedroom and wrapped her brother in a tight hug. “Hey, bro, what’s up?” she asked as he picked her up off of the ground and twirled her around.

“Not much. Happy to be home,” he said before placing her feet back down on the ground. He punched her shoulder playfully then gave her an incredulous look. “What’s this I hear about you letting some freshman brat beat you at time trials?”

Kaya slapped Nate on the arm. “Be nice to your sister.” Kaya hugged her now too. “Ignore your brother. He’s just jealous you’re a better athlete than him.”

“Damn right, she is,” Nate said with a laugh. “Which is why she shouldn’t be letting a little punk from her team beat her.”

Ellie sighed. Clearly, her brother wasn’t going to drop this. “It won’t happen again. I promise.”

“It better not.” Nate puffed out his chest. “Mom and Mama told me there’s a chance she doesn’t like the gays. You know I won’t stand for that seeing as how all of the women in my life are queer.”



It was true. Even Kaya was pansexual. Why she chose Ellie's meathead brother when there were so many hot women in this world was something Ellie would never understand, but she was glad she had. She loved Kaya.

Before Ellie could say anything else, her moms walked into the hallway to greet her brother and Kaya. "We told you about that so you would be extra nice to your sister," Mama scolded him. "Not so you could tease her about it."

"There's someone homophobic on your team?" Kaya asked. "She's not mean to you, is she?"

Ellie shook her head. Her mind flashed back to what Sierra said about not meeting your heroes and a pit formed in Ellie's stomach once again. I think I might be the mean one. "In a strange turn of events, she might not actually be homophobic. There's a chance I completely misjudged her."

"What makes you think that?" her brother asked, his chest still puffed out as if he was getting ready to fight someone.

Ellie shrugged. "Apparently, she has two moms." And gives off gay vibes if I'm going by Chris.

"Interesting." Nate looked over at their moms. "Maybe you two know them."

Every woman in the house glared at Nate, but it was Ellie who spoke. "Not every gay person in the world knows each other, asshole. That's such a cis white male thing to say. I expected better from you."

"Chill out," Nate said with a laugh. "I was only kidding. Maybe I expected better from you." He shook his head. "You can't just go around assuming every single person hates gay people."

The smile on his face told her he was kidding, but his words still hurt. Mostly, because they were true. Ellie had made so many assumptions about Sierra that were completely wrong. It made her wonder what else she didn't know about her.

“Take it easy on your sister,” Mama said as she wrapped an arm around Ellie protectively. She smiled down at Ellie and squeezed her side. “I’m just happy, because I take it this means you took my advice and actually had a talk with her.”

Ellie cringed. “Not exactly. Sorry, Mama.”

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:02 pm*

“Will you be having that talk?” Her mama gave her a look that told her there was only one correct answer to that question.

“I’ve been trying, but she really doesn’t want to talk to me. I didn’t make the best first impression on her.”

“Well, the great thing about first impressions is that they are just the first one. You have plenty of time to make it up to her.” Ellie’s mama squeezed her side again. “Want me to send some pie back with you? Does she live close to school? I bet her family would love my pie.”

Nate snorted. “There’s a joke there, but I have a feeling one, if not all of you, would slap me if I made it.”

Ellie’s mom snickered. “I’m glad you said it, because I was about to. I’d probably get in much more trouble than you.”

Mama rolled her eyes at her wife and son then smiled back at Ellie. “I have no doubt you can make this right.”

The way her mom was looking at her as if she was the greatest person in the world made Ellie want to believe her. She wasn’t sure she could, though. She had no idea how close Sierra’s family lived to their school, because she knew virtually nothing about her. She wanted to know more, not just because she needed to make this right, but because she was drawn to Sierra in a way she couldn’t explain. Not knowing her didn’t seem like an option anymore. She wanted to know everything.

Fuck.

## Chapter 10

Sierra

After spending a week away from school, Sierra realized her sister was right. She couldn't keep living with Teresa. For the first time in months, she temporarily felt like she could finally breathe. Less than a day into being back at school, she was suffocating again. Teresa had barely said one word to her, and Sierra was ready to jump out of her own skin.

She didn't bother running her plan to switch rooms past Teresa. She figured if she did, there was a chance Teresa would try to talk her out of it, and Sierra couldn't afford to let that happen.

She had done her research and learned the first step was contacting her RA, so she started by knocking on her door one night while Teresa was studying in the library.

"Sierra, right?" her RA asked when she opened the door. "How can I help you?"

"I need help." Sierra swallowed hard, suddenly very nervous. "I want to switch roommates for next semester."

"Oh yeah? Why is that? You don't feel in danger, do you?"

Sierra shook her head. She was in danger of going crazy, but she knew that wasn't what her RA meant. "We don't get along. We used to be..." Sierra hesitated. She wanted to be honest, but she also knew how much that would piss Teresa off, and that wasn't her goal in doing this. "We were best friends, and now we're not. It's making it really hard to feel at home in my own place."

The RA nodded as if she understood. “I understand how tough that can be. I’ve seen a lot of people room with their best friend, only to find out they aren’t compatible at all. It’s heartbreaking not only to lose your best friend, but also to feel uncomfortable in your room.”

Thank god. She gets it. “Exactly. Please tell me there’s something you can do.”

The RA nodded again. “Of course. To start, I need to do a few peer mediation sessions with you and your roommate. If we’re not able to work things out through these sessions, I will go with you to speak to someone at the Office of Residence Life to see if a change is possible. How does that sound?”

It sounded horrible. Sierra had tried to get Teresa to sit down and talk to her multiple times since the semester started. At first, Teresa somewhat humored her, but even back then, their talks never actually went anywhere. Sierra didn’t know how it would help to have someone there with them as they talked, except to piss Teresa off, because she would assume Sierra was trying to out her. “What if my roommate doesn’t agree to do peer mediation?”

“If things are as bad as you say they are, I’m not sure why she wouldn’t, but if that’s the case, we can skip that step, and I will inform the Office of Residence Life of her refusal.”

Sierra nodded slowly. “Okay. Sounds good.” She was sure it would make things even more awkward between them, but if it got her away from their current situation, it was worth it.

The RA placed a hand on Sierra’s shoulder. “You seem nervous. What do you say I stop by later after your roommate returns and have a talk with the two of you together? Sound okay?”

Sierra nodded once again, because what else could she do? She had to go through these steps if there was any chance of making it through another semester.

She tried to study while she waited for Teresa to return to their room, but she could barely focus on the words in front of her, which sucked since finals were right around the corner. She jumped when the door opened and Teresa walked in.

“Sorry to startle you,” Teresa said with a chuckle.

Sierra waited for her to say more, but she didn’t. Instead, she took off her shoes and hopped onto her bed. She smiled as she stared down at something on her phone. The hollow ache in her heart that Sierra had gotten way too used to returned as she watched Teresa, because she knew that smile. It was the smile she used to give Sierra. It meant she was most likely texting one of the many guys she had a crush on. How was she so okay while Sierra felt like her entire world was crumbling down around her? It was so unfair.

A few minutes later, as promised, there was a knock on their door. Teresa looked up from her phone and furrowed her eyebrows at Sierra. “Are you expecting someone?”

“Um, kind of.” Sierra got off of her bed and opened the door without saying anything else. Teresa would find out what was going on soon enough.

## Page 21

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:02 pm*

The RA stepped into the room and looked between the two of them before pointing her attention at Teresa. “I hear from Sierra that the two of you are having some issues.”

“What did she tell you?” Teresa asked as she threw a heated glare in Sierra’s direction.

The RA sat in a desk chair and motioned for the two of them to sit as well. “I know it can be hard coming to school and realizing that you and your friend might not have as much in common as you think. Have you two been friends for a long time?”

“Since middle school,” Sierra answered softly. She stared down at the comforter of her bed to avoid looking at Teresa.

“That’s a long time. It definitely makes things harder when you’re not getting along.”

“We get along fine,” Teresa said defensively. “Sierra just doesn’t like that I have other friends.”

Sierra brought her eyes up from the comforter and found the RA looking from Teresa to her. “Jealousy is a very normal feeling in friendship, especially when you’ve known each other for so long and your relationship is experiencing changes.”

“I’m not...” Sierra stopped because she couldn’t honestly finish that sentence. She was jealous. She was jealous of every guy Teresa hung out with. She was jealous of everyone Teresa kissed. She closed her eyes to try to keep her tears inside. No more crying. For the love of god, please no more crying.

She opened her eyes when she heard a loud thud. It turned out the sound was Teresa getting back off of her bed.

Teresa smiled a malicious smile and put both hands in the air. “Listen, this is clearly Sierra’s issue. I have plans with a guy tonight, so I don’t have time to sit around and listen to this.” She looked Sierra dead in the eyes for the first time in who knew how long. “If you want to switch rooms for some reason, go ahead and do it, but don’t waste my time by dragging me into it.”

Before anyone could respond, Teresa walked out of the room. A silence spread through the room that Sierra couldn’t take. She had to say something.

“Now can I file the request for a new roommate?” she asked.

Her RA studied her face for a moment before nodding. “If you’re sure. I don’t want you to make any rash decisions because you’re...upset...about your friend meeting new people.”

Great. Not only was Teresa pissed at her, but their RA clearly thought Sierra was the problem. Fucking great. “I’m sure,” she said as confidently as possible. She was happy when her voice didn’t crack from trying so hard to hold back tears.

“Okay. It’s too late to do it tonight, but we can do it first thing tomorrow morning if that works for you.”

“That works.” Honestly, Sierra would make anything work at this point. Now that Teresa knew what her plan was, it was even more important that this switch happened, or next semester would be even more awkward.

\*



The next morning, Sierra and her RA went to the Office of Residence Life together, as promised. It was in the school's main building which also held the admissions office, the dean's office, and the offices of a bunch of other school advisors and personnel.

"How can I help you?" a woman asked as soon as they walked into the correct office. She was typing furiously on her computer and didn't even look up at them. She sounded annoyed that they were even there.

"I have a room change request for next semester," her RA stated, seemingly not the slightest bit swayed by this woman's attitude. It made Sierra wonder how often she did this.

The woman sighed, licked her fingers, and handed Sierra a piece of paper. "Fill that out, and I'll see what I can do."

Sierra grabbed the paper and a pen and took a seat. The form had a ton of questions asking for her information as well as information about her current rooming situation. Sierra wasn't sure how to answer most questions since she couldn't be completely honest about what was going on between them.

After twenty minutes, she finally finished the form. She handed it to the woman who stared at it for only a few seconds before typing into her computer once again. "Is this an emergency? Are you in danger? Worried about your life?"

"What? No."

The woman smiled for the first time as she held the form out toward Sierra. "Sorry. Nothing I can do."

Sierra's body heated up and her blood boiled. Had this woman even checked

anything? “What do you mean? I... I need this. I can’t live with her anymore.”

“If you’re not in immediate danger, there’s nothing I can do. There’s no housing available.”

“But there suddenly would be if I was in danger?” Sierra asked, aghast. She couldn’t believe this was actually happening.

The woman took off her glasses with one hand and rubbed her forehead with the other. “Listen. If you wanted to switch rooms, you should’ve put the request through weeks ago. My hands are tied. There’s nothing I can do for you this late in the semester.”

Sierra bit down on her bottom lip as she tried to hold back her tears. She had made things even more awkward with Teresa, and it was all for nothing. Sierra had to get out of this office. The walls were closing in on her and she thought she might throw up. Without saying anything, she ran from the room and straight out of the building. She had no idea where she was going, but before she could figure it out, she ran right into someone. She brought her eyes up and found dark ones looking right back into hers. The gurgling in her stomach became even more intense. There was only one person in the whole world who had eyes like that—Ellie Fucking Finch.

### Chapter 11

#### Ellie

Ellie sighed as she walked with Juniper toward the building that held the Athlete Academic Advisor. Ellie's meeting wasn't scheduled for another half hour, but since Juniper's was right before hers, she figured they might as well go together. She had been dreading this meeting all week. It was a requirement for all senior athletes to make sure they had plans for the future and realized that life went on after college athletics.

Ellie obviously knew that was the case. She wasn't naive enough to believe she would be going to the Olympics one day, but she also wasn't worried about deciding her whole life at the ripe old age of twenty-one. She was pretty sure she wanted to do something that involved the impact of the environment on animals, but she wasn't sure exactly what that looked like or if it was even what she definitely wanted to do. It was just a fleeting idea, along with a million other ideas she'd had throughout the years. It's why she wasn't in any hurry to choose a permanent area of study. She couldn't imagine enduring years of medical school like her mom had and finding she completely hated it. Luckily, that hadn't been the case with her mom, but Ellie didn't want to take that sort of risk.

She was sure the advisor wouldn't like that answer and would see Ellie as one of those athletes who comes to college strictly for the sport. Athletes like that apparently make the school look bad since it gives them one less person to brag about in the school newsletter.

Throughout their walk, Juniper had been rambling about who knows what, but Ellie couldn't bring herself to listen. She nodded along, which seemed to be all Juniper needed. Ellie was about to open the door to the building that housed the advisor's office when the door flew open on its own.

Well, it wasn't exactly on its own. A person had opened it. Not just any person. Sierra.

Before Sierra noticed Ellie, she ran right into her. When their eyes met, an odd chill ran up Ellie's spine, causing the hairs on her arms to stand up. There weren't tears in Sierra's eyes, but they were glistening as if they were threatening to fall. Ellie opened her mouth to say something, but no words came out. She wanted to ask Sierra what was wrong. She wanted to know why she always looked like the weight of the world was on her shoulders. She wanted to take that weight from her.

Wait. What the hell? Where were these thoughts coming from?

Before Ellie had a chance to really consider what was going on, Sierra growled and pushed past her.

"Wow," Juniper said with a laugh as they both watched Sierra storm away. "Could she be a bigger bitch?"

"Yeah, I know. Right?" Ellie forced out a laugh as well. When she looked over her shoulder, she was happy to see that Sierra was far enough away that she most likely didn't hear either of those comments.

Ellie was in a haze as they walked through the building. She was pretty sure Juniper was still complaining about how rude Sierra was, but she couldn't be certain. All of her focus was on Sierra and that look in her eyes.

Ellie didn't want to have to wonder about her anymore. She had less than two weeks until Christmas break and she was going to make it her mission to get Sierra to talk to her before they were apart for the month.

\*\*\*

Ellie sent a silent thank you out to the universe that night at practice when her coach asked her and the other three members of the relay team to stay after practice. "With next week's practices being optional because of finals, we need to get some good handoff practice done tonight. I promise not to keep you too long, since I'm sure you have a lot of studying to do. Jefferson and Rossi, you'll still be legs one and two. The Fins are three and four."

Ellie nodded and tried her best to suppress her eye roll. Thank God Ellie had finally looked up Sierra's last name so she could understand her coach's lame ass joke. Ellie lined up on the track beside her teammate, Kate, who was the second leg of the relay, while Sierra and Jane stood about fifty feet from them.

When Coach gave them the signal to go, Ellie studied Sierra's every movement as she ran toward her. With Juniper, she had to count every step to try to leave at the right moment, but it wasn't the same with Sierra. Some innate feeling told her when it was the right time to leave, and her feeling must have been right. As soon as she held her hand out to grab the baton, it easily passed from Sierra's hand into hers. Meanwhile, Kate and Jane, who had been in those same positions all of last year, fumbled with their hand off.

Coach had them do a few more, and with each one, the pass between Kate and Jane became more smooth. Ellie expected herself and Sierra to trip up at some point, but every single one of their handoffs remained perfect. She thought maybe it was just Sierra being perfect at everything she did, but when Coach Kraemer asked her and Kate to practice handoffs as well, they also struggled.

When everyone was done, Coach Kraemer once again mentioned the chemistry between Ellie and Sierra. Even though she knew he was only referencing their hand offs, it still sent a shiver down her spine. Chemistry. Was that what this was between them? Was it the reason why Ellie sometimes stayed up at night thinking about those deep blue eyes? Was it why her body ached to learn more about Sierra even though there was no reason for her to be interested?

Ellie was so caught up in her own thoughts, she didn't notice the rest of her teammates packing up their things and starting to head out. She threw her things into her bag and ran after Sierra. Why am I always chasing this girl?

"Hey, Sierra, wait up!" she yelled once she was closer to her.

Ellie expected Sierra to completely ignore her, but much to her surprise she stopped while Ellie closed the space remaining between them. Well, the physical space. If the look in Sierra's eyes was anything to go by, the two of them were still worlds apart in every other way.

"Could we talk?" Ellie asked her. "I know I've said that multiple times now, but I'd really like to clear the air between us. We are teammates, after all. I don't want anything to get in the way of us winning a championship this year."

"I don't let my personal life affect my performance on the track. Don't worry," Sierra answered seriously.

"I'm glad to hear that, but it's not just that. I..." Ellie wasn't even sure where she was going with this, but she knew she had to say something. "I really think we could be friends. I want to be friends."

Sierra stared at her for a long time, and Ellie felt like she might melt under the intensity of those blue eyes. After a few seconds, Sierra averted her gaze and rubbed

her temples. “I don’t get it. You called me a bitch just the other day.”

Ah, shit. She did hear that. “That wasn’t me. It was Juniper.”

“So, you weren’t the one standing beside her who agreed with her right after she said it? That’s strange. It sure looked like you. Maybe you have a twin.”

Ellie sighed. She had her there. There was no point in denying what Sierra had obviously heard. “Okay, I did, but I didn’t actually mean it. I was shaken up, because you looked so upset.”

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:02 pm*

Sierra furrowed her eyebrows, and the cutest wrinkle formed on her forehead. “You were shaken up over me looking upset, so you called me a bitch?”

“No.” Ellie shook her head back and forth a bunch of times. This really wasn’t going well. “I didn’t want to fight with Juniper at that moment because my mind was on other things.”

Sierra crossed her arms in front of her chest, but her face softened the slightest bit. “What kind of things?”

“You.” Ellie couldn’t believe she had just admitted that out loud, but she couldn’t take it back now. “I was thinking about you, okay? I feel so guilty about the impression you have of me. I’m worried you’re having a shitty freshman year all because of me.”

“It’s not all because of you.” Sierra stared down at the ground and kicked at some rocks. “If I’m being completely honest, most of my problems have nothing to do with you.”

Okay, they were finally getting somewhere. Ellie couldn’t stop a small smile from parting her lips, but she quickly bit it back since she could tell that whatever Sierra was referring to was very upsetting for her. “Do you want to talk about it?”

Sierra shook her head, but still refused to look at Ellie. “I haven’t even talked to my moms about it.”

“So, you do have two moms. I take it that means you’re not actually homophobic,



huh?”

A small chuckle escaped from Sierra’s lips, and it was like music to Ellie’s ears. “Quite the opposite, actually.”

Did that mean...? Was Sierra...? Ellie wanted to ask her, but she figured that would be crossing a line. They had come so far in this conversation. She didn’t want to ruin that.

“So, what do you say?” Ellie put on her most charming smile. “Do you think we could have that talk?”

Sierra finally looked at her and her lips twitched as if she was trying to hold back a smile. “I don’t know. I really should shower then go to the library to study.”

“What about dinner? You have to eat.” Ellie wiggled her eyebrows. “I’ll buy. We can get something fast. It beats eating cafeteria food.”

Now, Sierra’s lips did part into the slightest smile. “I guess I could spare a few minutes for some good food.”

“Really?” Ellie’s voice came out at a higher pitch than usual, totally giving away how excited she was over Sierra actually saying yes. She cleared her throat, hoping it would help to make her sound more chill. There was no reason for her to be this excited about a dinner conversation. “I’ll pick you up in about thirty? Will that give you enough time to shower?”

Sierra pulled her phone out of her bag and stared at it for a few seconds before looking back at Ellie. “That should work. I’m in Fraser.”

“Would you... Could I...?” God, why couldn’t Ellie get her words out? It’s not like

she was asking a girl for her number. Well, that's actually exactly what she was doing, but it's not like this was a date. Sierra was her teammate that she was grabbing dinner with. They were barely even friends. It was ridiculous for her to be so nervous. She took her phone out and shook it in the air like a complete idiot. "Your number?"

Sierra's eyes went wide, but she quickly recovered and nodded. "Yeah. Of course. That way you can let me know when you're outside." Sierra pointed to the phone. "May I?" she asked before reaching for it.

Ellie handed it to her and Sierra quickly typed in her number, then hit the call button. She smiled at Ellie as she handed the phone back to her, and it made Ellie's stomach somersault. "There. Now, I have yours too."

"Awesome. Thanks. You should smile more often, by the way."

Shit. Why the fuck did I just say that?

Sierra's smile grew even wider. "I'll think about it." She turned around without another word, but Ellie could have sworn there was a skip to her step that hadn't been there before.

Ellie was so excited about their dinner, she sprinted back to her apartment. By the time she got there, she was so out of breath, she had to go into the kitchen to refill her water bottle. As soon as she shut the water off and got her breathing under control, she heard a strange noise coming from Juniper's room. It almost sounded like crying, but that didn't make sense since Juniper never cried. In fact, now that she was thinking about it, Ellie couldn't remember even one time throughout their whole friendship that she had seen Juniper cry.

She walked over to the door and knocked on it, and as soon as she did, the sound stopped. "Everything okay?" she asked through the door.

“I’m good.”

Juniper’s voice sounded anythingbutgood. Ellie brought her hand to the doorknob to test if it was unlocked. Much to her surprise, the knob turned, and the door opened.

When Juniper saw her, she quickly wiped the tears from her face. “I told you I’m good.”

Ellie walked over to her best friend and sat next to her on the bed, placing her hand in Juniper’s as soon as they were side by side. “What’s wrong?”

Juniper shook her head. “Nothing. All good.” She pointed to her face where she plastered on the worst fake smile.

“Good try. I’m your best friend, remember?”

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:02 pm*

Instead of saying anything in response, Juniper stared into space as though she was lost in her own thoughts. The silence stretched out between them and Ellie was about to say something when Juniper finally spoke again. “Have you ever heard the old song ‘All American Girl’ by Carrie Underwood?”

“I might have heard my mama listening to it at some point, but I’m not really sure. Didn’t that come out before we were born? Also, isn’t she on the People We Don’t Talk About list after the whole Inauguration bullshit?”

Ellie’s questions finally made Juniper crack a real smile. “I think it came out after we were born, but not too long after. And yeah, I know. My apologies.”

“Why did you ask me about that song?” Ellie had no clue where this conversation was possibly going.

More tears came to Juniper’s eyes. “When I started running track in high school, my dad used to sing that song to me. I didn’t understand what he meant at the time, but he would always tell me that someday I would be this amazing college track athlete and be his official All-American Girl. Once I was in college, it finally clicked for me. He actually believed I was capable of getting top eight at nationals.” Juniper let out a strained laugh. “I always thought he was crazy for thinking that was possible, but then last year...” Juniper took a few deep heaving breaths and closed her eyes.

Ellie didn’t need her to say anything else. She knew exactly what she was getting at. Juniper didn’t only want to go to nationals to get an all-expenses paid trip to California. She wanted to fulfill her dad’s dream for her. Ellie didn’t know much about Juniper’s dad except that he died suddenly right before her senior year of high

school. She almost never talked about him.

Ellie squeezed Juniper's hand. "I'm sorry. I had no idea."

"Of course you didn't. I never talk about it. I know I should honor my dad's memory, or whatever the fuck else my therapist has told me, by talking about him, but a lot of the time it's easier not to. I'd rather be the funny, bitchy girl than the girl with the dead dad. Does that make me a terrible person?"

Ellie shook her head as she fought her own tears from falling. She felt so sad for her best friend, but she needed to be strong right now. "I don't think there's one right way to handle a tragedy. We all deal with things in our own way, and that's okay."

"I know it's my own fault that I'm not on the relay anymore, but it still hurts. I feel like I let my dad down."

"I don't know much about him, but from what you've told me, I don't think you could ever let him down. It sounds like he loved you more than anything in the world, and he'd be so proud of you, no matter what."

Juniper nodded slowly. "I'm going to try harder. With track, I mean. I won't drink as much this season. I'll put in extra work. Maybe if I do that, I can get my spot back. I realize the Wicked Witch of West End will be on the relay team no matter how much I wish she wasn't, but I could probably beat Kate or Jane's times if I worked hard enough."

Shit. Ellie was so wrapped up in making sure Juniper was okay, she had almost forgotten about her plans with Sierra. What was she supposed to do? First, she needed to be there for her best friend. This was the girl who held her hair back the first time she got drunk. The one who crawled into Ellie's bed and held her almost every night for a month while she cried herself to sleep over some stupid girl. The first person by

her side congratulating her after every single race. Ellie needed to be here for her now.

If only she could remember what the last thing was that Juniper said. Ah, yeah. Working harder. “I have no doubt you can do that,” Ellie told her. “Anything you need me to do, I’m here for you.”

A spiteful smile spread across Juniper’s face. “You could Tonya What’s-Her-Face that bitch in the kneecaps for me. What do you say?”

A pit formed in Ellie’s stomach. She was so excited about their dinner, she had almost forgotten Sierra was supposed to be the enemy. She definitely didn’t feel like that right now. “Okay, maybe not anything,” Ellie said, forcing out a laugh so Juniper didn’t get suspicious.

Juniper sighed. “Fine. You’re way too nice.” She laid her head on Ellie’s shoulder and leaned into her. “Any chance you’d be okay with getting food delivered and watching a Hallmark Christmas movie while we study tonight?”

“Actually, I...” How was Ellie supposed to tell Juniper she had other plans tonight? Especially when those plans were with Sierra of all people. And after Juniper had opened up and been so honest with her. “I think that sounds amazing. Let’s do it. You pick out a movie while I shower, okay?”

Sierra would have to understand, right? As Ellie walked out of the room, she took her phone out of her pocket and sent a quick text off to Sierra, who was now listed in her phone as Fin.

Roommate emergency, sorry. Raincheck?

It took almost no time at all for Sierra to respond back. Yeah. Whatever.

She definitely didn't understand.

## Chapter 12

### Sierra

Sierra couldn't believe she was finally on the way to her first college track meet. To make the day even better, her whole family was coming, including her Uncle Mateo and Aunt Candace. Add on finally being away from Teresa, and the day was almost perfect. Almost. Things had gone from being awkward with Ellie to a little less awkward to almost nice then back to an even more extreme level of awkwardness. They hadn't talked once since Ellie made plans with Sierra only to cancel them when she was supposed to be picking her up. It made Sierra wonder if the plans were even real in the first place. Did Ellie go home and have a good laugh with Juniper over totally fooling the freshman bitch?

It didn't feel that way, especially with how Ellie had looked at Sierra longingly at every optional practice during finals week as if there was so much she wanted to say. Of course, she didn't, though. Not with Juniper around. Why was she around, anyway? She barely ever went to optional team activities, unless they involved drinking, of course.

Sierra acted like she was stretching so she could subtly turn and sneak a peek at Ellie. It would have been subtle at least, if Ellie wasn't already staring at her. They watched each other intently, neither of them breaking the contact as seconds passed by. Everyone else on the bus disappeared and all Sierra could see was Ellie. Why the hell was this happening?

She noticed Ellie's lips moving and it took her a moment to realize she was mouthing the words, 'Good luck today.'

Against Sierra's will (and better judgment), her lips curled up into a smile. 'You too,' she mouthed back, before finally forcing herself to turn away.

This was ridiculous. She shouldn't be.... What were they doing? Flirting? Definitely not. There was no reason for her to be acting that way with the girl who constantly played her hot and cold.



*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:02 pm*

She was giddy on the rest of the long ride to the track meet and tried to convince herself it was simply excitement over the meet. It obviously had nothing to do with Ellie Finch. Why would Ellie Finch make her giddy?

Either way, it was a nice change from the sick feeling she had become very accustomed to at school. Saying goodbye to Teresa before she left the night prior was almost as awkward as living with her. Teresa hesitated as she said her final goodbye, and the way she lingered by their dorm room door made it seem like she expected Sierra to hug her. The two of them had barely said one word to each other since Sierra tried, and failed, to switch rooms. Why the fuck would they hug goodbye? Especially since they would be in the same town for the next month and Sierra was sure that with her luck, they would definitely run into each other.

When the bus finally came to a stop, Sierra looked out of the window and found that they had made it to East Pine University, a small school in New Jersey that was supposedly close to Ellie's hometown. It's not like Sierra was listening to her conversation. She just happened to hear that.

Since the meet was so close to her house, Sierra wondered if Ellie's moms would be attending. She assumed they would be, but she also had plenty of teammates in high school whose parents never went to a track meet, even the home ones. They could be like those parents. Still, Sierra found herself wishing they would come. She had never met another two-mom family, and even though she was sure Ellie wouldn't be introducing her, she still thought it would be cool to see how they interacted.

Her attention was brought to the front of the bus by the sound of her coach clapping his hands together. "All right, gang, meet one. I'm not expecting any records today.

I'm just excited to see where everyone is at. Also, remember, if you do well today, that doesn't mean you get to slack over break. You can easily lose all of the progress you've made if you decide to take this next month off from workouts."

Sierra swallowed hard. She was going to work her ass off over break, but she knew it would be tough without having her teammates there to push her, especially Ellie. As much as she hated to admit it, she mostly owed the shape she was currently in to Ellie since the two of them were always competing at practice.

After the coach finished his speech, he wished them luck, and they all filed off of the bus. As soon as they walked inside and Sierra saw the track, the knots she had gotten very used to throughout high school immediately returned to her stomach. She was so nervous she thought she might throw up before she even ran. Even though Coach had flat-out said he wasn't expecting much, Sierra still felt immense pressure to perform. This was her first college track meet. She needed to prove that the coach hadn't made a mistake by recruiting her onto the team and making sure that she got a lofty academic scholarship since athletic ones didn't exist for Division Three athletes.

After Ellie called the team together and gave a pre-meet speech that Sierra could barely focus on, the team broke up to get ready for their events. Since Sierra had a while until the 400, she tried to cheer on her teammates, but mostly just wandered aimlessly.

When they announced the first call for the 400-meter dash, Ellie gathered the runners from their team and led them in warm-ups. Sierra tried to ignore the way Juniper glared at her, but it was hard since she didn't stop throughout their whole warm-up routine.

Juniper scoffed and mumbled something under her breath after they checked in and found out that Sierra and Ellie were the only two from their team who were in the fastest heat. She whispered something to Ellie that made her laugh, and the way

Juniper smirked at Sierra led Sierra to believe they were talking about her. What the hell had happened to that sweet girl from the bus whose smile made Sierra's stomach do somersaults?

Sierra shook these thoughts from her head. This was not where her mind should be right now. She needed to focus on the race and proving to her coach (and the rest of her team, for that matter) that she deserved to be here.

Luckily, there were two heats before hers, so she had plenty of time to get in the zone. The races went by way too fast and Sierra, admittedly, hadn't even been able to pay attention to how her teammates did. She stepped onto the track and took a deep breath before blowing it back out. There were six runners in her heat, and she was starting in lane five. She figured that meant there were two runners who entered with higher times than hers—a runner from East Pine who was in lane three and Ellie in lane four. If she could take at least third, she would match what her coaches and teammates expected from her.

The starter told them to get on their marks, then waited for what felt like an eternity to finally shoot the starting gun. Since Sierra couldn't see the two runners who were ranked in front of her, she had to run her own race. She kept her focus on the runner in lane six and made it her goal to catch up to her as quickly as possible. It didn't take long, and Sierra silently congratulated herself as she made up the stagger before she had to.

Since the indoor track was only 200 meters, they had to cut over out of their lanes halfway through the race, which was something Sierra wasn't used to. They had practiced it the past week at their optional practice sessions, so she was able to do it fairly seamlessly. She slipped in behind the runner from East Pine, but in front of Ellie. She swore she heard Ellie growl when she moved into that position, but she couldn't focus on that right now. She had to focus on herself and her race. Before long, she passed the runner from East Pine, but so did Ellie. As they came around the

last turn, Ellie was still behind her, but she came up beside her once they were on the homestretch.

Sierra pushed herself even harder now. If she could beat Ellie in this race, it would prove the practice race wasn't a fluke. It would most likely cause the slowly closing rift between them to be ripped apart again, but that wasn't for Sierra to worry about right now. She would never throw a race for a girl, especially not a girl like Ellie, who was most likely just playing games with her. Nope. That was even more of a reason to beat her. If Ellie's ego couldn't handle it, that was on her.

It turned out Sierra didn't have to worry about that, though. Stride by stride, Ellie inched past her until she got far enough ahead that Sierra couldn't catch her. Sierra crossed the finish line right behind her, and all of the other runners followed.

As Sierra tried her best to catch her breath, she looked in front of her to see Ellie bent over, breathing just as hard. Sierra knew she shouldn't keep watching her, but for whatever reason, she couldn't tear her eyes away. I should probably congratulate her, she told herself once she was able to get her brain to somewhat function.

She took two steps closer to Ellie, but right as she was about to reach out to grab her arm, Juniper flew onto the track and wrapped Ellie in a tight hug. She put her arm around Ellie's waist and Ellie leaned into her as the two of them walked off the track together. Sierra found herself yearning to be the one Ellie was leaning on. She figured the most logical reason was that she missed having someone to lean on her in general, since that used to be Teresa's position. Ellie could have been anyone, and she would have felt the exact same way.

"Sierra! You're my hero," a voice shouted from outside of the track and Sierra looked over to find her twin sister standing there.

Since she had been too nervous to search for her family before the race, this was her

first time seeing any of them since Thanksgiving. Sienna really was a sight for sore eyes.

Sierra walked over to her and accepted the hug Sienna wrapped her in. At least, no matter what happened, she could always count on her sister.

“Dude, how do you smell so bad after running two laps around the track?” Sienna asked as she playfully pushed Sierra away from her.

Sierra laughed. “Don’t lie. You’ve missed my stench.”

Sienna scrunched up her nose, but a small smile parted her lips. She brought her thumb and pointer finger close together. “Okay, maybe a little bit. Only because it’s close to Christmas, and I’m feeling sentimental.”

“Whatever.” Sierra rolled her eyes at her sister before looking behind her. “Where is everyone else?”

Sienna pointed over toward a set of bleachers. “They’re still sitting. They didn’t want to bother you when you were still in the zone or whatever, but as your twin sister, it’s my duty to bother you. So, here I am!”

“Hey, Sierra!”

Sierra turned around at the sound of Ellie’s voice and watched as Ellie’s eyes bulged out of her head. It was obvious she had just noticed Sierra’s clone standing next to her.

Ellie blinked her eyes a few times, before waving her arm at Sierra. “Coach wants to talk to us real quick.”

“Be right there.”

## Page 26

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:02 pm*

When Sierra looked back at her sister, Sienna had a shit-eating grin on her face. “Wow. She’s even prettier in person, isn’t she?”

“Really? I hadn’t noticed,” Sierra lied.

“Are you sure about that?” Sienna gestured toward her face. “Because, you’ve got a little drool right there.”

Sierra quickly wiped beside her mouth. “That’s not... it’s from...”

Her sister burst into laughter. “I was messing with you, but thanks for that. You proved my point.”

Sierra didn’t know exactly whatpointSienna was trying to prove and she didn’t want to know. “I have to go talk to my coach, but I’ll go over to the bleachers to say hi to everyone once I’m done.”

“Have fun.” Sienna’s tone and the smirk on her face told Sierra she wasn’t telling her to have fun talking to their coach.

“Whatever,” Sierra mumbled before walking away. Whatever her sister thought she saw between her and Ellie was complete and utter bullshit. There wasnothingbetween them. Not even friendship.

Sierra joined the rest of the 400 runners that were gathered around her coach. “Wow. I’m in awe of every single one of you girls,” the coach told them. “I just wanted to let you know that. Fin Squared—the two of you dominated that top heat. You were

racing against a bunch of D2 athletes and left them all in your dust. Juniper and Kate—you two did amazing from your heat as well. Those times are faster than any of you have ever run at the first meet of the season. Now, get some water and relax until it's time to start warming up for the 200.”

Sierra nodded, then headed toward the bleachers where her family was sitting. For a moment, she was tempted to turn around and congratulate Ellie on a great race, but she was sure Juniper was glued to her side and didn't want to deal with her dirty looks.

A wide grin spread across Sierra's face when she spotted her family sitting in the bleachers. Looking at them all sitting together, no one would guess they were family. Sierra's mom had long auburn hair and hazel eyes, while her mama's hair was dark brown. Her eyes were blue like Sierra and Sienna, but the shade was so different, it was obvious they hadn't gotten them from her. Harrison had lighter brown hair that was so curly, he still hadn't figured out how to style it even at age twenty-eight. Then there was her Uncle Mateo and Aunt Candace. Her uncle's head was currently shaved, which her mom had joked was because it was the only way for him to hide how gray it was. He couldn't hide the gray from his long brown beard, which Sierra's aunt refused to let him get rid of. People often figured Sierra's Aunt Candace was her and Sienna's mom since she had the matching blonde hair and blue eyes, but just like the rest of them, there was no blood relation. Sierra's family was the literal poster-family for foster care and adoption, and she felt so blessed that this bunch had been brought together.

Her mom was the first one to notice her and she jumped up from her seat and waved her arms like a crazy woman. The rest of her family soon joined in, and if Sierra was the type to be embarrassed of her family, they definitely would have embarrassed her at that moment. No matter how they acted, though, Sierra couldn't possibly be embarrassed. She was happy to be surrounded by so much love since she knew that wasn't the case for everyone who was put up for adoption at a young age.



“That was amazing!” her mama said as she wrapped her in a tight hug.

“Don’t get too close,” Sienna warned. “She smells like garbage that’s been left out in the sun.”

Sierra’s mama pulled out of the hug and playfully slapped Sienna’s arm. “Be nice to your sister.”

Sienna shrugged. “I’m just being honest. All of you are much too nice for that.”

Aunt Candace put an arm around Sierra and squeezed her in close. “I’m not nice at all, and I think she smells fine.”

Her uncle Mateo raised his hand. “I can definitely confirm that she’s not nice.”

After recovering from being slapped in the stomach by his wife, he gave Sierra a hug as well, followed by her mom and brother.

“How’s my favorite little bean doing?” Sierra asked her brother.

She was surprised he came all the way to her meet, given that his wife was currently eight months pregnant and could pop at any time. “Little bean and his mommy are doing great. Mel is spending the day with her bestie, so she doesn’t even miss me. With that being said, I will have to leave as soon as your last race ends. With the way her hormones are, she can change moods very fast.”

Uncle Mateo pointed to Harrison. “We came with him, so we’ll be leaving at the same time. I’ve been trying to convince your moms that you all should head out tonight too. They are calling for a big storm tomorrow.”

Sierra’s mom rolled her eyes. “I’m sure the last thing Sierra wants to do after her first

college track meet is ride in the car for four and a half hours. I'm sure we'll be fine if we leave first thing in the morning."

"Plus, it's all bullshit," her mama added. "It hasn't snowed in December for years. I don't believe that we're suddenly going to get some big blizzard."

"Suit yourselves," Aunt Candace said as she wrapped her arm around Uncle Mateo. "We'll be happy to say 'We told you so' when you're stuck here tomorrow."

Sierra didn't care if she got stuck somewhere. All that mattered was she was with her favorite people in the whole world and finally felt at home again.

## Chapter 13

Ellie

Ellie wasn't bothered when she took fourth place in the 200 and Sierra took second. She had always been weaker in the 200, so she didn't care about it nearly as much as she cared about the 400 or the relay.

What did bother her was the fact that she still hadn't had the chance to congratulate Sierra on what a good day she was having. Between cheering on her teammates, making sure her best friend was okay, and spending time with her family, there was no time to talk to Sierra. It didn't help that she had a whole fan club at the meet, and she was spending most of her time with them.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:03 pm*

Ellie needed to gather the relay team together so they could warm up, so this was the perfect opportunity to finally talk to Sierra. “West End four-by-four, gather up!” she shouted.

The three other girls were quickly by her side, ready to warm up. Ellie purposely placed herself right beside Sierra for the warm-ups to make it easier to talk. “Awesome job today. I’m sure you’re super pumped. Your times are so much better than mine were at this point in my freshman year. By the time you leave here, you’ll have all of my records,” Ellie elbowed her in the side. “For my own pride, I just hope it doesn’t happen while I’m still here,” Ellie joked.

By her sophomore year, she had already broken the school record in the 400, and last year, she broke the school record in the 200 and 4x400 as well. She didn’t expect those records to last forever, but it did kind of suck that they would most likely be beaten in the very near future.

Sierra stopped warming up and stared at Ellie with wide eyes. Ellie waited for her to say something, but an awkward silence stretched between them for almost a minute without a word being spoken.

Ellie cleared her throat. “I was just kidding. I’m sorry. You did have a really good day, and I can’t think of anyone more deserving of breaking my records. I totally wouldn’t be mad if you did. You know, if that’s what you’re worried about.” Okay, why am I rambling now?

Sierra shook her head. “Sorry. I’m just having a hard time figuring you out. I can’t decide if you want to be my friend or if you only talk to me so you have something to

laugh about with Juniper.”

It hurt that Sierra thought that about Ellie, but she also couldn’t blame her. Ellie hadn’t done the best job of reassuring her that her intentions were pure. “I’m not talking to you so I can laugh about it with Juniper. I’m talking to you, because I really want to get to know you better.”

Those words felt much heavier than they should as they left Ellie’s mouth. Why did it feel like she had just confessed something big and scary when all she said was that she wanted to get to know her teammate better? There was nothing crazy about that. Admitting it shouldn’t make her heart beat out of her chest the way that it was at that moment while she waited for Sierra’s response.

“Sorry. It’s confusing for me, especially after you begged me to get dinner with you then ditched me without any real explanation.”

She knew how bad that situation must look from Sierra’s end, but what other choice did Ellie have? Her best friend needed her. She wasn’t going to ditch her when she was clearly dealing with a lot. “I know. I’m sorry. I owe you an ex—”

“Third and final call for the women’s 4x400 meter relay. All teams must report to the starting line now or you will be disqualified,” a voice said over the loudspeaker.

Of course. It was as if this conversation wasn’t meant to happen. “Maybe we can talk after the race.”

Sierra shrugged. “I doubt my moms will want to stick around too long once the meet is over, but there’s always next semester.”

Next semester was a month away. The thought of waiting that long to make things right with Sierra made Ellie sick to her stomach. She didn’t like when things were

unresolved, especially when the contention was mostly her fault.

She let herself forget about it as she waited by the track for the race to start. The first two runners on her team had them in fourth place, but Ellie had no doubt that would change once Sierra got the baton. She wasn't wrong. Ellie watched as Sierra easily passed two runners and closed in on the third. Sierra's hand off to Ellie took place at almost the exact same moment as the hand off of the first-place team. She pulled away from Ellie slightly over the first 200 meters, but Ellie quickly closed that gap once again when they started the second lap of their leg of the race.

Ellie pulled ahead right at the end, giving herself her second win of the day. She wasn't naive enough to think this was how every meet would go, especially since the competition was better at later meets, but it was a pretty damn good place to start.

She high-fived her teammates and tried not to be disappointed that their coach pulled them into a team meeting before she could say anything to Sierra. He talked to them about how happy he was with the results of the meet and reminded them again to put in work over Christmas break. "Bus leaves in fifteen minutes," he told them at the end. "Anyone taking the bus needs to get their stuff together and head that way. If a parent or guardian is taking you, make sure we have a note from them."

As soon as the meeting ended, Sierra practically sprinted over to her family, almost as if she was trying to get away from Ellie, which she very well might have been. Ellie didn't want to embarrass herself in front of a group of people she never met, so she decided to let it be. She would have to be okay with waiting until after Christmas break to make things right with Sierra. At least that gave her time to figure out how to do it.

A hand landed on her shoulder, and she looked behind her to see her mom standing there. "Quite the ending to the day. Great race, champ."

“Yeah, sweetie, we are so proud of you,” her mama added before leaning in to give her a kiss on the cheek.

“Thanks, Mom. Thanks, Mama.” Ellie gave both of her moms a hug, then instinctively looked around to search for Sierra once again.

“Looking for me?” Juniper asked as she jumped on to Ellie’s back and wrapped her arms around her neck.

Ellie shook her best friend off of her back, then turned to face her. “Of course I was looking for you. Who else?”

Juniper put her hands on Ellie’s arms and pushed her bottom lip out in an exaggerated frown. “Try not to miss me too much, okay?”

Ellie brought her hand to her head in mock despair. “It’ll be hard, but I’ll try my best.” Even though she was joking around, Ellie really was going to miss her best friend. It was always weird going from seeing each other every day to not at all for weeks in a row.

Juniper held her arms out toward Ellie. “Give me a hug. I have a bus to catch. One that I’ll be riding on all alone thanks to you.”

Ellie pulled Juniper up against her. “Make Chris sit with you. I’m sure he wouldn’t mind.”

“Hmm. That’s a good idea. He’s not you, but he’ll have to do for now.”

Ellie gave Juniper one more big squeeze before letting her go. She watched her leave then moved her eyes around the room one more time to see if she could catch sight of Sierra. She was nowhere to be found and neither was her family, which meant she

must have already left.Damnit.

“Want to get some dinner before we go home?” her mom asked her.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:03 pm*

Ellie yawned. Just the thought of sitting in a restaurant made her tired. “Can we order in tonight? I’m exhausted.”

“Of course. Whatever you want.”

Ellie had gotten so lucky that the first track meet was at East Pine University, which happened to be less than twenty minutes from her house, making the drive home a quick one. The only problem was that her car was still at school so she wouldn’t have it for break, but she was sure her moms would let her borrow one of their cars whenever she wanted, especially since they worked at the same place.

As soon as she walked into her house, she headed straight for the family room and threw herself onto the couch. “I hope you don’t mind that I don’t plan on moving from this spot until the end of break,” she told her parents.

Ellie’s mama lifted Ellie’s feet and placed them on her lap as she joined her on the couch. “That’s fine as long as you get up to use the bathroom.”

“I’ll think about it,” Ellie said with a laugh. “Can we at least spend all day tomorrow like this?”

Ellie’s mom nodded. “As long as I don’t have to go into the office for something, I’m down.”

Even when she wasn’t working, Ellie’s mom had a cell phone that was reserved for patients to call after hours. Most people were nice enough not to use the number unless they didn’t have any other options, but it still happened once in a while since



her mom was by far the best doctor in town.

“If you get called in, I’ll go with you.” Ellie was sure her mama would go in too, and even though she was too cool to admit this out loud, she wanted to spend as much time with her parents as possible. She really missed them when she was away at school and wanted to take advantage of her time at home.

Not that it really mattered. She highly doubted her mom would end up going in to work.

## Chapter 14

Sierra

Sierra slowly opened up her eyes and looked around the hotel room she was sharing with her sister. Since it was apparently winter graduation weekend at East Pine, the closest hotel they could get was about twenty-five minutes away. Sierra had fallen asleep just a few minutes into the drive and woke up only long enough to go into the hotel and eat a few bites of a sandwich before passing out again.

It was now morning, and the room seemed much brighter than it should be. She had just realized her sister wasn’t in the room when she burst through the hotel door as if Sierra had summoned her with her thoughts. “Oh, thank god you’re up. We need to get out of here as quickly as possible. Mom and Mama are freaking out, because the weather report wasn’t wrong. It’s already snowing like crazy. It has been for at least an hour.”

Sienna pointed toward the window and Sierra turned to find large snowflakes falling from the sky. She forced herself out of bed and walked to the window to find her sister wasn’t lying. There had to be at least an inch of snow on the ground already. “Shit. I just need to go to the bathroom fast and then I’ll be good to go.”

Sienna shook her head. “Please shower first. I’m not sitting beside you for this whole long ass car ride when you smell like that.”

“Fine.”

Sierra went into the bathroom and took the world’s quickest shower, then pulled her hair into a ponytail and put on sweats. Sienna told her their moms were already out at the car getting the snow cleared off, so the two of them grabbed their bags and headed down together.

As soon as they walked outside, Sierra’s feet started to slide around on the frosty sidewalk. She walked extra slowly because the last thing she wanted was to get hurt when track season had barely started. Her sister clearly didn’t have the same reservations and didn’t even look as she stepped off of the sidewalk, onto the snow-covered blacktop of the parking lot.

Sierra felt like she was watching the scene in slow motion as her sister’s feet went out from under her and she landed on the ground with a loud thud. Sierra walked quickly, yet carefully, to get to her sister and prayed she would find her lying on the ground laughing. The last thing they needed with a big snowstorm coming was her sister getting injured. Unfortunately, Sienna was not laughing. In fact, by the time Sierra got to her, she was grabbing onto her ankle as tears rushed down her face.

“Shit, Sienna, are you okay?” Sierra asked dumbly. Of course, she wasn’t okay.

“Oh yeah, just peachy.” Sienna laughed through her tears, but there was no question how much pain she was in.

“Do you think you can stand up? If you can get up, I should be able to help you over to the car.”

“I can try.” Sienna winced as she tried to push herself up off of the ground. “Maybe not.”

Sierra tried to lift her, but it was impossible with the slippery conditions. Instead of getting Sienna any closer to being on her feet, Sierra had almost fallen down with her multiple times.

“Mom! Mama!” she shouted across the parking lot. The snow was coming down so strong that she couldn’t see well enough to decipher where they were and if they were even close enough to hear her.

After shouting their names again, both of her parents appeared a few feet in front of them.

“Oh my god, what happened?” her mom asked, not at all trying to hide the panic in her voice.

“Don’t worry, it’s the lazy twin. Not your star athlete,” Sienna joked.

“Stop being a jackass,” her mama said in response to her sister. “We obviously don’t want either of you to be hurt.” She bent down beside Sienna and put a hand on her ankle which caused her to wince again. “Can you move it?”

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:03 pm*

Sienna attempted to twirl her ankle, but yelled out in pain from the littlest bit of movement.

“I’d say that’s a no,” her mom said

Sierra and her moms worked together to get Sienna off of the ground and over to the car. Once she was sitting, Sienna rolled up the bottom of her pants and revealed an ankle that was already very swollen.

“Shit.” Her mama shook her head. “That’s not good. We should get you to see a doctor.”

“In this storm?” Sienna asked, aghast. “We’ll never get home.”

Sierra’s mama looked around them as if she was taking in the storm. “What difference is another hour going to make? At the very least, maybe we can get you some medicine to take away the pain.”

Sierra pointed toward the hotel. “I’ll go find out where the closest urgent care is.”

Her mom nodded. “That would be great. Thank you, sweetheart.”

Sierra walked as quickly as she could, but was careful not to trip. When she got inside, she shook off her jacket and walked to the front desk. “Excuse me, could you tell me where the closest urgent care is?”

The front desk woman’s eyes went wide. “What’s wrong? Is someone hurt?”

Sierra pointed outside. “My sister fell on the ice and her ankle is completely busted.”

“There is an urgent care, but I suggest going to the private practice instead. It’s closer and the doctor is much nicer. If I’m being completely honest, the doctor that normally works at the urgent care is a grouchy old man most people in this town can’t stand.”

“Good to know. Won’t the private practice be closed, though?” In Sierra’s experience, all of the privately owned medical facilities closed on Sundays.

“It is, but the doctor’s always willing to go in. She even gave me her emergency number for this very reason. She’s always happy to help out the people in this town, especially our visitors.” The front desk woman winked at Sierra. “Are you in town for East Pine’s graduation?”

Sierra shook her head as she fought to hide her growing impatience. “No. I was at East Pine for a track meet.”

“Oh, really? Small world. I’m pretty sure the doctor’s—” She put her hand up as if she was telling herself to stop. “You know what? I shouldn’t be rambling when your sister needs help. Let me get you the doctor’s information.”

Sierra felt herself grow even more impatient as the woman slowly searched around the desk, then copied down information from one piece of paper to another. When she handed the piece of paper to Sierra, Sierra said a quick goodbye before running out of the hotel. She slowed down once she walked out into the snow. When she got closer to the car, she found that it was running. Her mom was sitting in the driver’s seat, and her mama was in the passenger seat. Sierra slid into the backseat beside her sister.

She didn’t even bother to look at the piece of paper before handing it to her mom. “The lady at the front desk said we should call this doctor instead of going to urgent care. She made it sound like she’ll do a much better job.” Plus, Sierra would much

rather support a female doctor than a grouchy old man.

“Perfect. I’ll give her a call and see how soon she’d be able to see us.”

After her mom dialed the number, the call rang through the car speakers. “Hello, this is Dr. Finch speaking. How may I help you?”

Dr. Finch? Did Sierra hear that correctly or was she imagining it? She had to be imagining it, right? It would be way too coincidental if the doctor’s last name was Finch.

Sierra couldn’t focus on the conversation, because her ears were ringing. When she heard her mom say goodbye and end the phone call, she forced herself to listen. “That was so nice of her to offer to see us right away.” Her mom leaned forward and looked out the window. “I hope we can find the way. It’s really coming down.”

“What did the doctor say her name was?” Sierra asked as nonchalantly as possible.

Sienna let out a short chuckle and snort but didn’t actually respond to Sierra’s question.

“I believe it was Dr. Finch.” Her mama turned around to look at Sierra. “Wait. Isn’t that the last name of the really fast girl on your team? Ellie?” Sierra’s mama laughed. “She doesn’t live around here, does she?”

Sierra swallowed hard. Holy shit. She does. “I’m not sure where she lives.”

Sierra was sure she could get away with that lie, because there was no way the Dr. Finch they were headed to right now was related to Ellie. Life had been cruel enough to her lately.

At least, that's what she thought until they pulled into the parking lot a few minutes later, and saw who was unlocking the door to the practice. There were two women who appeared to be around the same age as her moms, but that wasn't who Sierra's eyes were drawn to. Nope, her eyes went right to the girl standing beside the older women—Ellie Fucking Finch.

## Chapter 15

Ellie

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:03 pm*

Ellie couldn't believe they were actually standing out in the cold, unlocking the practice for some family from out of town. Ellie's mom didn't ask for many details before saying she'd love to help, so the only thing Ellie knew was that some teenage girl had fallen on the ice and done something to her ankle.

Ellie watched as a car slowly drifted from the road into the parking lot. It parked in what would have been the closest parking spot if the spots could actually be seen. Ellie watched as one woman got out of the driver's side and another out of the passenger side. They both looked vaguely familiar, but she couldn't figure out why, especially if they were from out of town.

When the back door of the car opened, Ellie got her answer. Slowly, but surely, Sierra stepped out of the car. Even though it was almost impossible to see anything because of the snow coming down, Sierra's eyes drifted right to Ellie. Ellie felt it more than she saw it, but she had no doubt Sierra was watching her. Every bone in her body told her she was. Ellie bristled, but it wasn't from the cold winter air.

Wait. Is she hurt? A feeling of dread passed through Ellie's body as she thought about all of the times she and Juniper had hoped that very thing would happen. Now that it could have been the case, she was praying it wasn't. She watched Sierra, looking for any sign that she had hurt her ankle, but it was hard to tell with the low visibility.

From what she could see, Sierra's figure was walking from her side of the car to the other. She opened up the door and helped someone else. Duh. Her sister. Ellie could only assume she was her sister, at least, since they looked exactly alike. Sierra was built more like an athlete, which was to say she had all muscle and no meat. Her sister had less muscle and a little more cushioning around the midsection.



The two older women, who must have been Sierra's moms, walked to the back of the car as well and helped Sierra get her sister out. The four of them struggled to walk from the car to the office, but soon enough, they were standing in the lobby of the office with Ellie's family.

"I can't thank you enough for coming in to see us," the woman with long auburn hair said to them. "I'm Brooke Finnegan. My daughter, Sienna, is the one who slipped on the ice." Her eyes slowly drifted from Ellie's moms to Ellie. "Wait a second. You're Ellie Finch." She put an arm around Sierra, who hadn't made eye contact with Ellie since making it inside. "You're on the track team with Sierra."

Ellie saw when the realization hit both of her moms about who this was. It was obvious they were intrigued after everything Ellie had told them.

Ellie's mom stepped forward and took Brooke's hand. "It's very nice to meet you. I'm Ellie's mom, Brinley."

"Very nice to meet you," Brooke said.

A brunette stepped up beside Brooke and held her hand out as well. "I'm Tiffany Finnegan."

Brinley grabbed Tiffany's hand, but stood frozen for a moment. "You look oddly familiar to me."

"Me?" Tiffany furrowed her eyebrows for a moment. "Maybe you saw me at the meet, and you're recognizing me from that."

"Maybe." Brinley shook her head. "I just feel like I know you for some reason."

"You do feel familiar to me too." Tiffany looked between Brinley and Ellie's mama,

Annalise. “You both do. But, it could definitely be from seeing you at the track meet.”

“You didn’t ever happen to live in this area, did you?” Annalise asked with a laugh as if she suspected the answer to be no.

Tiffany pointed between herself and her wife. “Not Jersey, but we both lived in and around Philadelphia at one point.”

Brinley laughed now too. “Wait. I also used to live in Philly. Maybe we have met at some point.”

“Small world, huh?” Tiffany laughed, but it was short-lived, and her eyes went wide as she stared at Brinley.

Ellie watched as her mom’s eyes went wide at the same time, and she swallowed hard. “Very small world,” she said with a nervous giggle.

Okay, what the hell is happening?

Tiffany looked all around her before putting her focus on Sierra’s sister. “Anyway, this is Sienna, Sierra’s twin sister. She fell coming out of our hotel this morning and did a number on her ankle.”

Brinley bent down in front of Sienna and felt her ankle. “Definitely might be broken. If you come with me, I can do a few tests.” She stood back up and looked at Ellie and her mama. “Annalise, could you begin getting Sienna’s information put into our computer system? And Ellie, stay with your friend.”

Friend. That seemed like a very strong word for Sierra, but also, somehow, didn’t feel like enough. Soon, it was just Ellie and Sierra left in the room, both of them staring at

the floor awkwardly.

Ellie cleared her throat and pointed behind them. “Want to have a seat? I’m guessing this will take a while.”

“S-sure,” Sierra answered hesitantly, as if she was anything but sure.

Ellie led the way back to the waiting room chairs and sat down, motioning for Sierra to take the seat beside her. Part of her expected Sierra to refuse to sit next to her, but Ellie was pleasantly surprised when she did.

“So, what happened to your sister?” Ellie asked, desperate to find any way to break the ice between them.

Sierra snorted. “She’s an idiot. She was walking way too fast and not paying attention, as usual, and completely ate it on the ice.”

Ellie cringed as an ache came to her legs just from the thought. “Sounds painful. I’m glad it wasn’t you.” Ellie cringed again, but this time, it was at herself. Why the hell would she say something like that? “I just mean, that would really suck for the track team. You did an amazing job yesterday, by the way.”

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:03 pm*

Amazing segue, Finch. Ten out of ten. Very demure.

Sierra's eyes widened, but then her face softened. "Thanks. I really appreciate that. So did you, obviously, but that's a given by now, right?"

Ellie shook her head as the same nerves that ran through her body whenever she thought about track returned. "It doesn't feel like that to me. Every meet I wonder if it's going to be the one where I forget how to run or something. I'm constantly afraid I won't live up to all of the expectations people have of me."

It was weird for Ellie to say that out loud to someone her own age. She had shared that fear with her parents, who obviously assured her that she would never let them down, but she'd never voiced it to one of her peers. Not even Juniper.

"That's funny, because you carry yourself with such confidence. When you race, it's clear you know that's where you belong, and no one is going to take that from you. I would have guessed you never get nervous."

"Yeah, kind of disappointing, huh?" Ellie asked, her mind going back to the words Sierra spoke about not meeting your hero. Words that still haunted her to this day.

Sierra shook her head. "I like that you get nervous. It makes you more real. More human."

Sierra looked over at Ellie, and when their eyes met, all of the air was sucked from her lungs. She felt like she was floating outside of her body. It was the exact same feeling she'd had when Sierra's eyes met hers on the bus ride. Ellie knew she had to

say something, but she couldn't remember how to form words. She opened and closed her mouth a few times, before she was finally able to get words to come out. "I'm really sorry about ditching our dinner plans. They weren't fake. I was so happy you agreed to go. When I got back to my apartment that night, I found Juniper in her room, crying. I couldn't leave my best friend when she needed me. I know it doesn't seem like it from your perspective, but she's actually a really good person. She just doesn't always like to show that side of herself. Throughout college, she's been an amazing friend to me. She's the type of friend who would drop anything to be there for me. Have you ever had a friend like that? Someone who might seem a bit standoffish or bitchy to other people, but you see the soft side of them, so you'd defend them until the end of time?"

Ellie didn't know why she was so set on proving to Sierra that she and Juniper weren't bad people, but she needed her to realize that was the case.

Sierra blinked a few times, and it looked like she might start to cry. She gazed at something behind Ellie, a distant, hard look surfacing on her face as she did. "I did. Well, I thought I saw a soft side of her. It's not there anymore."

Ellie wanted to know what Sierra was talking about, but she didn't want to push her to talk about something that made her uncomfortable. "I'm sorry to hear that."

"She was actually..." Sierra shook her head rather than finishing her sentence. "Never mind. I don't know why I'm talking so much right now."

"You can tell me anything," Ellie reassured her. What she really wanted was for Sierra to tell her everything.

"It's okay. You don't have to be nice to me just because I'm stuck in your hometown while your mom takes care of my sister."

Was that really what Sierra thought? What else did Ellie have to do to prove herself? She didn't have time to figure that out, because her mom and Sierra's family walked back into the lobby at that very moment.

Sierra's sister pointed to the boot that she was now wearing. "Broke a bone in my ankle. This amazing doctor believes I'll be fine as long as I wear this boot for the rest of my life."

Tiffany rolled her eyes. "She's being dramatic. She needs to wear it for a month or two. If we ever get home, we'll set up a follow-up with Dr. Ohrs."

Annalise looked out the window and gritted her teeth together. "I hope you don't have too far to go."

Tiffany's smile dropped from her face. "Unfortunately, we do. We're over four hours away on a clear day. I think we might have to get a hotel and wait for the storm to pass."

"We can't!" Sierra said so loudly it caused Ellie to jump in surprise. "What if Mel goes into labor? I can't miss my first nephew being born."

Add that to the list of things Ellie didn't know about Sierra. Apparently, she was going to be an aunt.

Sienna raised her hand. "I personally think we should stay. We'll never meet our nephew if we don't make it home, and given the fact that there's no visibility out there, I'd say there's a pretty good chance we wouldn't."

Sierra looked between her moms as if she was desperate for one of them to say they would make the drive. "But what about work?"

Brooke laughed. "I'm sure the school will survive if I work remotely for a few days and your mama can literally work from anywhere." Her face softened as she looked at her daughter. "What's the real problem, sweetie?"

"I just really don't want to have to stay in a hotel." The way Sierra's voice cracked made Ellie believe she was trying to hold back tears, and that broke her heart. She had no clue what was going on with this girl, but it had to be something. It was as if she was always on the edge of a mental breakdown.

An idea popped into Ellie's head. It was probably an awful idea, but right now, it felt like the best idea in the world. Ellie looked between her parents. "Mom, Mama, could I talk to you in the back?"

Brinley squinted her eyes at Ellie as if she was trying to figure out what her daughter was up to. "That's a little rude when there are people here. Don't you think?"

"Please?"

Brinley looked away from Ellie to focus her attention on Sierra's family. "I'm sorry. Give us just a moment."

Ellie walked with her parents through the office and into the break room in the back. "I think we should ask them if they want to stay with us until the storm passes. It's not like we don't have the space."

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:03 pm*

There were four bedrooms in their house. The guest room and her brother's old room were completely vacant right now. Sierra's moms could stay in one room, and her and her sister could stay in the other. It was perfect.

Much to Ellie's surprise, her mom shook her head. "I don't think that's such a good idea, sweetheart."

Ellie was shocked her mom would actually say no to this. "Aren't you the one who is always preaching about going out of your way to help others? This is the perfect opportunity to do that. Come on. It's the holidays. They shouldn't have to stay in a hotel. Not when we have the space."

"I just really don't think it's the best idea," her mom repeated.

"Why not?" Ellie asked. She definitely wasn't going to let her mom off that easily.

"Yeah, why not?" her mama asked, clearly just as confused about Brinley's reaction as Ellie was.

"I'll tell you later," Brinley whispered to Annalise as if Ellie wouldn't hear it when she was standing right in front of them.

So odd.

Annalise smiled at Ellie. "They can absolutely stay at our house. We're not making them stay in a hotel during the holidays. You're right." She looked at Brinley and lifted an eyebrow as if to tell her she needed to agree.



Brinley shrugged. “Okay, you’re right. We should definitely ask them. Just don’t be offended if they don’t say yes.”

Ellie squealed and gave both of her moms a hug. “Thank you, thank you, thank you!”

When they went back out, Brinley was the one who spoke. “We think you all should stay at our house. There’s no reason to stay at a hotel when we have the space and we’re just a few minutes from here.”

Brooke shook her head. “We wouldn’t want to impose.”

“Yeah, we couldn’t,” Tiffany added more firmly.

“As the one with the broken ankle, I think I should have the final say, and I’d feel the most comfortable if I stayed with a doctor while we’re here. That way, if I need anything, she’ll be right there to help,” Sienna said.

Ellie could have sworn she saw Sierra glare at her sister, but she didn’t say a word in response to her.

“She does have a point,” Brooke said. She looked over at Annalise and Brinley again. “But only if you’re sure. Like I said, the last thing we want to do is impose.”

“We are positive. The more the merrier, right?” Annalise asked. Everyone nodded in agreement, but only half the room seemed to actually mean it.

Sierra was not one of the people who looked happy about their arrangement, but now Ellie had time to work on that. It was shaping up to be a very interesting Christmas break.

Chapter 16

Sierra

“Why the hell would you tell everyone you felt more comfortable staying with your doctor?” Sierra whispered to Sienna once they were back in the car on their way to Ellie’s house.

“You’re welcome,” her sister said with a smirk as if she had actually done Sierra a favor.

Sierra didn’t want to stay at a hotel, and she definitely didn’t want to stay at Ellie Finch’s house. She just wanted to be at home in her own bed where she could forget about everything that happened this semester.

She understood why they couldn’t drive there now, but it still didn’t make it any less hard. The only good part about going to Ellie’s house was that she definitely didn’t have to worry about old memories of Teresa coming up there. As much as she loved being home over Thanksgiving, she had to admit that it was hard being back in her old room in the bed where she lost her virginity to the girl she thought would be in her life forever.

But, really, Ellie Finch’s house? She was still trying to get a read on Ellie, and being forced to live with her was not the way she wanted to figure her out. Clearly, it was Ellie’s idea. That had to be why she asked her moms to go to the back to talk. Why would she want Sierra to stay? Was she really that desperate to talk to her and try to make things right between them? Sierra had to hand it to her. She was dedicated. She definitely didn’t give up.

After a few minutes, they pulled up in front of a modest two-story house that appeared to be about the same size as Sierra’s house. Sierra got out of the car so she could help Sienna out. By the time Sienna was out of the car and leaning all of her body weight against Sierra, Ellie was standing beside them.

“Do you two have bags I can grab?” Ellie asked.

Sienna pointed toward the trunk. “They’re back there. Thank god my moms picked me up from school on the way to the meet, so I actually have clothes with me.”

Sierra hadn’t even thought of that. Thank god she had enough clothes with her to last at least a week or two. Although, she really hoped she wouldn’t have to utilize two weeks’ worth of clothes, because two weeks spent in close quarters with Ellie sounded like absolute torture.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:03 pm*

Ellie pulled a bunch of bags from the back of the car and walked to the house as if it was nothing. She was covered right now, but Sierra had to guess the muscles that she had taken notice of multiple times during the meet, were flexed underneath her layers of clothes. She inadvertently licked her lips, which was ridiculous. She shouldn't be licking her lips while thinking about any part of Ellie's body. She might be hot, but Sierra had no interest in putting her heart on the line again, especially for someone like Ellie.

Her sister leaned even closer to her and snickered. "I'll say it again—you're welcome."

"I wasn't checking her out," Sierra hissed at her.

Her sister laughed even harder now. "That's funny. I don't remember saying that you were."

"I..." Sierra growled. Sienna was so infuriating and had no idea what she was talking about. "Just shut up. Okay?"

"Fine. I'll shut up if you help me into the house," Sienna said smugly.

Sierra wrapped her arm even more tightly around her sister and led her into the house. The house was adorable and gave a feeling of home immediately upon entering. Pictures lined the walls of Ellie and a boy who Sierra assumed must be her brother. Sierra couldn't stop herself from gawking at young Ellie. She couldn't help it. She was so fucking cute. There was a wedding picture of Ellie's moms that made Sierra do a double take, because Ellie's mom, Brinley, looked exactly like Ellie. Right next

to that was a picture that appeared to be from Brinley's graduation from medical school and that picture looked even more like Ellie.

"Good sign for the future, huh?" her sister whispered to her as she nodded toward the pictures Sierra was looking at.

"What happened to shutting up?" Sierra asked her.

"We're inside now, so I don't need your help anymore. Plus, I can't help myself. It's too much fun getting you rattled."

"Can I show you two to your room?" Ellie asked from the top of the stairs. "Sienna, will you be okay to get upstairs or would you rather I set you up with some blankets on the couch?"

"I can hop up the steps. Don't worry."

Sierra followed behind her sister to make sure she didn't miss a step while hopping and topple down the stairs. Luckily, they both made it up the steps in one piece. They followed Ellie down a long hallway until there were only two doors left.

Ellie pointed to the door to the right. "This is my room. Right across the hall here will be yours."

Ellie opened the door to reveal a very plain room that didn't have much left in it at this point. There was a bookshelf with a few trophies, a queen-size bed with a blue comforter, and a dresser. The walls were white, but the paint was chipped in multiple places, most likely from things being taken down that were once hanging on it.

"Sorry, I know it's not much," Ellie said as she followed them into the room. "But the bed is really comfortable, and my brother has been out of the house long enough that

it no longer has his stench, so it's better than nothing."

Sienna sat down on the bed and looked around. "Definitely better than a hotel. Do you know where our moms went?"

"I think my moms are giving them a tour of the downstairs right now. They might be showing off the bar in the basement. My mom was apparently a bartender before she went to medical school, so she's very proud of it. She normally takes guests down there and makes them a drink to prove she's still good at it," Ellie explained with a laugh.

"Did anyone else think our moms were acting strange earlier?" Sienna asked.

Sierra thought she had noticed some weird tension, but she figured she was just imagining it as a way to not think about the tension between her and Ellie.

"Yes!" Ellie shouted. "I'm so glad I'm not the only one who noticed that. It was so weird."

"Do you think one of our moms hooked up with one of your moms?" Sienna asked with a chuckle.

Ew. Why would she even suggest that? Sierra sat on the bed and hit her sister with a pillow. "I don't want to think about that at all."

"I bet it was Mama," Sienna said as if she hadn't noticed Sierra's obvious disgust over this topic. "She was the wild one."

Sierra rolled her eyes at her sister. "We don't actually know that. You always just assumed it was the case since they don't keep any of her books in the house."

Ellie leaned against the dresser and stared at Sierra and Sienna. “Your mama is a writer?”

“Wasa writer,” Sienna told her. “She wrote two or three books, but then put her time into trying to improve the foster care system.”

Ellie’s eyes went wide, and she stood a little taller. “That’s amazing. Is she a social worker or something?”

Sienna shook her head and answered before Sierra had a chance. “No. She created an app to help find the right match for kids and foster parents.”

Sierra was filled with pride when she saw the way Ellie’s face lit up in response to learning that about her mama. Sierra was able to watch firsthand as her moms gave love to kids who needed it the most, including her and her siblings.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:03 pm*

“That’s so cool!” Ellie said.

“Our moms are both super passionate about foster care since they both grew up in the system. Our mom was eventually adopted, but our mama never was.” Sierra wanted to keep talking about it, because Ellie was hanging on her every word. Even though she shouldn’t, she liked the feeling of having Ellie’s undivided attention.

Unfortunately, her sister cut in, stealing Ellie’s attention away. “Which brings me back to how I know for a fact that mama was wild.” Sienna broke into full theatrical mode, the same way she always did when she told a story. Her eyes were wide, and her hands moved all around as she spoke. “I bought a copy of the memoir she wrote about her life, because I was curious. Once I got to her twenties, I had to stop. It was even too much for me to handle, which you know is saying a lot. She—”

Sierra put up a hand to stop her sister. “Don’t tell me. I don’t want to know.”

“Aw, come on. Really?” Sienna asked. “Don’t ruin the fun.”

“Sometimes it’s better to let stuff be,” Ellie said. “I think it’s for the best not to know some stuff about our parents. I learned that the hard way.”

Sienna sat up straighter. “Oh, tell me more.”

Much to Sierra’s surprise, Ellie walked over to the bed and sat down close beside her, making it hard for Sierra to breathe. “When I was in middle school, I thought it would be fun to snoop through my moms’ room. I was wrong. I found these lists...”



Ellie's voice drifted off, but Sierra could tell by the intrigue written all over her sister's face that Sienna wouldn't let her get away with not giving them more details. She wasn't wrong. "And..." Sienna prompted after a few seconds.

Ellie cringed. "The first one was a sex syllabus, all about having sex with women. My mom's name was listed as the professor." Ellie made a gagging motion. "As if that wasn't bad enough, the other one was a fucket list."

"A fucket list?" Sienna laughed. "Like a bucket list of sex?"

Ellie nodded, her face twisting into a look of disgust. "Yep. I dropped those papers like they were on fire and never snooped around again. I could barely look at my moms for the next week."

Sienna wiggled back and forth on the bed as she broke into a fit of giggles. "Okay. You're right. That's awful. Maybe I should set the book on fire. Just to be safe."

Ellie laughed along with Sienna. "It's probably for the best, honestly."

Sierra watched the women on both sides of her and wondered why it was so easy for them. Every conversation between Sierra and Ellie was charged and awkward and normally went to shit within a few minutes. Sienna and Ellie barely knew each other, and they were already talking as if they were old friends.

Sienna caught Sierra's eye and studied her for a moment before doing a dramatic stretch and yawn. "You know what? I could use a little rest. Do you two mind going somewhere else to talk so I can take a nap? My ankle is killing me."

It was obvious to Sierra what Sienna was up to, but the way Ellie looked down toward Sienna's ankle with concern written all over her face, told Sierra she hadn't caught on. "Are you okay? Do you need my mom to come take another look at it?"

Sienna waved her hand. “I’m fine. I just need some peace and quiet.”

“Of course.” Ellie nodded and stood from the bed. As soon as she was standing, her eyes moved right to Sierra. “Do you want to rest too? If not, I can give you a tour of the house.”

For some reason, getting a tour of Ellie’s house that was led by Ellie seemed like the greatest thing in the world at that moment. There was nothing Sierra wanted to do more. But, that sent warning bells off in her head. She needed to be careful. Ellie seemed harmless, and it was obvious she wanted to make things right between them, but no one had made Sierra feel this way since Teresa. She and Teresa had a much better start, and everything still went to complete shit for them. Sierra couldn’t let another pretty face tear her world apart.

“I think I could actually use a nap, too. Thank you, though.”

The disappointment was obvious on Ellie’s face, and it made Sierra want to tell her she had changed her mind. Instead, she let Ellie leave without another word.

Sienna didn’t say anything as she crawled underneath the comforter and Sierra did the same. Sienna rolled onto her side, and after a minute of complete silence, Sierra figured she must have actually fallen asleep.

Sierra figured Sienna was having a dream when she heard her mumble something under her breath. That was until she registered the words her sister had said. “You’re a fucking idiot.”

Instead of actually napping, Sierra stared up at the ceiling and wondered if her sister was right.

Chapter 17

Ellie

When Ellie woke up the next day, she was happy to find that the snow hadn't let up at all. She took out her phone and discovered that they had over a foot already and even more was expected. There was a warning out that people shouldn't be on the roads unless they absolutely had to be.

Ellie looked out of her window toward the driveway. Even if Sierra's moms decided to try to drive in this for whatever reason, they would have to dig their car out first, which looked like it would take hours.

Ellie was still struggling to figure Sierra out. Any time she felt like they might be making some progress, Sierra pulled away from her. It happened after they got to the house yesterday and then again after dinner when everyone stayed awake to play board games, but Sierra went to bed. Ellie knew it was an excuse to get away since she had already napped for hours before dinner. Sure, the track meet was tiring, but it wasn't that tiring.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:03 pm*

Ellie did know one way to get Sierra to hang out with her, which she knew Sierra wouldn't be able to resist. She pulled up her and Sierra's text conversation (which had ended after Ellie canceled their dinner plans) and sent her a quick text.

I know it's going to be hard to actually do anything, but do you want to try to get some sort of workout in with me this morning?

It was no surprise when Sierra's text came back almost immediately. That's a good idea. What did you have in mind?

Ellie couldn't stop the smile from parting her lips. I have some free weights and a treadmill down in the basement. I'm sure we could come up with a circuit or something.

Cool. Want to meet downstairs in 15 minutes?

Works for me!

When a text came through a few minutes later, Ellie figured it was Sierra texting again. She was surprised when she saw Juniper's name pop up on the screen. She hadn't thought about her best friend or what she would think about Sierra staying at Ellie's house.

Hey! How's it going? Pretty big snowstorm, huh? I hear you are getting it even worse in Jersey. Most of our teammates were smart enough to drive home after the meet. I didn't, so now I'm stranded at school.

You're not the only one who is stranded, Ellie thought to herself. She considered not telling Juniper, but she felt bad lying to her. She also felt guilty keeping Sierra a secret. If she was trying to prove to Sierra that she had gotten the wrong impression of her, hiding the fact that she was at her house wasn't the way to do it.

Instead of trying to explain the situation over a text message, Ellie decided to call Juniper instead.

"Oh god, are you dying? Were you kidnapped?" Juniper asked after picking up after a few rings. "Why the fuck are you calling me?"

"I'm fine. Calm down. I just thought this was something I should tell you over the phone."

"Oh my god, you really are dying."

Ellie laughed at her best friend, but the sick feeling in her gut remained. "I'm not dying, but you might want to kill me after you hear what I'm about to say."

"Juicy. What's up?" Juniper sounded much more excited than she should for what Ellie was about to reveal.

Instead of wasting any more time, Ellie blurted out the whole story about her mom getting called into work and how it ended up being Sierra's sister who was hurt. She purposely let out the part about how she begged her moms to let them stay and told Juniper that her family decided to host them so they didn't have to get a hotel.

"Your moms are way too nice," Juniper said. "I can't believe they are actually letting someone who hates gay people stay at your house. I'm surprised Sierra's family even agreed. Is she the only one who's homophobic?"

“That’s the thing. Sierra also has two moms.” Ellie didn’t think that was a big secret Sierra was keeping, so she figured it was okay to share that information with Juniper.

“Does she hate them?” Juniper asked, as if that was the only logical explanation.

Ellie shook her head even though Juniper couldn’t see her. “I don’t think she’s actually homophobic.” There’s a chance she might even be gay.

“That doesn’t make any sense. Why would she have been so weird about you crushing on her friend if she didn’t have a problem with it?”

“I...” The answer hit Ellie like a ton of bricks. If Sierra was gay, maybe she had a crush on her straight friend, and that’s why she was so defensive over her. That’s why it hurt her so badly when Ellie joked about getting with her. Shit. “I’m not sure.” It wasn’t a lie since the conclusion Ellie had come to was purely speculation. “But I think we should give her a chance.”

Juniper sighed. “Just like your moms. Always looking for the best in people.” She sighed again. “Fine. I’ll make you a deal. If you still think she’s okay after being stuck in a house with her, I’ll give her a chance. And by that, I mean I won’t be a bitch unless it’s warranted. I’m not going to be her best friend.”

Relief swept through Ellie’s body. “I wouldn’t ask you to. You already have one of those.”

“Exactly. Be careful. Text 9-1-1 if you need me to come save you.”

“All right. Talk to you later, June.”

“Text me later. No more of this calling bullshit.”

“You got it. Text you later.” Ellie chuckled as she hung up the phone. She was pleasantly surprised about how well that conversation had gone, and now had a new pep to her step.

She ran down the two sets of stairs into the basement and found Sierra sitting on a stool by the bar. “Sorry it took me so long. I was talking to Juniper.”

“No problem.” The way Sierra said the words through gritted teeth with a deep scowl on her face told Ellie that she didn’t actually mean it.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:03 pm*

I really need to figure out a way to make these two get along.

That was a problem for another day, though. For now, they needed to work out. After discussing what made the most sense, Ellie and Sierra got to work. After an hour and a half, they were both sweaty and exhausted.

Ellie lay down on the floor and stared up at the ceiling. “I don’t think I’m ever going to stand again.”

Her view of the ceiling was blocked when Sierra walked over and stood above her. “You need to, or your legs are going to cramp up.” She held her hand out toward Ellie. “Here.”

Ellie accepted Sierra’s help as she stood. Yet, even with her feet planted firmly on the ground, she couldn’t get herself to let go of Sierra’s hand.

She looked in front of her where Sierra had beads of sweat running down her forehead and across her chest. Her heart beat faster as her eyes followed the trail into her cleavage. It was wrong for her to be checking Sierra out like this, so she forced her eyes up. That proved to be a mistake, though. Sierra’s deep blue eyes were boring into hers, and for a moment, Ellie forgot how to breathe. Really, she forgot how to do anything. She was frozen in place, barely breathing, and her heart was beating out of her chest, but she didn’t want it to stop. She wanted to stay lost like this forever.

When Sierra’s hand fell away from hers, reality came crashing in around Ellie. What the hell just happened? It felt like something Ellie was very familiar with, but that couldn’t be the case. There was no way Ellie had a crush on Sierra.



“So, um, do you want to hang out?” she asked dumbly. Out of all the things to say, those were the words that decided to come out of her mouth? Really?

Sierra stared at Ellie as if she had no idea what to say. After a few seconds, she pointed toward the stairs. “I need to shower, and I should probably spend some time with my moms.”

“Of course. Yeah.” Ellie should probably spend time with her moms too.

She waited a few minutes to go upstairs, because her moms could read her like a book. If she didn’t take the time to get her emotions under control, they would immediately know there was something up with her.

“Hey, sweetie!” her mama said as soon as she walked through the door from the basement. She was sitting at the kitchen table with Ellie’s mom, both sipping their coffee as if they had nowhere to be.

“No work today?” Ellie asked.

Her mom chuckled. “Have you looked outside? At this rate, I’d say we’ll probably end up closed through Christmas.”

Ellie looked outside and was surprised to see how much snow was still coming down. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen this much snow.”

Her mom nodded. “This is definitely some pre-global warming shit going on right now. They are saying it’s a blizzard. We haven’t had one of those in ages.”

A blizzard? Wow. Ellie didn’t think she would ever see one of those with how all of the winters she could remember had gone. Normally, it didn’t snow until January or February, and it was nothing like the extent of what was coming down now.

“So, what are we doing today?” Ellie asked.

Her mama smiled at her mom before looking back at Ellie. “We’re doing housework and catching up on bills. Do you want to join?”

“I’ll pass. Where are Sierra’s moms?”

“Up in the guest room doing some work.” Her mama raised an eyebrow at her and smirked. “Looks like you, Sierra, and Sienna will have to find a way to entertain yourselves today.”

After talking to her mom for a few more minutes, Ellie went upstairs to shower. She got dressed into sweats and headed across the hall to Sierra and Sienna’s room. She paused for a moment before knocking as she thought back on the feelings Sierra had stirred up in her earlier. Maybe hanging out with her wasn’t the best idea, but what else was Ellie supposed to do? She couldn’t make her guests stay in their room all day.

“Come in!” Sienna shouted after Ellie found the strength to knock.

Ellie walked in to find both Sienna and Sierra lying on the bed. Sienna was scrolling through her phone, and Sierra was completely entranced by the book she was reading. Ellie had to fight the urge to stare at her, because she looked so damn cute with her eyebrows furrowed and lips tipped up in the slightest smile.

“Anything we can do for you?” Sienna asked, the amused tone to her voice telling Ellie that she had most likely been caught.

Ellie cleared her throat as she looked from Sierra to Sienna. “I was just wondering if you two wanted to watch a movie or play a game or something.”

“I’m down.” Sienna threw her phone onto the bed and slowly stood up, placing all of her weight on her good leg.

Sierra looked up from her book and blinked over at Ellie as if she had just noticed she was there. “I think I’m just going to read.”

“Okay.” Ellie tried to keep the disappointment out of her voice, but she was pretty sure she didn’t do a very good job of it. “We’ll go over to my room so we don’t bother you.”

After a movie and two card games, Sierra still hadn’t joined them. It wasn’t that Ellie wasn’t enjoying her time with Sienna, but it was the other sister she was trying to win over. Ellie instinctively looked toward the door for what had to be the hundredth time in the hope that Sierra would walk in the room.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:03 pm*

She felt a set of eyes on her and looked over to find that Sienna was staring at her. “You know, I wasn’t sure how I was going to feel about you given everything my sister has told me, but you’re cool. If she’s a little standoffish, it’s only because she’s a little jaded right now.”

Ellie hated the thought of Sierra talking to her sister about her, especially since it didn’t seem like she had much positive to say. “I got the wrong impression of your sister, and I didn’t handle it correctly. I really regret how I acted.”

“I know. I can tell. It’s pretty obvious you like her.”

Ellie swallowed hard. What exactly did she mean by like? She wanted to ask, but she was afraid that would make her feelings more obvious. “Too bad she’s not my biggest fan.”

“It’s not you. Trust me. Some of the stuff you did was a little shitty, but it sounds like Sierra also hasn’t been the most likable person in the world these past few months. She’s...” Sienna hesitated. “Well, she’s just been going through some stuff.”

“I kind of figured that. I’m guessing you can’t tell me what that stuff is.”

Sienna shook her head. “It’s not my story to tell. Just don’t give up on her, okay?”

“I won’t.”

I don’t think I could if I tried...

## Chapter 18

Sierra

“So, are you done with your book yet?” Ellie asked when they finished their workout.

It was their third day working out together, and every time, Ellie tried to get Sierra to hang out with her. Luckily, Sienna was always down to hang out, so that let Sierra off the hook. Kind of. The problem was she actually had finished her book last night, so unless she lied, she no longer had that as an excuse.

“I stayed up late last night finishing it.” Sierra let out an exaggerated yawn. “So, I think I’m going to take a nap after I shower.”

“Of course. Makes sense.” Ellie smiled, but it didn’t reach her eyes.

Sierra could tell how hard Ellie was trying, so she felt guilty about continuously blowing her off. The problem wasn’t that she didn’t want to spend time with Ellie. The real problem was how much she did. Even when they weren’t together, Sierra was constantly thinking about her. She had to imagine it would only get worse if they actually spent time together. What good would it do, anyway? Ellie would probably ditch her as soon as they got back to school. Sierra couldn’t handle being rejected like that. If she was the one doing the rejecting, it wouldn’t hurt as bad. At least, that was what she kept telling herself.

Sierra was startled from her thoughts by the sound of Ellie speaking again. “Tell your sister I’m going to do a Christmas movie marathon in my room if she wants to join.”

“I will.”

After getting her shower, Sierra informed her sister of Ellie’s invite.

“Cool.” Sienna nodded toward the door. “Let’s go.”

“I think I’m going to take a nap.”

Sienna rolled her eyes. “You fell asleep hours before me last night. If I’m okay, you should be too.”

“I just don’t want to, okay?”

Sienna put her hands in the air and backed away from Sierra. “Fine. But if you keep doing this, I’m going to have to tell Ellie the real reason you won’t hang out with her.”

Sierra crossed her arms and tapped her foot. She didn’t have the patience for her sister’s bullshit right now. “And what would that reason be?”

Sienna smirked and mimicked Sierra’s stance. “Obviously that you like her, and you’re worried if you hang out with her, you’ll fall madly in love.”

“That’s complete bullshit.” At least, mostly.

“Maybe it is. Maybe it isn’t. But Ellie doesn’t know that.”

“Fine.” Sierra didn’t think her sister would actually do that to her, but she wasn’t willing to take the risk.

As soon as Ellie noticed Sierra walking into her bedroom behind Sienna, her whole face lit up, which caused Sierra’s body to have a super obnoxious reaction. She’s only giving you time right now because her cooler friends aren’t around, Sierra reminded herself.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:03 pm*

“Decided against the nap?” Ellie asked, the wide grin on her face giving away how happy she was about Sierra’s decision.

Sierra pointed to Sienna. “She convinced me.”

“Yeah, I told her she needs to stop being such an anti-social asshole.” Sienna walked over to Ellie’s bed and claimed the spot all the way to the left.

Sienna had clearly done that on purpose, so Sierra had no choice but to sit next to Ellie. Sierra took the spot next to hersister in the hopes that maybe Ellie would end up sitting in her desk chair or on the floor, but she wasn’t going to get that lucky. Without hesitation, Ellie filled the empty spot next to Sierra.

When Ellie picked up the controller to choose a movie, her arm brushed Sierra’s, which in turn, caused Sierra’s skin to tingle. She tried to focus on the discussion Ellie and Sienna were having about movie choices, but it was no use. With each movement and every slight touch, Sierra lost her mind. She closed her eyes and focused on her breathing. She shouldn’t andcouldn’tbe having this type of reaction.

Sierra’s eyes startled awake when she was elbowed in the side. “Don’t tell me you’re falling asleep already,” Ellie said playfully. “The movie hasn’t even started.”

“Sorry. Definitely not.”

Sienna snorted a laugh, but luckily, didn’t say anything. As the movie played, the more Sierra tried to avoid thinking about Ellie’s close proximity, the more frequent these thoughts became. Partway through the movie, Ellie smiled over at Sierra and

scooted even closer to her. This time, instead of freaking out, Sierra's whole body relaxed. When she sunk lower into the bed, Ellie did the same, but it wasn't unwelcome. For the first time in a very long time, Sierra felt safe, as if this was exactly where she belonged—lying beside Ellie Finch on her bed, watching Christmas movies. It made her wonder why she had been fighting it so hard.

She decided to let her body have complete control, and when her eyes started to close, she didn't give in to the urge to force them open. When Sierra's eyes finally did open, the TV was no longer on, and her sister was gone. She tried to sit up, but couldn't. That was when she realized what was holding her down—Ellie had fallen asleep too and her arm was draped over Sierra's stomach. It was suffocating and intoxicating all at once. She wanted to lean into it, but she also wanted to run away.

Before she could decide what to do, Ellie started to stir and rolled away from her. A minute later, she stretched and sat up. "Shoot. I must've fallen asleep. I'm sorry."

God, her sleepy voice is adorable. Why the fuck does it have to be so adorable?

"All good. I actually fell asleep too."

Ellie laughed. "In your defense, you did tell me that you were tired." She patted the empty spot on the other side of the bed. "It looks like we lost your sister."

"Yeah. I guess I better go find her." Sierra hopped out of the bed as if it were on fire and speed-walked toward the door.

She had just started to turn the handle when Ellie's voice interrupted her. "Wait."

Don't turn around. Don't turn around.

Despite her better judgment, Sierra did, indeed, turn around.



Now Ellie patted the spot where Sierra had just been. “Could you stay for a little bit? I want to talk to you.”

Run away. Run the fuck away.

“What do you want to talk about?” Sierra took one step away from the door and closer to Ellie.

Stop.

Ellie shrugged. “Anything. Like I said before, I just want to get to know you better.”

“And how do you plan on getting to know me better?” Against her better judgment, Sierra took a few more steps in Ellie’s direction.

“I don’t know.” Ellie stared at the ceiling as if she was considering the question. “How ’bout two truths and a lie?”

Sierra couldn’t help but laugh as she closed the distance between them even more. “Seriously? Are we in middle school?”

“Humor me.”

There was no way Sierra was going to be able to say no to that smile, so she took the last few steps and sat down on the bed beside Ellie. “You first.”

“Fine. I’ve been out since I was in 6th grade, I’ve had three girlfriends, and I lost my virginity when I was fifteen.”

Wow. She was really jumping right in there, wasn’t she? Sierra was sure she couldn’t bring up sex without her face turning bright red, plus fifteen sounded like a logical

time for someone to lose their virginity, so she eliminated that one. “I’m going to say you didn’t come out in sixth grade.”

Ellie raised both eyebrows and smirked. “I did, actually. Benefit of having two moms. I realized I liked a girl and thought, ‘hey, that’s cool.’ I asked her out and she rejected me, because she was straight, but that was that.”

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:03 pm*

That was that. She said it as if it were the simplest thing in the world. As if it wasn't some huge secret that Sierra had been carrying around for over two years.

"My lie was the number of girlfriends. I've actually had five, but two of them were very short-lived middle school flings." Ellie knocked her shoulder against Sierra's. "Your turn."

Sierra could feel the nerves taking over her body before she even opened her mouth. There was so much she could say, but she wasn't ready, so she kept it simple. "I grew up in Woodbury. My favorite color is blue. I have a sister and a brother and about a million fiblings."

"I don't know what a fibling is, but I don't know many people who have a million of anything so I'm going to say that one."

"Okay, so that might have been an exaggeration, but it actually wasn't the lie. Fibling is the word Sienna and I came up with for our foster siblings who weren't adopted by our moms. My moms were always taking in kids temporarily while we were growing up, so there are a ton of them."

Ellie watched Sierra, unflinching, as if she was hanging on every single word Sierra said. It made her feel seen for the first time in months. "Do you still talk to any of them?"

Sierra had to look away, because Ellie's intense gaze was too much to handle. "Almost all of them. With my moms, once you're family, you're family. It doesn't matter if you lived with us for one month or five years. There's always a place in our

home.” Sierra knew she sounded like a Hallmark card, but she had heard that so many times growing up, it was ingrained in her mind.

“I love that. But, what was your lie?”

“My favorite color. It’s actually green.”

Ellie brought her hand to her mouth and faked a yawn. “So boring. You better come up with something better for the next one.”

“Oh yeah? Well, what’s your favorite color?”

Ellie waved a finger at her. “Ah, that’s classified. I need to know I can trust you before I disclose that type of information.”

“Whatever. Your turn.”

“All right.” Ellie rubbed her hands together. “There are so many family members on my mom’s side, I can’t even remember all of their names. I was named after my two great grandmothers. I have two tattoos.”

“The tattoos?” Sierra answered quickly. Their track uniforms were pretty skimpy. She would have noticed if Ellie had a tattoo.

“You’re right. I only have one.”

Even though she was covered from head to toe, Sierra’s eyes instinctively ran over Ellie’s body to search for the tattoo. “Where is it?”

“Wouldn’t you like to know?”

Sierra's face turned red as she imagined what that might mean, and Ellie threw her head back in laughter. "Get your mind out of the gutter. It's on my foot."

Sierra wanted to ask to see it, but something about that felt intimate, even though it shouldn't. It was a foot, goddamnit. "So, what's your middle name?" she asked instead.

Ellie shook her head. "That's another one you're going to have to earn. It's awful. I swear my moms must hate me."

"How do I earn this wealth of knowledge you're dangling in front of me?" Sierra joked.

"You could start by giving me a juicy two truths and a lie."

The first thing that popped into Sierra's head both exhilarated and terrified her. By the time she got herself to say the words, her heart was practically beating out of her chest. She wasn't even sure if Ellie would be able to hear her over how loudly it was beating. "I'm a homophobic bitch. I have two moms. I'm gay." And I can't believe I just said that out loud.

"I knew it!" Ellie snapped her fingers. "You are a homophobic bitch."

Sierra was so surprised and overwhelmed (in a good way) by Ellie's reaction that she broke into a fit of laughter. The more she laughed, the harder it came out, and soon, she couldn't stop herself. But damn, it felt good to laugh. And not just any laugh—a full belly laugh.

"Was it really that funny?" Ellie asked after another minute of non-stop laughter.

Sierra shook her head as she tried to calm herself down. "Sorry. I'm just so relieved. I

haven't told many people, and it was so much easier than I expected."

Ellie's face suddenly became serious. "Wait. You haven't told many people, but you told me? I'm flattered, but why?"

"Why did I tell you?"

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:03 pm*

Ellie shook her head. “Why haven’t you told anyone else?”

That question was enough to stop Sierra’s laughter, because it reminded her exactly why she hadn’t told anyone. Teresa. Just the thought of her made Sierra’s stomach hurt. “It’s... complicated.”

Ellie nodded slowly. “Well, if you ever want to talk about it, I’m a really good listener.”

A week ago, Sierra would not have believed that, but now she was sure truer words had never been spoken. “Thank you. I really appreciate that.”

Ellie smiled and it made her eyes twinkle. “My turn. My tattoo is on my foot, and it’s a winged track shoe with the words ‘Run your race’ written under it. It was a birthday present from my mom for my eighteenth birthday.” Ellie laughed. “That’s all number one, by the way. Number two—I never get nervous before a race. And last, but not least,” she looked deep into Sierra’s eyes and swallowed hard, “even though the world has come a long way in terms of acceptance, I still worry about someone hurting my family because we’re different.”

Without thinking about what she was doing, Sierra reached out and grabbed Ellie’s hand. “I worry about that too.”

Ellie continued to stare at her as if she could hear all the words Sierra wasn’t saying. “Yeah, that one was obviously true. The race one was a lie. I still shit my pants every time I step on the track.”

“That’s quite the visual.” After saying the words, Sierra did something she almost never did. She giggled. An honest-to-god giggle. What the hell is wrong with me?

Ellie cringed. “Yeah. Please forget I said that. Changing the subject. Your turn to go.”

Even though Ellie wasn’t pushing it anymore, Sierra felt the urge to open up to her. Something about sitting with Ellie, hands still entangled, made her want to be vulnerable. “I was adopted when I was three. I don’t know much of anything about my birth parents and neither do my moms.” She took a deep breath and blew it out before saying the last one. “My first semester of college was even better than I expected it to be.”

Ellie’s expression dulled and her mouth turned down in a frown. She squeezed Sierra’s hand. “I’m so sorry for the part I played in making your first semester hard. Even though I’m sure it doesn’t seem like it, it truly wasn’t my intention.”

Even though it scared Sierra, she believed Ellie. “It’s not the best feeling in the world when the person you idolized hates you, but that’s kind of my own fault. I haven’t been myself these past few months.”

Ellie’s eyes darted around Sierra’s face as if she was studying every part of her. “So, who are you?”

“Do you really want to know that?” Sierra was tempted to look away from Ellie, but she couldn’t. She wanted to stay lost in this moment with this woman forever.

Sierra watched as Ellie’s throat moved up and down. Even though she couldn’t feel it, she knew Ellie’s heart was beating just as fast as hers.

“More than anything,” Ellie said just above a whisper.



Sierra wasn't sure if she was moving in or if it was Ellie, but their faces were definitely getting closer. They were so close, Ellie's breath ghosted across her lips. Sierra shuddered. She couldn't remember ever wanting anything more in her entire life.

"Girls! Are you up here? We made lunch!"

The sound of Annalise's voice caused Sierra and Ellie to jump apart.

"I... We..." Ellie's eyes moved from spot to spot around the room.

"Yeah. We should go down."

Sierra's legs were wobbly when she stood from the bed. It was hard for her to move, but now that the moment was broken, she felt like she had no choice. She needed to get out of there.

## Chapter 19

Ellie

I'm not feeling up to working out today. Sorry.

Ellie stared at the text from Sierra and tried to figure out how to respond. She was pretty sure they had almost kissed the day before (at least, that's what she was hoping was going to happen), but ever since then, Sierra had been avoiding her like the plague. They spent time together with their families, but even during that time, Sierra barely looked at her.

Before going to bed, Ellie had made one last ditch effort to talk to her by asking if she wanted to watch a movie. When she said she was too tired and slumped away into her

bedroom, Sienna stuck around to remind Ellie not to give up on her, then followed Sierra into the bedroom.

Are you okay? Ellie texted back. Maybe that was a dumb question, but she wasn't sure what else to say.

I will be. Don't worry.

What did that mean? Ellie was so frustrated, she was tempted to chuck her phone across the room, but that wouldn't have done anything but leave her with a broken screen. What she could do was workout, so she quickly changed into shorts and a T-Shirt and headed down to her basement. She pushed herself even harder than she usually did, so by the time she was done, she was completely exhausted. She checked her phone to see if Sierra had said anything else and was disappointed to find she hadn't. Her disappointment grew when she noticed Sierra's door was still closed.

## Page 41

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:03 pm*

She didn't even bother changing before lying down in bed and letting herself drift to sleep. When she woke up a few hours later, the only text message she had was one from Juniper asking if she was still alive. She assured Juniper that Sierra hadn't killed her then sighed as she sat her phone back down.

She was pretty positive Sierra wasn't actually sick and that the avoidance had more to do with their almost-kiss than anything else, but no matter what, it definitely seemed like she could use some comfort. She might not want to get it from Ellie right now, but Ellie knew someone else who could give it to her.

She walked over to her closet and searched high and low until she found what she was looking for. She walked across the hall, knocked on Sierra's door, and waited for a response.

"Come in!" Sienna's voice called from the other side.

Ellie walked into the room to find Sierra lying in bed reading a new book, and Sienna in the process of trying to stand up.

Sienna pointed toward the doorway. "I'm going to go downstairs and make sure the moms are behaving." She looked over at Ellie and smirked. "I'll be gone for a while so take your time."

Ellie waited for Sienna to leave, then walked over to the side of the bed where Sierra was lying. "I brought you something to help you feel better." She pulled the ratty, old stuffed bear out from behind her back and held it in front of Sierra. "His name is Boo Bear. He always makes me feel better whenever I'm feeling sick or scared or sad. As

you can probably tell, I've had him since I was little."

Sierra didn't say anything, but the cutest smile came onto her face as she took the bear from Ellie's hands.

Ellie stuck her hands in her pockets and rocked back and forth on the balls of her feet. "Well, I just came here to give you that, but I'll leave you be." She waited a few seconds in the hopes that Sierra would ask her to stay, but when the request never came, she took that as her cue to leave.

She was almost at the door when Sierra finally said her name. When she turned around, Sierra was holding Boo Bear tight up against her chest. "Thank you so much for this. Seriously."

"Of course."

Even though Sierra hadn't asked her to stay, Ellie couldn't stop herself from smiling as she left the room. It wasn't much, but it was something, and that something was enough to fill her with hope that maybe things weren't completely ruined.

She held onto that hope for the rest of the day, as the hours passed without any sign of Sierra. She continued to grasp onto that hope when Sienna informed everyone that Sierra wouldn't be joining them for dinner. Her hope only started to dwindle when she crawled into bed that night without another word from Sierra, but at least tomorrow was a new day.

\*\*\*

"Attention! Can I have everyone's attention?"

Ellie was startled awake the next day by the sound of her mom's voice. Even though

all she wanted to do was cover her ears and roll over, she listened to what her mom had to say.

“All women with two working ankles need to meet downstairs in fifteen minutes. I repeat — all women with two working ankles should be downstairs in fifteen minutes. Not a minute later.”

Ellie groaned, but stood up out of bed and got herself dressed. By the time she got downstairs, everyone else was already down there, including Sienna, who didn't need to be.

“What's the big emergency, Mom?” Ellie asked before letting out a long yawn.

“The snow is finally slowing down, so we need to start the process of getting it removed. I just remembered I never got the snowblower fixed last year, so it's just the six of us and some shovels.”

This was actual torture. Maybe Ellie was still asleep and she was having a nightmare. “But that'll take days!”

Her mama smiled and lifted her eyebrows. “Exactly. That's why we need to start now. As much as we love having the Finnegans here, we can't hold them hostage forever.”

Ellie's stomach dropped. She had kind of forgotten this arrangement was only temporary until it was safe for Sierra's family to get home. She looked out the window and found the snow coming down much slower now. This sucked. Sierra wasn't talking to her and the weather was taking a turn for the better. If she didn't figure out a way to break the wall that had come up between them, she might never get the chance.

Then again, maybe shoveling was the perfect way to do that. There was no way Sierra was going to say no to Ellie's moms, so this was the perfect way for them to have time together. Sure, they wouldn't be alone exactly, but she would worry about that detail later.

"Let's do it!" She realized she probably sounded much more cheerful than she should, but whatever. Her moms probably wouldn't think anything of it since they were just thankful to have the extra help.

Her mom snapped her fingers. "Oh, you know what? I just remembered something I have to do for work."

Her mom's tone immediately gave away the fact that she was lying, but Ellie had no idea why she would be. Did she really want to get out of shoveling that badly? Wasn't it her idea? She was the one who woke Ellie up, for god's sake. "Your work is closed. What could you possibly have to do?" Ellie asked.

"Oh, you know, I have to..." Her mom's voice trailed off as she looked over at her mama.

"Call the patients to let them know we're still closed," her mama answered for her. "And I should probably help her with that."

Brooke pointed between herself and Tiffany. "We actually have some work to do before we can come out too. Sorry, girls."

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:03 pm*

Their parents were definitely up to something, but Ellie wasn't going to question it since it worked out perfectly for her. "No problem. Take your time."

"Yeah, we can do it. That's fine." Sierra's tone wasn't nearly as convincing as Ellie's, but it must have been good enough for their moms, because they all walked away without another word.

Once they were gone, Ellie turned toward Sierra. "It looks like we've got some work to do."

"Um, yeah." Sierra pointed toward the stairs. "I just need to get changed into something warmer. Meet you back down here in five?"

Sienna, who Ellie had almost forgotten was still standing there, chuckled and began to hobble down the hallway. "You two have fun with that. Don't call if you need me, because I can't help anyway."

Less than ten minutes later, both Ellie and Sierra were dressed in full snow gear and headed outside with shovels. Seeing as how they could barely even get the front door open, this definitely wasn't going to be an easy task. Sierra immediately got to work shoveling out a small path, so Ellie followed her lead. The whole time they worked, her mind was running through all of the things she could say to try to break the ice, but nothing seemed good enough.

Much to Ellie's surprise, Sierra was the one to finally break the silence after almost an hour of work. "What the fuck are they doing in there? This fucking sucks."

“Does it suck because it’s hard or because you’re stuck out here with me?” Ellie wasn’t sure if that was the right way to start this conversation, but it was the first thing to come to her mind, so she decided to go with it.

Sierra dropped her shovel and turned to look at Ellie. “Why would you ask that? I obviously meant because of how hard this is. We had a fucking blizzard and the two of us are out here alone with below average shovels trying to move mounds of snow.”

Ellie dropped her shovel too and took a step closer to Sierra. “Is the process taking too long? Do you wish we could get it done faster so you could leave here? It would make it a lot easier to avoid me, right?” Ellie meant for it to be a tease, but the pain she felt over spending the last twenty-four hours wondering where things had gone wrong kept it from coming out that way.

Sierra shook her head vehemently. “I wasn’t avoiding you.”

Ellie closed the remaining distance between them, leaving Sierra with nowhere to go because of the high pile of snow behind her. Ellie rested her hands against the snow on either side of Sierra’s body. “Oh yeah? Then what were you doing?”

Sierra stared down at the ground. “Okay, I was, but not because I don’t actually want to spend time with you. The problem is, I want to spend all my time with you.”

Ellie brought a finger underneath Sierra’s chin to force their eyes to meet. “Why is that a problem?”

This time, Sierra didn’t look away when she spoke. “You scare the shit out of me.”

Ellie understood that feeling all too well. “Honestly, the feeling is mutual.”

Sierra shook her head. “I don’t want to get hurt.”



“All I’m asking is for you to talk to me. I don’t need any more than that.” Her words felt like a lie with how her body was thrumming from their close proximity, but she would take something with Sierra over nothing.

“Okay.” Sierra took a deep breath and closed her eyes as she blew it out. When she opened them back up, they were an even darker shade of blue. “You’re right. I can do that. I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay.” Ellie put her hand on Sierra’s hip, because she couldn’t help herself. She needed to touch her. “Don’t run away from me again, okay?”

For the first time since coming outside, a genuine smile came onto Sierra’s face. “Only on the track.”

Ellie let out a boisterous laugh, because she couldn’t help herself. She squeezed Sierra’s side before dropping her hand and backing away. “You wish, rookie.”

## Chapter 20

### Sierra

After a long day of shoveling, the moms forced all three girls to have a game night with them. Halfway through the night, Sienna announced she was too tired to keep going and went up to bed. When everyone else decided they’d had enough, Ellie asked Sierra if she wanted to stay up to watch a movie with her, but Sierra was exhausted. The day had been emotionally and physically taxing, and she could barely keep her eyes open.

“Tomorrow?” Sierra asked when she saw the disappointment on Ellie’s face.

The disappointment immediately faded away when Ellie broke into a wide grin.

“Really? Yes. That would be great.”

The whole next day, Sierra tried to be present, but it was hard with thoughts of her impending movie night running through her head. It was almost as if her body hadn't gotten the memo that this wasn't a date. Because it totally wasn't. I mean, come on, Sienna would probably be there too.

Except... she wasn't. When Ellie asked her about watching the movie with them, she made up an obvious lie about how tired she was.

That was exactly why Sierra and Ellie were sitting in Ellie's bed, much closer to each other than was necessary for them to be. This isn't a date, she reminded herself again.

## Page 43

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:03 pm*

“Do you want to watch the movie right away or are you okay to talk for a little?” Ellie asked.

“Talking is cool.”

“Cool,” Ellie responded teasingly.

“What... should we talk about?”

“Hmm. I got it. Which movie villain do you think got an unfair rep?”

That was definitely not what Sierra expected Ellie to say, but she was appreciative they weren't going too deep. It didn't take Sierra long to think of her answer and she delivered it with confidence. “Definitely Gaston. He was just trying to save the kidnapped girl.”

“Gaston?” Ellie's voice was a combination of surprise and disgust. “Gaston has that fragile white male ego. Men like him are the reason I'm a lesbian. Terrible pick.”

“Fine” Sierra tried to make her voice sound annoyed, but that was impossible since it was the opposite of how she was feeling. “Who's your pick?”

“Definitely Carrie. Her mom was terrible. Her classmates were the worst. Everyone in that movie deserved to die.”

Sierra choked out a laugh. “Wow. That's dark.”

Ellie simply smirked in return. “I know.”

They continued to go back and forth like this for the next hour, telling each other so much without really revealing anything at all. When Ellie asked if they should start the movie, Sierra thought about saying no since she was enjoying their conversation. She had to admit that a movie also sounded great, though.

She definitely didn’t regret her decision when the movie started and Ellie and her naturally snuggled closer together. There weren’t any intentional touches, but with how tightly they were pressed together, Sierra could feel Ellie everywhere.

“Thanks for agreeing to watch this with me,” Ellie whispered.

“There’s nowhere I’d rather be right now,” Sierra answered honestly.

The smile that confession brought to Ellie’s face caused Sierra’s stomach to somersault. Their hands were already resting against each other, but when Ellie moved her finger the slightest bit to stroke the top of Sierra’s, lighting bolts flashed through her body as if she was in the midst of the most amazing storm.

After a few minutes of continuing this motion, Ellie’s finger wrapped around Sierra’s. Ellie smiled over at Sierra and Sierra smiled back, and fireworks went off around them (at least, that’s how it felt). It was the most innocent thing in the world, but right now, it was everything.

When Sierra noticed her eyes becoming heavy, she decided not to fight it. As she began to drift off to sleep, Ellie’s head came down to rest against hers. “Is this okay?” she asked.

“It’s perfect.” Sierra could hardly get the words out since she could barely breathe.

Slowly, but surely, Sierra let sleep overtake her and she drifted into the most restful snooze she had in a long time. A few hours later, when Sierra woke up, her finger was no longer intertwined with Ellie's, but instead, their bodies were. Ellie had an arm and a leg draped over Sierra, and Sierra was leaning heavily into her. The last thing she wanted to do was leave this perfect cocoon they were in together, but she figured it would be awkward if they woke up in bed together in the morning.

She slowly extracted herself from underneath Ellie's body, careful not to wake her up. She crept across the hall and slowly opened the bedroom door to try to keep the sound from waking up Sienna. She tiptoed across the room and delicately pulled back the covers so she could get into bed. She let out a relieved breath when Sienna didn't even flinch beside her.

Sierra tried to fall asleep, but she was finding it impossible with the absence of Ellie's body. She picked up her phone so she could mindlessly scroll through social media, but when she did, she noticed a text had come through from Ellie.

You could have stayed. The bed feels cold without you.

Sierra felt like her brain was short-circuiting as she tried to figure out what to say to Ellie. I didn't want Sienna to get the wrong idea...

Or was it the right idea? Sierra wasn't sure at this point.

And what would that idea be? ;)

Sierra really didn't know what to say to that. When did this shift happen? When did they become the people who sent each other flirty texts? A week ago, Sierra didn't even know if Ellie was a nice person. Now she wanted nothing more than to stay up all night texting her. Okay, actually, there was one thing she wanted more. She wanted to stay up talking to Ellie, their fingers still intertwined.

Goodnight, Ellie :)

It felt like a safe response. The smiley face still made it flirty without giving too much away.

Same time and place tomorrow?

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:03 pm*

Sierra smiled down at her phone. I'm in. The smile never left her face as she closed her eyes and drifted back off to sleep.

\*\*\*

The next day was similar to the one prior. They shoveled (mostly alone), spent the rest of the day with their families, and fell into bed together to watch a movie and talk until they couldn't keep their eyes open anymore. When Sierra woke up in the middle of the night again, she thought about staying, but it felt like a bad idea with so many unanswered questions between them.

Before getting out of bed, she pushed a piece of hair behind Ellie's ear and watched her sleep. She didn't want Ellie to wake up and find Sierra staring at her, so she forced herself to get up and walk out of the room.

"Same time and place tomorrow," Ellie said sleepily as Sierra was slipping out of the room.

As requested, the next night, they found themselves in the exact same position. "How would you feel about skipping the movie tonight, so we can talk more? I'm really enjoying getting to know you better."

"Having fun learning about all of my thoughts on book and movie characters?" Sierra teased.

"You're right. Our conversations have been much more surface level these past few days. Tell me something deeper." Ellie wiggled her eyebrows. "Or juicier."

This didn't feel like the safe little bubble Sierra was trying to keep them in, but with Ellie looking at her that way, she forgot why she needed to protect herself. "What do you want to know?"

"Hmm." Ellie tapped her chin as if she was thinking. "Let's start easy. What's your middle name?"

"Thatiseasy, because I don't have one."

"You don't have a middle name?" Ellie scrunched up her nose. "I thought everyone had a middle name."

Sierra shrugged. "Not me and Sienna. Our birth parents apparently didn't find them important."

"Interesting. Sierra No-Middle-Name Finnegan. I like it."

Sierra waved her hand in a go-on motion. "And now it's your turn. What's your full name?"

Ellie cringed. "I guess I walked myself into that one, huh?"

"You kinda did."

Ellie sighed. "Fine. I was named after two of my great grandmas, so my full name is Eleanor Patricia Finch."

Sierra pinched her lips together to try to keep from laughing. It really was an old lady's name. "I can see why you go by Ellie."

"Hey!" Ellie grabbed a pillow and hit Sierra with it before she could duck away.



“Since you decided to be mean, I’m not going to take it as easy on you with this next question. How many people have you kissed?”

Sierra swallowed hard. “Just one.” Talking about kisses made her think about the person she didn’t want to be thinking about right now. “How ’bout you?” she asked before Ellie could ask any follow-up questions.

A small crease formed on Ellie’s forehead as she thought about Sierra’s question, and it took all of Sierra’s willpower not to reach out and run her finger over it. “Ten to fifteen maybe? Some of them were girls I made out with at parties, so does that even count?”

Sierra’s heart clenched. That definitely counted. Until this moment, Sierra had let herself forget about what happened at that track party. Now, it was all she could think about. Part of her wanted to run away again and another part of her wanted to call Ellie out for what she had done. There was a third, much smaller, part of her that wanted to crash her lips into Ellie’s to prove to her how much more chemistry they had.

“Like Teresa?” she asked. Apparently, her mouth had decided she was going with the second option.

Ellie looked genuinely confused by Sierra’s question. “Who’s Teresa?”

It was strange that Teresa was the person who had torn Sierra’s whole world apart and Ellie didn’t even know her name. Maybe that wasn’t the weirdest thing since it was a random hookup at a party. “My roommate. The redhead. The one you have a big crush on and made out with at that track party.”

Now, Ellie looked even more confused. “I didn’t realize that girl’s name was Teresa, but just for the record, I didn’t make out with her at that party.”

“You didn’t?”

Ellie shook her head. “No. This was really bitchy of me, but I only said I was going to because I thought it would piss you off since I was convinced you were homophobic. Once you stormed out, and I felt like I had accomplished what I wanted to, I told everyone it was a joke. I had no interest in kissing her. She’s not my type at all.”

It made no sense. Why had Teresa made it sound like they had made out when they actually hadn’t? Did she just want to hurt Sierra even more? Also, why was Ellie saying that Teresa wasn’t her type when she had been caught checking her out multiple times? “Really? Then who’s your type?”

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:03 pm*

“Girls with a little bit of mystery about them. The more competitive, the better. Normally blondes. In a nutshell—you. I was never actually checking out your roommate. It was a lie I told Juniper, so she didn’t realize I was actually checking out you. You caught my eye at the state track meet last year and haven’t stopped catching it since.”

There were so many questions Sierra needed to ask Ellie. So much more she needed to know. Right now, she wasn’t looking for an explanation, though. Right now, she needed something else. “You should probably kiss me before I change my mind.”

### Chapter 21

Ellie

You should probably kiss me before I change my mind. Ellie tried to process those words as she moved closer to Sierra. Sierra wanted to kiss her. Sierra was asking to kiss her. There was so much that needed to be figured out between them, but that didn’t matter right now. If Ellie didn’t feel Sierra’s lips on hers soon, she might explode.

When their lips touched, it was as if an electrical current had been sent through Ellie’s body, and she was alive for the first time. If Sierra hadn’t just told her she only kissed one other person, Ellie would have assumed she had much more experience. Her kisses were soft, yet firm. There was a confidence in Sierra as she opened her mouth to Ellie’s that Ellie had never seen from her before.

As their tongues battled for dominance in the most sensual way possible, two strong

hands came to rest on Ellie's arms. Soon, Sierra gently pushed her back and crawled on top of her. Who the hell was this girl? It definitely wasn't the shy, closed-off freshman she had come to know.

Ellie wrapped her arms around Sierra, and they moaned into each other's mouths as their bodies came even closer together. So fucking sexy.

Ellie slowed down to catch her breath and get some semblance of control over her hormones, but that turned out to be a terrible idea. Sierra pulled back and stared down at Ellie like a deer caught in the headlights (or a girl caught making out with someone she shouldn't). She rolled off of Ellie and they lay side by side for who knows how long, the only sound in the room the sound of their heavy breathing.

"I think we need to talk," Sierra said finally. "I... There's something I need to tell you."

Ellie rolled over onto her side and propped her body up on her elbow. She had a feeling whatever Sierra needed to say was important, so she wanted to make sure she knew she had Ellie's full attention. "You can tell me anything."

"The reason I got so upset about Teresa wasn't because I'm homophobic. We were together for about a year before college. We kept it a secret because that's what Teresa wanted, but the plan was to be out once we got to school. Instead, she dumped me. Apparently, she decided men were the easier option, and it wasn't worth coming out as bisexual. That's why I was such a bitch the first few times you tried to talk to me. It seemed better to blow you off than to let you see me cry."

A searing pain went right through Ellie's heart when tears started to fall from Sierra's eyes. She couldn't believe how wrong she had been about her and didn't want to imagine how much harder her actions had made things for Sierra. "I didn't know," Ellie whispered as she brought her thumb to Sierra's cheek to wipe away her tears.

“God, if I had known, I wouldn’t have done and said those things about her. I’m so sorry. I never wanted to hurt you. Not like this.”

Sierra put her hand on top of Ellie’s hand that was still wiping her tears. “You weren’t the one who hurt me. Teresa broke my heart. You...”

“I did what?”

Sierra shook her head. “I can’t say it. It’s too scary.”

“Please?” The emotions in the room were so high, Ellie was worried she might start to cry too.

“You’re kind of the one putting it back together.”

Ellie’s heart exploded. This was much more than just a crush. It was... Well, she wasn’t sure what it was, but she liked it.

More tears came to Sierra’s eyes. “I’m not really sure what’s happening though. It’s too soon to have feelings for someone else. I’m not even sure if I’m fully over Teresa yet. A few weeks ago, I would’ve said I definitely wasn’t, but lying here with you makes me forget about everything.”

“Nothing needs to be decided right now. Why don’t we just let ourselves enjoy being lost in this moment?” Especially if being lost in the moment means less tears and more kissing.

Sierra’s lips pulled up into a gentle smile. “I think I’d like that.”

After a few more minutes of kissing, Ellie forced herself to pull away. She knew this was a lot for Sierra after everything she had been through, so she didn’t want to push

things. “Could you stay in here tonight? We don’t have to do anything you’re not comfortable with. We don’t even have to kiss anymore. I just really want to hold you as I fall asleep and still be holding you when I wake up.”

“That sounds great. I actually am getting tired though.”

“Then let’s go to sleep.” Ellie gave Sierra a kiss on the forehead then snuck a peek at her phone so she could check what time it was. 12:01 A.M. “Merry Christmas Eve, Sierra No-Middle-Name.”

“Merry Christmas Eve, Eleanor Patricia.” Sierra snickered as she said Ellie’s name. “I never thought I’d say this, but I’m glad I get to spend this day with you.”

Ellie was so happy about that too, and as she drifted to sleep, she couldn’t stop herself from thinking about what it would be like to spend the holidays with the girl she was already falling for.

\*\*\*

Ellie was spooked away by the sound of knocking, not on her door but on the door across the hall.

“Sienna! Sierra! Wake up. We need to leave before it’s too late.”

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:03 pm*

Leave? No, they couldn't be leaving. Not after such a perfect night. Not when things had finally clicked into place for her and Sierra.

Sierra stirred beside her and slowly opened her eyes. "Did they say we were leaving?"

Ellie's heart dropped. It appeared she hadn't misheard what was said. "I think so. I guess we shouldn't have done such a good job of shoveling the driveway."

Sierra grabbed onto Ellie's shirt and wrinkled it in her hands, as if she was holding on to her for dear life. "What if I'm not ready to leave?"

Ellie smiled despite her sadness. This was a far cry from the girl who was begging to go home not that long ago. "I'm not ready for you to leave either."

"Hey, where's your sister?" Brooke's voice floated into the room from out in the hallway and Sierra's eyes went wide.

"Shit. What the hell am I supposed to do? If I walk out of your room, they're gonna know... well, I don't know what they'll know exactly, but they could make some assumptions. I don't—"

Ellie stopped Sierra's rambling by putting a hand on each cheek and placing a soft, quick kiss on her lips. She still couldn't believe that was something she could do. "It's okay. We'll say we fell asleep watching a movie. They have no reason not to believe that."

Sierra nodded a bunch of times as if she was an anxious bobble head doll. “Yeah, that could work. I think that’ll work.”

Ellie tried not to smile at Sierra's internal crisis, but she looked so damn cute, she couldn't help it. “It’ll work.” Ellie kissed Sierra once again, because why not? Her lips were perfect. “Maybe let me do the talking, though.”

Her joke finally made Sierra crack a smile. “Probably a good plan.”

Ellie squeezed Sierra's hand and forced herself to get out of bed as Sierra did the same. They walked to the door together, and when Ellie opened it, she found both of her moms, Sierra's moms, and Sienna all standing in the hall. Sienna was very passionately speaking about something, but Ellie only caught the tail-end of it. “We can't. Trust me, now is not the time.”

“Now is not the time for what?” Ellie asked.

Sienna looked at Ellie and gave her a knowing smile and subtle wink. “It's not the right time to go home. I mean, really, who wants to spend over four hours in the car on Christmas Eve? Not me!”

Tiffany rubbed her temples as if her daughter was giving her a headache. “So, you'd rather drive four hours on ChristmasDay?”

Sienna put her hands on her hips as if to show she meant business, but the shit-eating grin on her face said she was simply up to something. “No. I think we should wait until the day after.”

Brooke shook her head. “But what about your brother and Mel? If we're not home, we won't be able to spend Christmas with them.”



Sienna sighed. “They live in the same town as us. We can spend the day after Christmas with them.”

“I don’t know,” Brooke said, but it sounded like her resolve might be breaking. “This isn’t only your decision. Your sister really wanted to get home, and the Finnegans probably have plans with their family.”

“We don’t,” Ellie answered quickly. “My brother and his girlfriend aren’t coming until the weekend after New Year’s, so that’s when we’re celebrating with the rest of our family. It’s just the three of us.”

Brooke put her focus on Sierra, who immediately got the deer-in-the-headlights look back. “I fell asleep in Ellie’s room watching a movie, and I was so tired I didn’t wake up until just now,” Sierra blurted out without her mom even saying anything.

Sienna chuckled, but Brooke just furrowed her eyebrows and continued to stare at Sierra. “Okay. But what do you think about staying through Christmas?”

Sienna nodded multiple times, doing the complete opposite of playing it cool. “Yes. I think we should.”

Tiffany clapped her hands together. “It looks like it’s settled then. Let’s make the Yuletide gay.”

Excitement bubbled inside Ellie, and it wasn’t just because Sierra was staying (even if that was a big part of it). Ellie really liked Sierra’s whole family, and she was excited to have more time with them. She looked over at her moms, who looked weirdly just as excited as her. “After Sierra and I do our workout, we’ll run out to the store since it’s safe to drive now. Text me what we need.”

\*

After doing a workout that turned out to be much more fun when kisses were added in as rewards, Ellie and Sierra both took showers before meeting downstairs to go to the store. Sierra was wearing a pair of jeans and a West End Track and Field hoodie that she looked unfairly cute in.

Ellie had chosen wide leg pants and an ugly Christmas sweater that said “All I want for Christmas is a new PR.”

Sierra pointed to the sweater and chuckled. “I fucking love that.”

“You can borrow it sometime if you want.” Honestly, Ellie loved the idea of Sierra wrapped up in something that belonged to her.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:03 pm*

“It does look very warm.” Sierra looked around as if she was checking to see if they were truly alone, then closed the space between them and rested her hand against Ellie’s stomach. “But then again, I don’t need the sweater to keep me warm if I have you.”

There was something so sexy about confident Sierra, especially since that side of her didn’t come out as often. Ellie leaned in and placed a quick kiss on Sierra’s ear before whispering into it. “We really need to get out of here.”

Once they were in the car, Ellie reached out her hand and was happy when Sierra accepted it. She brought their hands up to her lips and kissed Sierra’s knuckles. “If it’s okay, I thought I could show you around town before we go to the store.”

“I would love that.”

Ellie showed Sierra each of her schools, starting with her elementary school. She took her to the track, which they couldn’t see much of since it was covered by snow. To finish off the tour, she took Sierra to the barn where her parents got married. Even though Ellie obviously wasn’t there that day, her parents had taken her to see the venue multiple times growing up.

“This is where my parents got married,” she said while parking the car in the snow-covered parking lot. “I figured it was an important part of the town tour since this barn is the whole reason we ended up in this town.”

Sierra’s eyes were wide as she looked around. “It’s gorgeous.”

Ellie shut off the car and turned to face her. “Want to get out and take a look around?”

“Are we allowed?”

Ellie shrugged. “It doesn’t look like the owners are around, but even if they were, they know me by now, so I doubt they’d care.”

Ellie didn’t wait for Sierra’s answer. Instead, she got out of the car and ran to the other side to open Sierra’s door for her. Ellie reached her hand down toward her, but Sierra just stared at her.

“What’s wrong?” Ellie asked.

Sierra gawked at Ellie’s hand for a moment before gazing up at her. “No one’s ever opened my car door for me.”

“Then it looks like you’ve been kissing the wrong people.” Ellie grabbed Sierra’s hand and pulled her up to her feet, then wrapped her arm around Sierra’s back to bring their bodies flush up against each other. “Speaking of which...” Ellie placed a tender kiss on Sierra’s lips before pulling away.

For a few seconds, Sierra remained frozen in place with her eyes closed and lips still puckered. When she opened her eyes, the sunlight hit them, causing them to sparkle in the most magnificent way. The sight made Ellie weak in the knees, but she somehow found the strength to get herself to walk.

“What kind of wedding do you want?” she asked Sierra as they walked. It seemed like a strange question for the girl she had kissed for the first time last night, but she had just asked about Sierra’s wedding. It’s not like she was making plans for the two of them.

“I haven’t really thought about it, have you?”

“Nah. I kind of always figured I’d end up doing whatever my future fiancée wanted. I’m not picky.”

“What about kids? Do you want them?” Sierra asked.

“Yes. I want a bunch of kids.”

“Birth or adopt?”

Ellie had to think about that one. With how young they were, it wasn’t something she had really thought about. “Maybe both? I think I’d like to know what it feels like to carry a child inside of me, but there’s also so many kids who need homes.”

Sierra blew out a long breath. “I know. I was definitely one of the lucky ones. I don’t know who I’d be or where I’d be if it wasn’t for my moms.”

Ellie stopped walking so she could turn to look at Sierra. “I guess I’ll have to thank them, because I like who you are, and I’m also very happy about where you are right now.”

“I’m very happy about where I am too. I think this might end up being the best Christmas I’ve ever had.”

Ellie had no doubt it would be, because she was going to make sure it was.

## Chapter 22

Sierra

Sierra felt like she was floating as she walked back into Ellie's house after their tour of the town and trip to the grocery store. She knew they needed to talk about what they were doing, but for now, ignorance truly was bliss.

They bought supplies to bake cookies, so as soon as they recruited their moms and Sienna to help, they began to bake. By the time the last batch of cookies went into the oven, the kitchen was a complete mess, but for the first time in a long time, Sierra's heart was not. When everyone else left to get cleaned up, Sierra and Ellie stuck around.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:03 pm*

Ellie closed the little bit of space between them and when she was toe to toe with Sierra, she pointed to a spot on her face. “You’ve got a little something right there. Do you mind if I—” Ellie placed her hand below Sierra’s chin and once Sierra nodded in response to her unspoken question, Ellie wiped the side of Sierra’s mouth with her thumb.

Sierra tried to figure out what had been there, but she couldn’t see traces of anything. “Get it? What was it?”

“There wasn’t actually anything there. I’ve just always wanted to do something cheesy like that.”

The proud smile on Ellie’s face shouldn’t have been so endearing, but it was. It really, really was. So, Sierra had no choice but to lean in and give her a quick kiss on the lips. It was a kiss that had her toes curling even with how short it was. Because, honestly, who was this girl who opened doors and faked cheesy moments? Was any of it real, or was this just the magic of the holidays sweeping them away?

Either way, Sierra was going to enjoy it. After the baking extravaganza, they spent the rest of the night playing board games and watching Christmas movies with their families. When it was time for bed, Sierra stayed close to Ellie’s side, even though the invite to spend the night in her room hadn’t come yet.

Sienna waved a hand at them when they got to the bedroom doors. “You two have a good night. Merry Christmas Eve.”

“Merry Christmas Eve to you too, Sienna,” Ellie said before wrapping her arms

around Sierra and pulling her into her bedroom.

“Bold of you to assume I’d be coming to your room with you,” Sierra muttered against Ellie’s lips between kisses.

“Feel free to go,” Ellie said, but it was clear by her continued kisses that she already knew what Sierra’s answer was.

They fell into bed together and switched between making out and talking until midnight came and Ellie wished her a Merry Christmas before kissing her one more time before they fell asleep.

There was no gift-giving on Christmas morning, but the day was filled with stolen kisses, holding hands under blankets while watching Christmas movies, and lots of laughter. They laughed as they played Christmas charades and sang Christmas karaoke with their families. They laughed when the dinner that they all chipped in to make didn’t come out as expected at all, and Brinley had to run out to buy everyone Chinese food. They laughed between kisses as they stumbled back into bed that night.

Sierra couldn’t remember ever laughing that much with Teresa, even when things were at their best. She knew she shouldn’t be comparing the two though. For all she knew, this was just a fleeting moment with Ellie. Nothing more than a Christmas fling.

“I hate to kill the mood, but with you leaving tomorrow, I feel like we should talk about what this is and where it’s going,” Ellie said after an especially hot makeout session.

“Okay. What are your feelings? What do you want?” Sierra asked. After everything that had happened last semester, there was no way she was going to allow herself to be vulnerable without knowing where Ellie stood.



“I really like you, and I’d love to see where this goes.”

Sierra wanted to grasp on to Ellie’s words and run with them, but she had so many reservations. It wasn’t that easy for her. “I like you too, but how does that even work? I live with my ex. Your best friend hates me. If anything goes wrong, it could completely fuck up our season.”

Ellie grabbed Sierra’s hands and squeezed them. “No offense, but do you really think I’m going to let anything get in the way of my last season of track?” When Sierra shook her head, Ellie rewarded her with a kiss. “Good. I think we’re both serious enough about the sport to separate our personal lives from our performances.”

Sierra sighed. She wanted this to be easy, but no matter how hard she tried to make it that way, it couldn’t be. “I just really don’t know if I’m ready to jump into anything.”

“What if we hop into it?” Ellie asked as she stared into Sierra’s eyes as if she could find the answer to every question in them. “We’ll take things slow. We don’t have to make any big decisions now. We’ll just enjoy ourselves and see where things go.”

Sierra liked the idea of hopping, but she was still hesitant. There was a voice inside her head telling her this might all be temporary, and after she left here, things would never be the same. She didn’t want to leave filled with promises that could be ripped out from under her. “What if we take the rest of break to really consider and decide what we want, and we’ll check in with each other when the next semester starts to see if we’re still on the same page?”

Ellie nodded. “I can work with that.” She kissed Sierra slowly and sensually, then pulled away to gaze into her eyes with a passion that took Sierra’s breath away. She continued to stare as she pushed a piece of hair behind Sierra’s ear. “My favorite color is the color of your eyes, by the way,” she whispered into the room.

It was official. After only spending ten days in a house together, Sierra was done for. She had done the thing she swore she wouldn't after Teresa broke her heart. She had fallen head over heels for someone new. Someone who had the power to break her heart just as much, or even more, than Teresa had. But, something about the way Ellie held onto her as they drifted off to sleep made her believe maybe Ellie wouldn't. Maybe Ellie would be the one to save her.

The next day, after a long goodbye in the privacy of Ellie's room, they said a short goodbye in front of their parents. Sierra gave Ellie an extra squeeze before she finally forced herself to let go and head out to the car. Ellie leaned against the open door frame watching them as they threw their final items into the trunk and got in the car. She stayed there as the car pulled out of the driveway. Sierra watched her through the window and gave her one last subtle wave before the house, and Ellie, disappeared behind them.

A newfound confidence swept through Sierra as she thought about everything that had happened in the past week. "I need to tell you all something," she spoke out loud into the car. "I'm gay."

Sienna chuckled beside her, and her moms smiled at each other rather than at Sierra. "We know, sweetie."

"Everyone who was in that house for the last week knows you are," Sienna added with another laugh.

Sierra couldn't stop herself from laughing along with Sienna. She was so happy, nothing could ruin it. She had no clue where this was going to go with Ellie, but for now, she was just appreciative she wasn't faking her smile any more.

## Chapter 23

Ellie

In the week following Christmas, Ellie and Sierra texted constantly and talked on the phone most nights. Their conversations were about their days or funny things their family members did. They didn't broach the topic of what this was or where it was going, but if this week had shown Ellie anything, it was that she really wanted to pursue this further. She was pretty positive Juniper wouldn't be too happy about this development, but she had already decided she needed to wait to see what came of it before she told her best friend. There was no use in pissing Juniper off if Sierra decided this wasn't what she wanted.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:03 pm*

As if Juniper somehow knew Ellie was thinking about her, a phone call came through from her at that very moment. “Hey! What’s up?” Ellie asked when she picked up the call. She felt bad that she hadn’t been keeping in touch with her as well this break, but if Juniper had noticed, she hadn’t said anything about it.

“Not too much. Getting ready to head to West End for Chris and the guys’ party. Sure you don’t want to go?”

“Nah. I’m good.” The sprinter guys had been planning to have a New Year’s Eve party at their apartment pretty much since the beginning of the school year, but Ellie was never planning on going. It was too far away to justify driving there on New Year’s Eve just to drive back home on New Year’s Day. She already had plans to spend the night with her moms, and she was more than happy to do that.

“Are you sure?” Juniper asked in a whiny voice. “You won’t be the only one not drinking this time.”

“Oh yeah?” Ellie laughed. She highly doubted there was anyone from the team who was driving back to school just to stay sober for the party. “Who is planning on staying sober?”

“Me,” Juniper answered nonchalantly as if she didn’t think that answer would shock Ellie. “I’ve been thinking a lot about what you said, and it’s probably too little too late, but I’m going to take this season more seriously. Since you never drink during the season, maybe that’s the secret, so I’m going to try it.”

“Wow.” Ellie wasn’t sure what to say. This was a big change for her best friend.

“That’s awesome. You don’t have to give up everything, though. Even I’ll probably end up a little wine-drunk tonight.”

Juniper laughed. “I don’t doubt that if you’re spending the night with your moms. I know I can have fun tonight without drinking, so I figured I might as well not do it.”

“That’s awesome, June. I’m super proud of you.”

“Thank you! You’d also be happy to know that I’ve been working out like crazy over break. I honestly think I might be in the best shape of my life right now.”

Juniper was really blowing Ellie’s mind right now. It’s not that she didn’t believe in her best friend, but she wasn’t expecting such a one-eighty from her. “You’re making me so happy right now.”

“I figured, but now that I’ve buttered you up, I do have some bad news.”

“What’s up?” Ellie wasn’t sure what Juniper needed to butter her up to confess, but the warning did cause a nervous ache to settle in her gut.

“I know I said we should go back to school a few days early to hang out before things get crazy, but it turns out, I won’t be able to get back until Sunday. I’m going on a ski trip with a friend for a few days.”

The ache immediately left Ellie’s gut. She had no idea why Juniper had been so nervous to tell her that. It wasn’t a big deal at all. “Oh, that’s fine. No worries.”

Juniper blew out a long breath. “Phew. I’m so glad you’re not mad. I’ve been scared to tell you.”

Ellie laughed. “It’s really not a big deal at all.”

“Thank you. Have fun getting wine-drunk with your moms tonight.”

“Don’t worry. I will.”

\*\*\*

By 11:30, Ellie was much more wine-drunk than she planned to be, but she was too happy to worry about it. She and Sierra had been texting all night, and even though their conversation only involved them sending each other funny videos and telling stories about their families, it still had her feeling giddy.

“So, it seems like you and Sierra get along much better now, huh?” her mom asked with a raised eyebrow.

Her parents had tried to bring Sierra up once or twice since her family left, but Ellie had done her best to avoid the subject. Now that she had this much wine running through her veins, it was no use trying to hide it. “Just a bit,” she said with a giggle that completely gave her away.

Her mom turned to face her more fully. “Okay, spill. I’ve been trying to be the cool parent who doesn’t pry, but I need to know. What’s going on with you two?”

Ellie sighed and clutched her phone to her chest as if it was Sierra she was holding. “I’m not really sure. She got her heart broken a few months ago, so she’s reluctant to jump into anything new. But, I think I can charm her into it.”

“You are very charming.” Her mom winked at her. “You get that from me.”

“And me,” her mama chimed in.

Her mom waved her hand dismissively. “Uh yeah, sure, sweetie.”

“For what it’s worth, we both really like Sierra,” her mama told her. “Not that you’re asking for our approval, but for what it’s worth, we do approve.”

“Good to know.”

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:03 pm*

Their conversation eventually shifted from Sierra to the upcoming track season, and before Ellie knew it, the last half hour of the year had passed, and they were counting down to midnight.

At midnight, her moms both gave her a kiss on the cheek before kissing each other. Ellie sighed. She wanted someone to kiss at midnight. But, not just any someone. She wanted Sierra, and she was going to make sure that happened.

She slipped out of the room while her moms were stuck in their “love-bubble” and went upstairs to her bedroom. As soon as she was inside with the door shut behind her, she called Sierra.

“Hello?” Sierra asked when picking up after only two rings.

“Your voice issocute,” Ellie said, unable to control this confession after how much wine she drank that night. “I missed it so much.”

Sierra giggled. “We just talked last night, remember?”

“I know, but that feels like so long when all I want to do is talk to you every minute of every day,” Ellie confessed.

“You’re drunk.” It was a statement, not a question.

“Only on you,” Ellie said in a sing-song voice. She held her thumb and forefinger close together even though Sierra couldn’t see her. “And a little bit of wine.”



Sierra sighed. “You’re really cute.”

Ellie’s heart warmed at her confession. It was probably the first thing Sierra had said since going back home that actually hinted at the fact that they might be more than friends. “Speaking of which, what are you doing the weekend before school starts again?”

“Umm... hanging with my moms, then heading back to school on Sunday afternoon.”

Ellie made the sound of a buzzer. “Wrong answer. You’re hanging out with me... please?”

“I’m going to need more details about what you’re asking me to do before I agree,” Sierra said with another giggle.

“I think we should both go back to school the Thursday before and spend some time together before everything gets crazy again.”

“How would that even work? They don’t open the dorms back up until Saturday.”

“Lucky for you, I live in an apartment that I have access to anytime.”

“Are you asking me to stay over? Are you sure that’s a good idea? We haven’t talked about what this is yet.”

“Even more reason to stay over,” Ellie said, trying to make her voice sound much more confident than she felt. The truth was, Sierra was holding Ellie’s heart in her hands and that scared the shit out of her. “I’m going to come with a list of all the reasons you should give me a chance.”

“Okay.”

“Okay? Really?” Ellie couldn’t have kept the giddiness out of her voice if she tried.  
“You’ll come?”

“I’ll be there.”

Sierra’s words made Ellie feel like she was floating. The last week and a half of break couldn’t go by fast enough.

\*\*\*

Because of her plans with Sierra, the last bit of break did not fly by. In fact, it dragged by, every day seeming to last forever. By the time the Wednesday before spring semester rolled around, Ellie couldn’t take it anymore. She went into the office and had lunch with her moms, then packed up her bags and headed back to school. Even though Sierra wouldn’t be there until the next day, Ellie needed the change of scenery. She used the extra time to clean the apartment so she could impress Sierra. Even though the list had been a drunk joke, Thursday morning, Ellie sat down and wrote a list of reasons why Sierra should give her a chance. She hung the list on the door of her apartment so it would be the first thing Sierra saw when she arrived.

When Ellie opened the door after Sierra knocked, she found Sierra standing there with the note in her hands, already reading it to herself.

She held the note up in the air and smiled at Ellie. “This is absolutely ridiculous, but also hilarious.”

Ellie grabbed the bag Sierra was holding and opened the door more fully so she could walk in. “What do you think? Did I convince you?”

“It definitely helps, but do you know what helps even more?”

Ellie shook her head because she honestly had no idea.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:03 pm*

In a move that shocked Ellie, Sierra closed the space between them and put a hand on her cheek. “Seeing this face. In case you didn’t know, it’s kind of irresistible.” Sierra placed a quick, light kiss on Ellie’s lips, then sighed and rested her head on Ellie’s shoulder. “You really scare me.”

Ellie wrapped her arms around Sierra’s back and held her tight. “There’s nothing to be afraid of. I promise.”

“There is, though.” Sierra kept her head resting on Ellie’s shoulder and took a deep breath as if she was breathing her in. “I told myself I would take things slow this weekend. That I wouldn’t let anything happen until we really talked this out and figured out what made sense and if it even makes any sense at all. Then I get here, and you have this super cheesy note waiting for me and a huge-ass adorable smile on your face, and all I can think about is kissing you senseless.”

“Well, just for the record, I’m more than okay with you doing that.” Ellie laughed, but her body was on edge. Hearing Sierra talk about kissing her caused her body to ache for it. That one kiss wasn’t enough. She needed more. She also understood how important it was to respect Sierra’s boundaries, though, so nothing was going to happen unless Sierra initiated it.

“Of course you are.” Sierra’s stomach growled, causing the slightest bit of sexual tension to float away, but not enough. “Maybe we should eat before we do anything else. I was so nervous about coming here, I didn’t eat anything before I left, and now I’m starving.”

“Perfect. The way I see it, we have two choices.” Ellie held up two fingers to

emphasize what she was saying. “We can either go out to eat or we can order pizza and eat in bed.”

“Going out to eat sounds like the much safer option,” Sierra said as she finally lifted her head to bring her eyes to Ellie’s.

“Maybe.” Ellie ran a finger down Sierra’s cheek because she couldn’t help herself. She needed to touch her in one way or another. “But the other option sounds like much more fun. Don’t you agree?”

Now Sierra put her hand onto Ellie’s cheek as well. “It does, which is why I think we should save that for later.”

There was a sultry tone to her voice that made Ellie’s breathing pick up. She had no idea where this was going, but she had a feeling she was really going to enjoy the ride.

## Chapter 24

### Sierra

Ellie had been completely respectful toward Sierra all day, and if Sierra was being honest, it was kind of driving her insane. She knew Ellie wasn’t trying anything because she wanted to leave it up to Sierra, but Sierra wished she would stop being so damn chivalrous and kiss the hell out of her already.

She had already thought about doing it herself about a million times, but each time, a voice in her head told her to slow down. She wanted to shut that voice up, but she knew the only thing that could do that was Ellie’s lips, and those lips were waiting on Sierra. What a fucking cycle.

“Are you getting hungry again?” Ellie asked Sierra from where she was sitting on the

opposite end of the couch from her as they watched TV.

Seriously, couldn't this girl be just a little bit less considerate?

"I am, but I think we should talk first," Sierra said before she could convince herself not to.

Ellie scooted the tiniest bit closer to her (but still not close enough). "Okay. What do you want to talk about?"

"I'm... well.... I think I might be ready to hop in."

Ellie's eyes went wide, and she moved even closer, so they were now inches apart but still not touching. "Cool. And what does hopping in look like to you?"

"I'm not sure. It's not like any of our former problems have gone away. I still have my ex to deal with, and you have your best friend."

Ellie shook her head and grabbed Sierra's hand, causing a spark to ignite inside of her. "I'll tell her, don't worry. I'm not going to lie, it might be a little awkward at first, but she'll get over it eventually." Ellie squeezed Sierra's hand and looked deep into her eyes, her expression so sincere that Sierra had no doubt that she meant whatever was about to come out of her mouth. "I know how much it hurt you that you had to be your ex's secret, and I don't want to do that to you. I don't ever want to make you feel like I'm ashamed of you, or this, because I'm not."

"I really appreciate that, but," I can't believe I'm about to say this. "Maybe we should keep this between us for a little bit. I'm only out to a handful of people so far and as much as I don't care if anyone knows I'm gay, I don't know if it's necessary for me to leap out of the closet right now. Plus, we don't actually know where this is going. I really like you already, so I'm sure this isn't the case, but I

haven't been single for that long. What if...?" Sierra couldn't say the words because nothing about them felt true.

"You're afraid that I'm just a rebound." It wasn't hard to miss the disappointment in Ellie's voice, no matter how hard she was trying to cover it up.

Sierra hated that she had caused the slight downturn of Ellie's lips, which was even more of a reason to take things slow between them. "It doesn't feel that way. Trust me. I don't think that's the case at all. I wasn't looking for this, and I definitely didn't expect it, but I can't get you out of my head, no matter how hard I try. I thought once I left after Christmas, some of the magic would wear off, but I started to like you even more when we were apart. My heart skipped a beat every time I saw your name pop up on my phone. I was constantly waiting for your calls at night, and every time we hung up, I would just stare at my phone wondering where the hell you came from. So, no, I don't actually think you're a rebound, but I also want to take things slow, because I would never want you to feel the way I did these past few months."

The smile returned to Ellie's face and her dark eyes shined as bright as the sun. "I'll take things as slow as you need to. And don't worry, I'm a big girl. You've been very honest with me about where you're at emotionally. If you realize this isn't what you want, I'll bow out gracefully. I don't need to tell anyone about this, but as soon as you want to, we can. Okay? Let's just keep talking. As long as we keep talking and make sure we're always on the same page, we'll be okay."

"Okay." Sierra's heart beat fast, but it wasn't from nerves. It was excitement. She trusted Ellie, and she wanted to see where this could go, even if the unknown freaked her out. "But for now, maybe we shouldn't talk."

Ellie lifted an eyebrow and smirked. "Oh yeah? What did you have in mind instead?"

"I figured I could kiss you senseless now."

Without overthinking it, Sierra leaned in and kissed Ellie, and it was like nothing she had ever experienced before. Sierra used to think that kissing Teresa was the greatest thing in the world, but it didn't even come close to how it felt to kiss Ellie. Kissing Ellie was like coming home to a place you didn't know existed. It was like being swept away by an ocean wave, but not worrying about where you'd end up. It was everything.



*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:03 pm*

As they continued to kiss, their bodies naturally melded together to the point that Sierra wasn't sure where her body ended and Ellie's began. Without even realizing what she was doing, Sierra pushed Ellie back onto the couch, so they were both lying horizontal with Sierra's body completely covering Ellie's. She instinctively moved her hips against Ellie's to satisfy the urges coursing through her, and she moaned at the sensation it sent throughout her body. Being with Ellie like this made her crave even more, and while she wanted to take all of it, she knew she needed to keep some semblance of control. As much as she didn't want to, she sat up to break the contact between them and cool the flame that was threatening to set them both on fire.

"Sorry. I need a little bit of a breather. I was starting to get carried away."

Ellie smiled at her, and with her swollen lips and messy hair, it was hard for Sierra to resist going right back in for round two. "I think we were both getting carried away. It's hard to resist you."

Please stop looking at me like you want to devour me. A girl can only have so much self-control. "You're going to have to try." Sierra playfully pushed Ellie away from her. "I'm not ready..." Her face warmed just from thinking about what she was about to say out loud, and she could only imagine how red it must be. "I'm not sure what your expectations are as far as the physical stuff goes, but I'm not ready to have sex with you. I've only had sex with one person, and she ripped my heart into a million pieces. Part of taking things slow is that I can't just jump into bed with you, no matter how much I might want to."

Ellie nodded slowly. "What if we're jumping into bed to eat pizza? Then are you agreeable?"

Sierra laughed. Just when she thought Ellie Finch couldn't get any more perfect, she went and said things like that. "Only if our clothes stay on."

Ellie nodded more quickly now. "Absolutely. I've found that hot pizza and naked bodies donotmix."

"In that case, let's get some pizza."

\*\*\*

Sierra was pretty sure she hadn't known what true happiness was until she woke up in Ellie's arms for the third morning in a row after spending the whole weekend at her apartment. They hadn't done anything particularly exciting. Most of their time was spent either making out or finding otherrandom activities to do when their making out started moving in the direction of something more. They talked. They played video games. They watched movies. It was nothing special, or at least, it shouldn't have been, but it was still one of the greatest weekends of Sierra's life.

She let out an involuntary sigh when she thought about how she had no choice but to travel out into the real world again in a few short hours.

"Everything okay?" Ellie asked. She ran her fingers up and down Sierra's arm as the two of them lay intertwined.

"I'm great. This has been the perfect weekend."

Ellie kissed Sierra before pulling away and studying her face. "Are you sure? That didn't really sound like a happy sigh."

"I'm happynow. I guess I'm just worried about how things will be when we're not in this perfect bubble anymore."

“You’re not doubting me, are you?”

Sierra shook her head. She hated that Ellie assumed Sierra’s reservations had anything to do with her. “Not at all. I just don’t know what to expect, you know?”

“I get it.” Ellie grabbed Sierra’s hand and kissed her knuckles. “If I had to guess, I’d say it’ll be a lot of secret smiles during practice, probably a few discreet ass grabs if I can pull it off. Dinners out. Study sessions in the parts of the library that never get used. Finding different places to hide and make out. That sort of thing.”

When Ellie put it like that, it sounded more sexy than scary. They were in this together. Ellie wasn’t hiding her from the rest of the world. She was simply respecting Sierra’s wishes.

“I’ll also make sure that Juniper knows we’re friends,” Ellie added. “I can’t guarantee that’ll keep her from being a bitch, but I’m going to do everything I can to show her you’re not the person we thought you were.”

Sierra chuckled. “Well, thanks. I appreciate that.” She was never the type of girl to have enemies, so the less she could have at this school, the better.

“There is one thing that’s going to be hard for me.”

“Oh yeah? What’s that?”

Sierra expected Ellie to say something like trying to keep her hands off of Sierra in public, so she threw her head back in surprised laughter at what Ellie actually said. “Not punching your ex in the face if I ever run into her on campus.”

“I have trouble picturing you punching anyone in the face,” Sierra said in between laughter.

“Seriously? I’m so scary.” Ellie crossed her arms in front of her chest and scowled, but she quickly broke into a wide grin. “Okay. You’re right. I’ll send Juniper after her.”

“Now, that I can see. And it would be nice for her wrath to be focused on someone else.”

“It will be soon, don’t worry.”

“Speaking of which, I probably shouldn’t stay too much longer, huh?”

Ellie picked up her phone and laid it back down. “Juniper still hasn’t texted that she left, so we have at least a few more hours. Anything you want to do until then?”

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:03 pm*

Sierra snuggled in closer to Ellie. “Can we just lay here and forget the world for a little bit longer while it’s still possible?”

Ellie placed a kiss on Sierra’s forehead that caused her whole body to buzz. “I’d love to forget the world with you.”

\*\*\*

Sierra put off leaving Ellie’s for so long, she almost thought she was going to have to sneak out the window so Juniper didn’t catch her there. After about a million goodbyekisses, Sierra finally forced her feet to move and she left Ellie’s place (through the front door, luckily).

She had just crossed the street onto campus and was walking along the sidewalk when she saw Juniper’s car drive by. Phew. That was close.

Sierra took a deep breath once she was standing in front of her dorm and hesitated before going inside. She had no idea if Teresa was back yet. She had no clue about anything involving Teresa since they hadn’t texted once over break and thankfully hadn’t run into each other in their hometown either.

When she heard her text tone go off, her nerves picked up, because she thought it might be Teresa checking in. When she looked at the phone, she was relieved to find it was actually Ellie. Six texts in a row came through from her, and Sierra smiled as she read through them.

I miss you already. Want to get dinner with me after practice tomorrow?

Maybe we should have lunch so I can see you sooner.

Actually, I owe you a dinner date.

I won't ditch you this time. I promise.

Okay... final plan: I'll wait until practice to see you, secretly pine for you the whole time, then pick you up at 7 for dinner.

Say you agree and I promise to stop attacking you with texts :)

Sierra hated that her mind immediately compared Ellie to Teresa, but every comparison showed her they were incomparable. Even at their best, Teresa never acted this excited to spend time with Sierra. Teresa always seemed happy when they were together, and she said all of the right things, but it wasn't like this.

Sierra sent Ellie a text back, agreeing to go to dinner with her and letting her know that she missed her too. The smile never left her face as she took the elevator up to her floor and walked down the hallway to her room. She was still smiling down at her phone, rereading Ellie's texts, as she walked into her room. She was so distracted, she didn't notice the other person present in her room.

"Um, hi," Teresa said, sounding annoyed just from Sierra's presence.

A pit formed in Sierra's stomach when she looked up and saw Teresa staring at her. The person standing in front of her was a far cry from the girl Sierra used to know. Of course, she hadn't been that girl for a very long time, but she was even more of a stranger to Sierra now that she didn't cause that same flutter in her stomach that she used to.

This definitely wasn't a stranger she wanted to be having a conversation with right

now, but she didn't really have a choice with Teresa standing right in front of her waiting for her to answer. "Hey, how was your break?"

"It was fine." Teresa puckered her lips and narrowed her eyes. "There's something different about you."

Sierra shrugged. "I'm just happy, I guess." There was no guessing about it, but she wasn't going to give Teresa more details than that.

"What are you so happy about?" The tone of Teresa's voice made it sound like she was mad at Sierra for being happy.

"It was a good break."

"Hmm." Teresa sat down on her bed and put on her headphones, apparently done with their conversation.

Sierra hadn't even been back in their room for five minutes, and she already wanted to crawl out of her own skin. After putting away her clothes and the few other things she had taken home for break, she lay down in her own bed and put on her headphones as well. She wanted to text Ellie more, but didn't want to interrupt her time with Juniper, so she went through the pictures they had taken together this weekend instead.

Sierra didn't know how much time had passed before she heard Teresa's feet hit the floor. She looked over to find Teresa already staring at her. Teresa pointed at the door. "I'm going to go pick up some dinner at the dining hall. I'm going to assume you don't want to come since you don't even want to be my roommate anymore."

There was so much Sierra wanted to say in response to that. She had tried to be Teresa's friend. She had done everything in her power to keep things from getting

awkward between them, but Teresa had pushed her to her breaking point. Also, wasn't it Teresa who decided they needed to be "cordial roommates" only, which led to things being so uncomfortable in their room that Sierra felt she had no other choice but to leave? She could have pointed out all of that, but instead, she told Teresa she wasn't hungry. "I hope you enjoy your dinner though," she added at the end to try her best to make things a little less awkward between them.

"Yeah, thanks." Teresa scoffed. "Also, you might want to find somewhere to go later. I'll probably have a guy over." The tone of her voice made it sound like she was only saying it to try to hurt Sierra, but Sierra didn't want to take any chances, so she decided she would go to the library for a little bit when it was around the time Teresa would be getting back.

She didn't have any work to do at the library, but it was better than being stuck in her dorm room with the girl who hated her, whether she had a boy with her or not.

\*

After spending a few hours at the library, scrolling endlessly on her phone and preparing her folders and notebooks for the upcoming semester, Sierra headed back to her dorm.



*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:03 pm*

When she walked in, she found Teresa snuggled in bed next to some guy Sierra had never seen before. A feeling of jealousy overtook her as she looked over at them, but it had nothing to do with the fact that Teresa was close to someone else and everything to do with the fact that she missed Ellie and wanted to be doing that with her.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” the guy said as he sat up slightly. “Teresa didn’t think you’d be back so soon. I can go if you two want to hang out or something.”

“She’s just my roommate,” Teresa said. “We don’t hang out.”

Her words didn’t hurt as much as they pissed Sierra off. How dare she act like Sierra was no one? That would be rude even if they really had always been just roommates.

The guy looked between the two of them, his whole body strained as if he could feel the tension in the room. Eventually, his eyes stopped on Sierra. “If you want to go to sleep, you can tell me. It’s really no big deal.”

“It actually is a big deal. The movie has barely started,” Teresa said, her voice sounding more and more annoyed every time she spoke.

“I was actually just coming to grab my shower tote and a change of clothes. I have things to do, so I won’t be back for at least another two hours.”

Sierra quickly grabbed her things, then rushed out of the room and into the bathroom. She wasn’t planning on showering, but she might as well since she wasn’t welcome in her own room.

After spending much longer than necessary in the shower, Sierra brushed her teeth and got dressed. When she checked her phone, she realized there was no way the movie was over yet, plus she didn't really want to be in there anyway.

Without overthinking it, she clicked on Ellie's name to call her. She wasn't even sure if the phone rang once when Ellie picked up.

"Hey, you! How are you?"

"I'm fine," Sierra said, trying to make it sound as believable as possible.

"Okay. Cool. Here's what I'm going to do. I'm going to ask you that question one more time and this time, I want you to be honest with me. Hey, you! How are you?"

For the first time since moving back into her dorm room, a sincere smile spread across Sierra's face. "I'd be better if my ex wasn't such a bitch."

"Uh-oh. What happened?"

Sierra explained everything that had happened since she left Ellie's apartment, down to the fact that Teresa was still in their dorm room, that Sierra apparently wasn't welcome in, watching a movie with some random guy, who honestly seemed way too nice for her.

Ellie let out a low whistle. "That's really rough. I'm so sorry. Do you want me to pick you up, and we can go for a drive somewhere?"

"I can't make you do that. It's late. I'm sure you already started getting ready for bed." One of the things Sierra had learned about Ellie was that she was very serious about getting at least eight hours of sleep. She knew Ellie had an 8 a.m. class, so she was sure she had to have started her nighttime routine by now.

“It’s seriously no big deal. I don’t want you to be by yourself.”

It was quiet, but Sierra caught a small yawn coming from Ellie’s side of the phone. Ellie had clearly tried to cover it up, so Sierra didn’t realize how tired she was.

“Don’t worry about it. I mean it. The movie is going to be over soon, and then I’m going right to bed.” She let out an exaggerated yawn to make her point to Ellie.

“Only if you’re sure.” Ellie lowered her voice to a whisper. “All I’ve been able to think about all day is how good it feels to kiss you. My bed feels so empty without you tonight.”

Sierra’s heart felt empty without Ellie, but she wasn’t going to admit that out loud. Hell, she didn’t even like admitting it to herself. “I’m sure. I miss you too, Ellie. I miss you so much.”

She almost thought she might start to cry as she said the words, which was pathetic as it hadn’t been long since they last saw each other. She knew it went beyond that, though. She missed the special little world they had created where nothing could hurt Sierra. Just thinking about going back to her room and dealing with Teresa made her heart hurt.

“Do you want to stay up and talk more?”

“No. I’m okay. Thanks for talking to me, though. It helped a lot.”

“Goodnight, Sierra. I’ll see you tomorrow at practice and then again for our date.”

“See you tomorrow, Ellie.”

As soon as Ellie hung up, Sierra felt the loss. She would have talked to Ellie all night

if she could have. When her phone vibrated, she expected a text from Ellie, but unfortunately, it was Teresa.

That was so awkward. There's no way I'm going to see that guy again. Did you purposely ruin things for me because you're jealous? That's so unfair. You need to get over me.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:03 pm*

Sierra plopped down onto the common room couch and made herself comfortable. She might as well. Going back to her room seemed like a much more uncomfortable option than this brick couch right now. With the safety of space between them, Sierra typed out a text she never thought she would send.

I am over you.

She hit send and shut her eyes.

### Chapter 25

Ellie

Ellie was so excited for her date with Sierra, she couldn't stay still. She paced her room and she checked the time on her phone over and over again. Getting ready had taken surprisingly less time than expected, so now there was nothing left to do but wait.

Track practice tonight had been fun with all of the secret smiles and discreet touches between her and Sierra. It was a tough workout, and she didn't even register that she was tired, because there was so much adrenaline pumping through her veins just from being close to Sierra.

Ellie jumped when there was a knock at her bedroom door. When she opened the door, she found Juniper standing there. Juniper didn't look like herself. She looked less confident than usual, and it put Ellie on edge. As far as she knew, there was no reason for Juniper to be anything other than extremely excited right now. She had

killed their workout, after all. She kept up with the front group the entire time.

Ellie stepped to the side to allow Juniper to walk in. “Everything okay?”

Juniper paced in the same way Ellie had been doing a moment prior. “Yes.” She stopped, shook her head, then continued pacing. “No. I mean, I guess so. We need to talk.”

A lump formed in Ellie’s throat. She assumed Juniper must have noticed something at practice and was here to call Ellie out about her and Sierra.

“What’s up?” she asked as calmly as possible.

Juniper sat down on the bed and wrung her hands together. “I’ve been lying to you.”

Ellie had no idea where Juniper was going with this, but she had a bad feeling it was somehow going to lead back to her and Sierra. “Okay...”

Juniper looked up at Ellie, her eyes wide with fear. “I’ve been, kind of, dating someone.”

“Okay.” Ellie still had no clue why Juniper was making such a big deal out of this.

“It’s Chris. We didn’t mean for it to happen, but after the track meet, we both stayed back at school for a few days, and it was just the two of us, and things kind of just happened. I think we’ve both felt something for a while, but didn’t realize it went beyond friendship. I wanted to tell you as soon as everything happened, but I didn’t know how you would feel about it since we’re your best friends on the team. We didn’t want you to feel like a third wheel or anything.”

Relief swept through Ellie, and she started to laugh. “Dude, that’s it? You scared the

shit out of me.”

Juniper’s shoulders dropped as she noticeably relaxed as well. “What the hell did you think I was going to say?”

“That’s a great question. I’m not sure,” she lied.

Juniper blew out a breath. “I’m so happy you’re okay with this. I should have just told you from the beginning.”

Ellie sat down beside Juniper and took her hand. “Of course I’m okay with it. Like you said, you’re two of my best friends. All I want is for both of you to be happy and if you can find that together, that’s great.”

“There is one other thing.”

Ellie’s heartbeat picked back up. Maybe she wasn’t out of the woods yet. “What is it?”

“When I ditched you to go skiing, Chris is the one I went with. I’m so sorry. I know it’s supposed to be chicks before dicks, but I—”

Ellie put her hand up to motion for Juniper to stop. “It’s no big deal. This is all new. You’re excited. You want to spend all of your time together.” Ellie understood all of those feelings much more than Juniper realized.

Juniper wrapped her arms around Ellie and squeezed her tight. “Thank you so much for being so cool about this.” After letting go of Ellie, Juniper jumped from the bed. “I made plans to get dinner with Chris tonight, but if you want me to cancel, I can.”

“Of course not. You two have fun.”

Juniper looked like she was going to leave but then she hesitated for a moment. “Do you have something to do? If not, you can come with us.”

“I’m good. I actually have plans with some girls from the team.” It wasn’t totally a lie. She was hanging out with one girl from the team.



*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:03 pm*

Juniper scrunched up her nose. “Is Sierra going?”

Ellie nodded slowly and tried her best to keep her face neutral so she didn’t give anything away. “She is. We’re kind of friends now.” The kind of had to do with the fact that they were so much more than that.

“Good for you, I guess. I’ll try my best to get along with her, but I’m going to tread lightly for a while.”

“That’s fine.” Ellie was just relieved to find that her and Sierra’s secret was still safe.

Juniper waved a hand as she walked away. “Have a good night. Don’t have too much fun without me.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it!” Ellie shouted after her.

That talk had actually been good, because it wasted time, and she could finally leave to pick up Sierra. Ellie checked herself in the bathroom mirror one more time before leaving the house. When she pulled up to Sierra’s dorm, Sierra was already waiting outside.

She was wearing a tight-fitting cream V-neck sweater and black pants. Ellie had to bring a hand to her face just to make sure there wasn’t any drool, because damn, Sierra was so hot. She looked nervous, which only served to make her even hotter to Ellie. Confidence was definitely sexy, but there was something very endearing about a person being nervous around you.

Ellie jumped out of her car and ran around the front so she could open Sierra's door for her. "Your chariot," she said with a slight bow as Sierra slipped into the car.

Ellie closed Sierra's door and went back to her side of the car. She reached out her hand and was happy when Sierra intertwined their fingers. "We are going to a little Italian restaurant that is about forty-five minutes away. I hope that's okay."

"That sounds great," Sierra said, her body relaxing slightly when Ellie ran her thumb along Sierra's.

"Okay. Most important question. What music should I put on? I was thinking either Taylor Swift, Sabrina Carpenter, or Renee Rapp."

"It's a long drive. Why don't we do all three? I'm a big fan of all of them."

Ellie put the hand that wasn't holding Sierra's on her chest. "Girl after my own heart. I think all three of them are so hot."

Sierra smirked at her. "Got a thing for blondes, huh?"

"I really do," Ellie admitted.

"Lucky me."

Ellie squeezed Sierra's hand. "I'd say I'm the lucky one."

"Maybe we're both lucky," Sierra said shyly, the cutest blush touching her cheeks.

"I think we are."

Ellie turned her car back on and started to drive. The forty-five minute trip went by so

quickly, the time being filled by Ellie trying to get Sierra to sing louder when she caught her singing under her breath, and the two of them laughing and talking together. The date was already perfect, and it hadn't even really started yet.

Ellie wasn't sure how Sierra felt about public displays of affection since she wasn't technically out, but when Ellie grabbed her hand to help her out of the car, Sierra didn't let go, so Ellie figured that must mean she was okay with it.

They continued to touch in one way or another throughout the whole dinner, whether it was a squeeze of the hand or fingers tickled along a leg. Ellie was a very tactile person, so she was so happy to find that Sierra was the same way, even in a public setting.

"Want to split a dessert?" Ellie asked when they had both finished their main dishes. "Coach can't get mad at us if we're not eating a whole dessert, right?"

"What Coach doesn't know won't hurt him," Sierra said with a conspiratorial smile. "Plus, did you see that tray go by with the peanut butter cheesecake? Come on. Even I have my weaknesses."

Ellie rested her chin in her hand as she stared across the table at Sierra. She couldn't believe this girl was actually hers. Every moment they spent together was so much better than the last, and things had just started. She couldn't imagine how amazing things would be months from now. Or years from now. She ignored the thought that popped into her head, because it was way too early to be thinking like that. They were supposed to be taking this slow. Imagining their wedding day definitely wasn't slow.

"Peanut butter cheesecake sounds perfect," Ellie said once she remembered what they had been talking about.

It turned out, the peanut butter cheesecake really was perfect, so when they left the

restaurant, Ellie had a full belly and a full heart. The only problem was she really didn't want this night to end. Right as she had that thought, she noticed a playground across the street.

“Any interest in making this date last a little longer?” Ellie pointed at the playground. “I know it's frigid out here, but I thought we could maybe hold hands on the swings or make out on the merry-go-round.”

“Both of those things sound pretty great, but are you sure? I know you're serious about the amount of sleep you get and it's already late.”

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:03 pm*

It was sweet that Sierra had already figured that out about Ellie without her explicitly stating it. It made her like Sierra even more, which meant she had no interest in this date coming to an end. “I’m sure. I made my schedule so I’m done by twelve on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday but don’t start until twelve on Tuesday and Thursday.”

“That’s an interesting way to do it.”

Ellie shrugged. “It seemed like a good balance.”

Sierra squeezed Ellie’s hand and her whole body warmed, making her forget that it was the middle of winter in Pennsylvania. “Well, since you can sleep in tomorrow, I would love to go to the playground with you.”

Ellie had to stop herself from skipping across the street. She was so excited to be with Sierra, her energy level was extra high. She decided to lead Sierra to the swings first, so she didn’t think Ellie brought her to the playground only to make out.

“So, it turns out Juniper and Chris are dating,” Ellie told Sierra as they slowly swung back and forth, hand-in-hand.

“Oh yeah?” Sierra turned toward Ellie and studied her face. “How do you feel about that?”

“I’m excited for them. If I’m being completely honest, I’m also very excited for us.”

“For us? What do we have to do with Chris and Juniper?”

“I’ve been friends with Juniper long enough to know how she acts when she starts dating someone. She gets obsessed and wants to spend all of her time with them.” Ellie put her feet on the ground to maneuver her swing closer to Sierra so she could give her a kiss. “Since she’s going to be preoccupied, that means more time for us.”

Sierra’s whole face lit up when she smiled. “That’s good, because I happen to really like us.”

“I happen to really like us too.”

The need to be closer to Sierra overtook Ellie, and she averted her gaze from Sierra over to the merry-go-round. “Should we move on to the next part of our playground date?”

Sierra smiled even wider now. She must have known exactly what Ellie was thinking about. “The swing part was very short-lived.”

“That’s because I was trying to be a gentlewoman, but I can’t stop thinking about how much I want to kiss you.”

“It has been way too long since we’ve done that, right?” Sierra asked flirtatiously.

Ellie nodded. “It’s been over twenty-four hours, which is way too long if you ask me.”

Sierra tilted her head, the wide grin still ever-present on her face. “Didn’t you just kiss me a second ago?”

“I think we both know that’s not the kind of kissing I’m talking about.”

Sierra’s face became serious, and her throat moved up and down as she swallowed hard. “I know,” she said.

Her voice was much huskier than usual, and it turned Ellie on even more. If she didn't have this girl's tongue in her mouth soon, she might actually explode. Without saying another word, she stood from the swing and pulled Sierra toward the merry-go-round. They were both giggling as they tripped into it and stumbled over each other, their bodies naturally intertwining as Ellie's back hit the hard metal. Ellie put her hands in Sierra's hair and pulled their faces together. Sierra gasped right before her mouth closed over Ellie's, and it was one of the sexiest sounds Ellie had ever heard in her entire life.

She didn't know how long they stayed on that merry-go-round making out, but she knew by the time they forced themselves to stop, her lips were tingling and her heart was more full than it had ever been before.

On their whole walk back to the car, Sierra kept staring at Ellie like she wanted to say something. When she couldn't take it anymore, Ellie spoke up. "Whatever you want to say to me, go ahead. I can tell there's something."

Sierra opened her mouth as if she was about to argue, but then closed it and smirked. After a few seconds, she finally said what she had clearly been thinking about. "I know the rest of this week will probably be busy with classes and preparing for our next meet, but are you free on Sunday? I thought I could plan our next date."

"Sunday sounds great."

The truth was, Sierra could have asked about any day, and Ellie would have found a way to make it work. There was nothing she wanted more in life than to go on a million dates with Sierra Finnegan.

## Chapter 26

Sierra

Sierra couldn't believe it was finally Sunday and time for her date with Ellie. She really hoped Ellie liked what she had planned. She had to get help from her moms and Sienna to come up with the perfect idea. Of course, none of them were surprised when Sierra let them know she was planning a date for Ellie. Without her saying it out loud, there was a clear unspoken understanding of what had developed while they were staying with the Finches.

Sierra groaned as she bent over to put on her shoes. She was so sore from their meet yesterday, but it was all worth it. They were competing against harder teams this time, so she had finished fifth in the 400, seventh in the 200, and her relay team had finished sixth. Ellie beat her in both races, but that didn't bother Sierra. All she cared about was her times had improved from December. She was pretty certain there was no chance Ellie would ever let her win the 400 after losing to Sierra in the time trial. At this point, even though they were rivals once a race started, Sierra had no question they would both be happy for each other's victories, even though they came at the other's expense.



*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:03 pm*

“Where are you going?” Teresa asked from where she was sitting on her bed with headphones on.

Sierra was surprised to hear her voice since it was the first time Teresa had said anything to her (while being sober) since sending that rude text.

“Out,” was all Sierra said in return. Even if she wasn’t going out with the girl she was secretly dating, Sierra still wouldn’t have told Teresa what she was doing. She owed Teresa nothing.

Honestly, Teresa was probably part of the reason Sierra was so sore right now since Sierra had slept on the couch in the common room several times over the past week. Some nights, she set an alarm and snuck in when she knew Teresa would be asleep, then set another alarm so she could leave before Teresa woke up. Other nights she stayed there the whole night. Even with the couch being so uncomfortable, she tended to get a better night’s sleep those nights since she wasn’t waking up to a bunch of different alarms. The only night she actually slept in her room the whole night was Friday night, because she needed to get a good night’s sleep for her track meet. That plan had kind of backfired when Teresa came back to their place drunk and tried to crawl into bed with Sierra. When Sierra promptly kicked her out, Teresa insisted she had gotten confused and thought that it was her bed, but Sierra had a feeling that wasn’t the case. These were the types of games Teresa had played with her throughout the whole first semester. The only difference was Sierra wasn’t going to let her get away with them anymore. Even though Teresa “didn’t mean to get into Sierra’s bed,” she had spent the next hour going on a drunken ramble about how Sierra was too uptight.

Teresa made a grunting noise, indicating she was unhappy with Sierra's answer, but luckily, didn't say anything else. Sierra left the dorm and walked the half mile to the parking lot where she was forced to park her car, because she was a freshman. By the time she reached her car, she could barely feel her hands, but that didn't matter. Soon her hand would be wrapped around Ellie's and that wouldn't just make her hand warm, but also the rest of her body as well. That was the effect Ellie had on her.

Ellie had let Sierra know that Juniper wasn't home, so Sierra parked her car close to Ellie's apartment and walked to the front door to get her. She didn't even have to knock before Ellie opened the door and pulled her inside, using Sierra's body to shut the door behind them. With Ellie's body pinned tightly up against hers, Sierra could barely breathe. As if that wasn't enough, Ellie immediately brought her mouth to Sierra's and kissed her hard, as if she needed Sierra to live.

By the time Ellie pulled away, Sierra's head was spinning, because what the fuck had just happened? Ellie ran her thumb along her bottom lip as she bit back a smile. "Sorry, I've wanted to do that since yesterday, so I couldn't resist. You looked so sexy in your uniform, it was fucking killing me to keep my hands off of you. Then, I didn't even get to see you after the meet since Juniper wanted to hang out. Pretty much I've been a damn ready to flood ever since, so I'm very sorry about the attack, but I couldn't help myself."

Sierra pushed her ragged breaths in and out until she was finally able to speak. "You never have to apologize for kissing me like that."

"In that case," Ellie leaned close to her once again, "should we go for round two?"

As much as it pained Sierra to do so, she had no choice but to push Ellie away from her. "I wish. Trust me, there's nothing I want more right now. But, unfortunately, if we don't leave now, we won't make it on time."

Ellie smirked and lifted an eyebrow. “Make it where on time?”

Sierra squeezed Ellie’s side and laughed when Ellie yelped and jumped away from her. “You’ll find out when we get there, okay? I’ve told you thatso manytimes.” It wasn’t a lie. Ellie had made a really good effort to get Sierra to spill the beans over the past few days, but she had stayed strong.

“Will you at least give me one clue?” Ellie held up one finger as if she was trying to emphasize her point.

“It’s an hour away from here and starts in an hour and fifteen minutes. That’s your one clue. Good luck figuring it out from that.”

Ellie scowled, but her smile quickly snuck through. “Are you trying to one-up me by taking us fifteen minutes farther than I did?”

“Yep, you caught me,” Sierra said sarcastically while rolling her eyes at Ellie. She playfully pushed Ellie’s chest. “Not everything has to be a competition, you know.”

“Well, where’s the fun in that?” Ellie took Sierra’s hand and led them both out of the apartment. “Dude, it’s fucking freezing out here,” Ellie said. “You’re going to have to hold my hand really tight or I might get frostbite.”

“You know, there is this crazy invention that came out recently called gloves,” Sierra joked. “You should try them sometime.”

“Oh yeah? If they’re so great, why aren’t you wearing them?”

Sierra’s face immediately turned red, because she knew she had to admit the real reason she didn’t put any on. “I didn’t want anything getting in the way of feeling your hand against mine.”

Ellie leaned in and gave Sierra a kiss on her temple. “I guess great minds really do think alike.”

Once they were in the car, Sierra put on the new playlist she had made on Spotify that was made up entirely of songs by blonde female singers. Sierra smirked when an idea popped into her head. “I’ll make you a deal. As soon as you figure out what all of these songs have in common, I’ll tell you where we’re going.”

Sierra was sure there was no way Ellie would figure it out, but Ellie was eager to try, so she listened to the songs and verbalized notes about each one. After five songs, she snapped her fingers. “I figured it out. These are all blonde singers.”

To say Sierra was shocked would be an understatement. “How the hell did you do that?” she asked.

“It was actually pretty simple. I knew who was singing each song we listened to so far, and because I think they’re all hot as hell, I obviously know the color of their hair. Add on top of that, with how fucking adorable you are, it was no surprise that you’d take something I told you on our first date and make a playlist based on that.”

“You think I’m adorable?” Sierra’s cheeks warmed from the compliment.

Ellie laughed as if it was ridiculous for Sierra to even ask that. “Of course I think you’re adorable. I wouldn’t try to kiss your face off every time I saw you if I didn’t.”

“That’s good, because I happen to like it when you kiss my face off.”

Ellie cleared her throat. “As much as I love this flirting we have going on here, I believe you made me a deal.”

“You’re right. You definitely earned it.” Sierra took a deep breath. Even though she

had worked hard to plan the perfect date, she still worried about whether or not Ellie would like her idea. “We are doing a cooking class. I guess it’s also kind of a baking class, because they help us to make a full meal—appetizer, main course, and dessert. When we’re done making it, we get to sit down and eat it there. It’s supposedly a really romantic setting, but I’ve never been there, so I can’t confirm that.”

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:03 pm*

“Are you serious?” Ellie asked.

Sierra couldn’t decipher her tone, so her nerves got even worse. “Yeah. I’m not sure if you’re into that sort of thing, but I thought it could be cool since we had so much fun baking cookies together.”

“Sierra, that’s more than cool. It’s fucking amazing. Aren’t those things super expensive, though?”

Out of all the questions for Ellie to ask, why did she have to ask that one? “Yeah... about that. My moms actually gave me the money to pay for it. I think they want this date to go well just as much as I do.”

“Your moms know we’re dating?”

Shit. Why did I say that out loud?“Yeah. I’m sorry. I know we agreed to keep it a secret, but they were kind of there as it was happening, and they figured it out.”

“I get it. So did my moms. And, just for the record, they definitely approve of you as well.”

“I guess we made much better first impressions on each other’s parents than on each other, huh?”

Sierra wasn’t sure if they were at the point where they could joke about that, but the way Ellie laughed told her they were. “That’s for sure,” Ellie said in the middle of her laughter.

They arrived at their date location just in time to get the rundown and set up their cooking area before beginning. There were three choices for each course, so Sierra and Ellie decided to do Italian Wedding Soup for their appetizer, Steak and Garlic Mashed Potatoes for the main meal, and Chocolate Chip Cookies for dessert. The two other desserts were much fancier, but Ellie convinced Sierra they had to make cookies since it was the first (and only) thing they ever made together.

The two of them trying to cook together was just short of a disaster. Neither of them had any clue what they were doing, and more food ended up on themselves and the floor than in the recipe. By the end, the woman running the class was doing most of the work while Sierra and Ellie laughed about how pathetic they were.

By the time their cookies were in the oven, their soup was done, so Sierra and Ellie cleaned themselves off and sat down to eat. The reviews hadn't lied. With the low light and candlelit tables, it was a very romantic atmosphere, and Sierra could feel herself falling for Ellie even more.

When they were done eating, Ellie leaned back and patted her stomach. "I gotta hand it to us. We did a great job. That food was amazing."

"I hate to burst your bubble, but I'm not sure how much of that actually had to do with us."

Ellie laughed and held her glass of water up to tap it against Sierra's. "Touché."

Sierra was sad when she noticed all of the other pairs starting to clear out, because that meant they would be expected to leave too. She was having such a good time with Ellie, she didn't want it to end. It definitely didn't help that she would be leaving Heaven to return to Hell.

The hour drive back to school went by way too fast and Sierra could feel her stomach

twisting the closer they got. “Do you have any plans for the rest of the day?” Sierra asked in the hopes she could prolong this date a little bit longer.

Ellie let out a loud, exaggerated sigh. “I already have a test tomorrow. I’m going to be spending the rest of the night studying.”

“Oh. Yeah. Of course.” Sierra tried to hide the disappointment from her voice, but the look on Ellie’s face told her she hadn’t done a very good job.

“How would you feel about continuing this date in the library? I can meet you there in a half hour or so. I just have to gather all of my study materials together.”

Sierra felt fifty pounds lighter from hearing Ellie’s idea. “I would love that.”

“I was hoping you would be down, because I plan on asking for a reward for all of my hard work. Think we can find a dark corner in the library?”

Sierra’s body hummed in anticipation. If they couldn’t find a dark corner, she would fucking make one.

## Chapter 27

Ellie

They were only three weeks into the semester and school was already kicking Ellie’s butt. Between classes and track, she barely had time for fun. The only thing keeping her sane was Sierra and their daily library dates that often ended with them making out in Ellie’s car.

Their track meets were going really well, and Ellie, along with the majority of her teammates, was getting better each week. Ellie and Sierra seemed to switch which



one of them finished better in the 200 every other week. However, Sierra hadn't been able to beat Ellie in the 400 again, and while Ellie adored that girl, she was going to make sure it never happened.

While they rode back from their fourth meet of the indoor season, Ellie found herself straining to listen to the conversation happening two seats behind her.

"You live in Fraser, right?" another freshman sprinter from the team asked Sierra.

"I do." There was something hesitant in Sierra's voice, as if she was afraid to admit that.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:03 pm*

“So, that was you that I saw sleeping on the common room couch the other day.”

What the hell?

“Yeah, that was me,” Sierra said so quietly that Ellie could barely hear her.

“I thought it was. I was going to text you to ask, but I didn’t want to seem like a total creep. It was really early. I had to meet up with a girl from my Psych class to finish a project due that morning. Why were you sleeping there? Is everything okay?”

“Roommate problems.” Sierra used the tone she always did when she was trying to sound chill about something when she was actually freaking out.

Ellie took her phone out of her pocket and leaned over it against the window so it was hidden from view. Can you wait for me after we get back? she typed to Sierra.

She was surprised by how fast a reply came from Sierra. Of course. Is everything okay?

I miss you ;) Ellie knew if she said anything other than that, Sierra would spend the rest of the bus ride freaking out.

“Yo, Ellie.” Juniper poked Ellie’s back, causing her to fumble with her phone as she tried to shut off the screen.

“What’s up?” Ellie asked when she sat up.

Juniper scooted closer to Ellie and pulled her into her arms. “I know I’ve been a sucky roommate lately, but would you hate me if I spent the night at Chris’s?”

“That would be great,” Ellie said way too excitedly. “For you two. That would be great for the two of you, so I’m okay with it.”

Juniper snorted. “So glad we have your blessing.” She squeezed Ellie even tighter. “Thanks for being so cool about this.”

Ellie felt guilty about accepting that compliment when she had ulterior motives, but she didn’t have any other choice, so she said, “You’re welcome.”

When they got back to the school, Juniper sprinted off of the bus to meet Chris. Ellie stood off to the side as she waited for her teammates to drift away in different directions.

“So, you missed me, huh?” a sweet, soft voice said from behind her.

Ellie turned around and rested her hands on Sierra’s hips. “Just a little bit. I also need to talk to you, though.”

As Ellie expected, the smile immediately dropped from Sierra’s face. “What’s wrong? Are we okay?”

Ellie brought her hand below Sierra’s chin and used a finger to push it up and force Sierra to look at her. “We are great, so don’t you dare worry about that. I did catch some of your conversation on the bus, though. You slept in the common room?”

Sierra nodded and dropped her eyes back down toward the ground as if she were ashamed. “Sometimes I just need to get away. Teresa is impossible to live with.”

“Times? Like you’ve done it more than once?”

Sierra nodded again, still looking guilty as if this was somehow her fault. “I sleep there more than I sleep in my room.”

Ellie’s heart broke from Sierra’s confession. What hurt just as much was the fact that Sierra didn’t feel comfortable coming to Ellie with this information. “You’re not going to do that anymore.”

Sierra shrugged, her shoulders dipping in defeat. “I don’t really think I have a choice.”

“Of course you have a choice. You’re going to sleep at my place.”

When Sierra looked back at Ellie, her eyes were wide as if she couldn’t believe what Ellie had just said. “How would that work? I’m pretty sure Juniper would start to suspect something if she saw me coming out of your room every morning.”

Ellie smirked. “That’s why she’s not going to see you.” She moved her hands back to Sierra’s hips. “We’ll sneak you in and out. It’ll be super sexy.”

“It sounds risky.”

“That’s what makes it so sexy. Plus, it’s not actually that risky. Most nights, Juniper is at Chris’s place, or he is at ours, and even when they’re at our place, they are too disgustingly obsessed with each other to take notice of another body in the house. It’ll be all good.”

“There is one problem,” Sierra said softly.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:03 pm*

“What’s that?” Ellie wracked her brain, but she honestly wasn’t sure what Sierra could be talking about. It sounded like a great plan to her.

“How am I supposed to control myself if I’m in your bed?”

Ellie’s whole body heated up. Thoughts of Sierra’s hands on her ran through her mind, and it was hard to breathe. So many sensations pulsed through her body, making her almost forget Sierra’s original question. “We did it over Christmas,” Ellie said, trying to keep her voice level so she could convince Sierra she wasn’t a walking container of hormones ready to explode.

Sierra groaned and put her hands over Ellie’s rapidly beating heart. “I know, but everyday I’m with you, it gets harder and harder to control myself. I’m pretty sure the only reason I haven’t jumped you yet is because we spend most of our time in public places.”

Was Sierra trying to turn her on? Because, if so, it was working. “I guess we’ll just need a lot of cold water to cool us off.”

Sierra nodded slowly as if she was honestly considering this as a viable option. “That could work. I don’t want you to get sick of me though.”

Ellie couldn’t control the boisterous laugh that bubbled out of her. Sierra didn’t really believe that could happen, did she? “Every time I’m not with you, I’m wishing I was. I literally count down the minutes until I get to see you each day. Every time we say goodbye, I’m pretty sure part of my heart goes with you.”

“That was so sweet, but also incredibly cheesy.”

“What can I say? You bring out the softie in me.” Ellie inched closer to Sierra so there was no space left between their bodies. She didn’t care that they were outside. She wasn’t worried about anyone else seeing. All that mattered was that she had the girl that she was falling harder and harder for every day wrapped in her arms.

Sierra laid her head against Ellie’s chest, making her heart beat even faster. “It’s scary how hard and fast I’m falling for you.”

Ellie understood that feeling all too well. “If it makes you feel any better, you’re not alone.”

Sierra wrapped her arms around Ellie, bringing their bodies even closer. “You don’t know how good it feels to hear that. I was so lonely before I met you.”

Ellie chuckled when she thought about what it was really like when Sierra met her. “Technically, you were lonely after you met me too, but luckily, the snow gods were on our side.”

Sierra shivered against Ellie, and even that made Ellie crave more of her. “Why are we still out here? It’s freezing.”

“I hadn’t noticed.” Ellie wasn’t kidding. With the warmth of Sierra’s body against hers and the way being close to her melted her insides, it could have been summer as far as she was concerned. “But you’re right. We should get back to my place.”

Sierra pulled back slightly and looked deep into Ellie’s eyes. “And you’re sure you won’t get sick of me?”

“Never,” Ellie answered honestly.

\*\*\*

After two weeks of sneaking Sierra in and out of her apartment, Ellie had fallen even harder for her. There was something about falling asleep and waking up with Sierra in her arms that made the whole world seem brighter.

Ellie was in so deep, she found it harder and harder to hide her affection when they were around other people. She found creative, secretive ways to show Sierra how she felt, like quick winks or tapping her with the relay baton when she walked by her at practice. Whenever they studied together, whether it was in the library or the privacy of Ellie's bedroom, they passed each other sickeningly cute notes that Ellie totally would have made fun of if she wasn't one of the people involved.

Ellie stroked Sierra's arm as they spent a lazy Sunday in bed after another tiring track meet. Chris had apparently planned a date for Juniper that was going to last most of the day, so there was luckily no reason for her to race out after they woke up. "I can't believe the conference meet is only two weeks away."

Sierra groaned. "Don't remind me. My stomach hurts every time I think about it."

"Nervous?" Ellie tickled Sierra's side.

Sierra giggled as she tried to wiggle away from Ellie's attack. "So nervous. Aren't you?"

"Are you kidding me?" A weight settled in Ellie's gut. "I'm so fucking nervous. This is my last chance to win a team championship for indoor track. We've come so close before and could never get it. I feel like everyone is expecting us to do it this year, and I feel so much pressure. I'm ranked first in two of my three events. I can only go down, and if I do, that could be the difference between the team winning and losing."

Sierra sat up slightly and stared down at Ellie, the furrowing of her eyebrows causing the cute crease between her eyes that Ellie loved. “You do realize that’s not true, right? A conference championship isn’t won or lost by one person. It takes the whole team.”

“Logically, I realize that, but I can’t actually get myself to believe it.”

“I completely get that. I feel the same way. I know I’m only a freshman, but I was one of the biggest recruits this year. I don’t want to do anything to make the coaches think they made a mistake.”

Ellie laughed. The fact that Sierra would actually think the coaches would ever regret recruiting her was so insane it was humorous. “That won’t happen. Coach Kraemer is obsessed with you. If I didn’t feel the same way, I’d be very jealous. Hell, I was jealous at the beginning of the year.”

“You were?”



*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:03 pm*

“Of course I was. You scared the shit out of me. I was so scared you were going to knock me from my throne. Then you beat me in time trials, and I was so butt-hurt over it, which I’m sure you noticed. Definitely not my best moment.” It still hurt to think about how she treated Sierra that day knowing everything she was going through.

“You clearly had nothing to worry about. You’ve been smoking me in the four this season.”

“I think smoking is a very strong word.”

“Fine, but you have beaten me in every race, and I’m definitely not taking it easy on you. I’d rather piss you off and lose a night of kisses than let you win.”

Ellie’s whole body reacted to Sierra’s confession, down to her core. Why is it such a turn-on knowing that she wants to beat me? “Just for the record, I would never withhold kisses if you beat me. That would be awful. It’d be like losing twice in the same day. Also, I find it incredibly sexy how competitive you are.”

“Oh yeah?” Sierra rolled over so half of her body was on top of Ellie’s. “How sexy?”

“Mm.” Ellie rolled them over so she was now on top and kissed Sierra’s neck. “I could tell you, but I’d much rather show you.”

Sierra purred in response to her kisses and the sound caused Ellie to moan. She continued to kiss Sierra up her neck and to her jaw. When she reached Sierra’s lips, Ellie immediately opened her mouth to Sierra’s and moaned again from the first

touch of their tongues. The sound of her apartment door opening caused her to shoot up.

Sierra stared up at her with wide eyes. “I thought she wasn’t coming home,” she whispered.

“Honey, I’m home!” Juniper yelled from down the hall.

Sierra hopped off of the bed and looked all around the room. “Should I hide in your closet?”

Ellie couldn’t help but laugh at the irony of Sierra hiding in a closet. “Absolutely not. I’m not forcing you into the closet.” She got out of bed and tossed a sweatshirt at Sierra. “Put this on and fix your hair.”

As Sierra messed with her hair, Ellie quickly put on a sweatshirt and looked in the mirror to fix herself up as well. She could hear Juniper getting closer, so she had to think fast. She grabbed an old notebook from the bottom of a pile on her desk and came up with a plan just as the door to her bedroom was opening.

“Hey!” Ellie looked from Juniper to Sierra and then back at Juniper, who was now staring at Sierra. When she moved her gaze to Ellie, she gave her a what-the-fuck look.

Ellie held up the notebook. “Sierra just stopped by to borrow notes from me. She has the same professor I had for General Psych.”

“Oh.” Juniper scrunched up her nose. “That was Dr. Aspen, right?” Juniper moved her focus from Ellie to Sierra. “I’m sorry. He’s such a bad fucking professor. That man should not be teaching.”

Sierra giggled nervously from Juniper’s attention. “Yeah. Definitely.” She walked

over to Ellie and grabbed the notebook from her, her fingers grazing Ellie's in a way that couldn't have been an accident. "Thanks for this. I really appreciate it." Her eyes told Ellie everything she wasn't saying. She wasn't thanking Ellie for the fake notes. She was thanking her for how she had handled that encounter.

Ellie had to force herself to pull her eyes away as Sierra walked out of her room. Both she and Juniper were frozen in place until the door of their apartment opened and closed.

Juniper pointed toward the hall. "Okay, I knew you two were friends, but I didn't know you were share-old-class-notes level friends."

"We tend to go to the library at the same time, so we study together sometimes." That was mostly the truth. The only thing Ellie had left out was that they plan to go to the library at the same time. Oh, and the little detail about their study dates often ending with a very steamy makeout session. "I thought you had a big date with Chris today," she said, trying her best to change the subject so she didn't have to tell more lies to her best friend.

"We do. It turns out I apparently need a bathing suit for said date. Chris is such a guy. He acted shocked when I told him I didn't have one with me."

Ellie had to force a laugh since she was still shaken up over almost getting caught. "I really hope this date is inside. Not exactly bathing suit weather out there."

"It is. Don't worry. That was the first question I asked him."

"Thank god."

"I actually have to grab it and run. Chris is waiting in his car for me. Sorry I can't stay longer. I hope you have something to keep you entertained today."

I did until you interrupted. “I’ll figure something out.”

When Juniper was almost out of her room, Ellie said her name to stop her. “Thanks for being so nice to Sierra. I know she hasn’t always been your favorite person, but I promise if you two spent some time together, you would actually like her.”

Juniper shrugged. “I figure if she’s good enough for you, she can’t be all bad. Plus, it’s important we act like a team with the conference meet coming up.”

“I couldn’t agree more.” Ellie was just surprised Juniper felt the same way. She still hadn’t gotten used to her taking track so seriously.

“Yeah, yeah.” Juniper waved a hand at her. “Enough of this kumbaya shit. I’ll be nice to her. Just don’t expect me to go falling in love with her or something.”

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:03 pm*

When Juniper walked out of her room, Ellie checked her phone to find a text from Sierra explaining that she was still in the parking lot, and Ellie should let her know when or if it was safe to come back in so they could finish what they started.

Juniper might not fall in love with Sierra, but there was a really good chance that somebody else already was.

### Chapter 28

Sierra

I won't be back until Monday afternoon, but is there anything you need me to grab from your house and bring back for you?

Sierra had been staring at the text she received from Teresa for the past ten minutes. It was almost as if Teresa knew this was a huge weekend for Sierra and wanted to mess with her head by suddenly being nice out of nowhere.

She was about to take a screenshot and send it to Ellie (who was sitting three rows ahead of her on the bus) when another text came through from Teresa. My dad told me to send that text, then watched over my shoulder to make sure I did. I couldn't tell him we don't talk anymore because you're weirdly obsessed with me, so I had no choice but to send it. You can ignore it (which I'm sure is what you were planning to do anyway).

Weirdly obsessed with her? Sierra scoffed. If Teresa had been paying any attention this semester, she would have noticed that none of Sierra's focus was on her. Thank

god. She sent a screenshot of those two texts to Ellie, who immediately responded with two texts of her own.

Aw man. I thought you were obsessed with ME :( it's a shame since I happen to be pretty obsessed with you...

In all seriousness, she's a bitch. I'm sorry you still have to put up with her. Are you okay?

Sierra typed her reply as their bus pulled into the parking lot of the hotel they would be staying at for the weekend. I'm good. I have more important things to focus on this weekend.

Like me? ;)

Sierra smirked when she thought of the perfect response. Exactly. Like how I'm going to kick your ass in all of these races and be conference champ in the 400.

In your dreams, Rookie.

After getting off of the bus and filing into the hotel lobby, Coach Kraemer started to read off their room assignments. By now, it was pretty evident who they would all be rooming with. Ellie and Juniper were always together and there were two other freshman sprinters who Sierra switched between, when all three of them weren't shoved in a room together. She knew Coach would only put her with one of them for this meet so they could each have their own bed since it was the conference championship. She was happy when she found out she was sharing a room with her bus buddy, Avery.

They grabbed their keys from Coach and headed up to their room, but Sierra had barely gotten her bags down before another text came through from Ellie. Juniper is

going to Chris's room for a little bit. I'm in room 336. Come give me a kiss before we have to morph into mortal enemies.

Sierra let Avery know she would be right back, then rode the elevator up a floor to get to Ellie's room. Seconds after knocking, Ellie opened the door and pulled her into the room. Before Sierra could even comprehend what was happening, she was lying on the bed with Ellie on top of her.

Ellie kissed Sierra's neck while her hands ran up and down her sides. "Do you know how fucking turned on it makes me when we shit-talk each other?"

Sierra had trouble getting words out since she could hardly breathe. "I think I'm... starting to realize that." Shit, this feels good.

Sierra couldn't remember Ellie's hands ever touching her as much as they were at this moment, and she wanted to feel them everywhere. She wanted them on her skin. She wanted those fingers buried deep inside of her. Fuuuck. Why was Sierra having this realization when they only had a few minutes together?

She focused her attention on kissing Ellie since she knew they couldn't go farther than that. Not tonight. She hadn't waited just to have a quickie in a hotel room where they had to be worried about someone walking in on them. No. For now, kissing had to be enough. Luckily, the kissing was pretty damn great, and when Sierra and Ellie were finally able to force themselves apart a few minutes later, they both had swollen lips and messy hair.

"Do I look as disheveled as you right now?" Ellie asked with a laugh.

Sierra laughed along with her. "That depends. Do I look like I just fought a war? If so, we're in the same boat."

Ellie sat up and ran her fingers through her hair, then took Sierra's hand. "Good luck tomorrow. I have no doubt that you're going to do fucking amazing and exceed every single one of coach's expectations. You're also going to look ridiculously sexy standing on the second-place podium after the 400 finals on Sunday."

Sierra let go of Ellie's hand so she could playfully shove her. "Funny. I was just going to say the exact same thing to you."

Ellie laughed with Sierra for a few seconds before her face became serious and she grabbed Sierra's hand once again. "Sierra, I..." Ellie shook her head as if she had changed her mind about what she was going to say. "I'm really proud of you."

Had Ellie almost told her she loved her? The possibility both terrified and excited Sierra. It had barely been over two months since they shared their first kiss, but Sierra's feelings for Ellie were also bordering on love. It wasn't something she was ready to admit out loud, and even thinking it made her want to throw up, but she couldn't deny it.

"I'm really proud of you too," Sierra choked out.

That night, as she fell asleep, her mind wasn't on the big weekend ahead of her. All she could focus on was the possibility that Ellie Finch might be in love with her.

\*\*\*



*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:03 pm*

The first day of the conference championship went by in a blur. After qualifying, Sierra was ranked above Ellie in both the 200 and the 400. Ellie had been sure to reassure her it was only because she was saving her energy for the next day, and even though Sierra knew it was just playful banter, she also had no question that Ellie would do everything in her power to make sure Sierra didn't beat her in the finals.

When they got back to the hotel, Coach gave them a speech about how they were in the perfect position to win the meet. After his speech, Sierra went right up to her hotel room. There was an unspoken understanding between her and Ellie that their focus needed to be on the meet and not each other, so they sent each other one goodnight text before both drifting off to sleep.

The next day, Sierra's nerves were so bad, her whole body was tingly. The only thing that was able to ease her anxiety the slightest bit was the smile and wink Ellie gave her every time they passed each other. When it was time for the 400, Ellie high-fived both Sierra and their other teammate who had made finals, but her hand held on to Sierra's after they high-fived and she gave it a squeeze before dropping it.

They took their spots on the track, Sierra in lane four while Ellie was staggered behind her in lane three. The whole gym was filled with cheers as they took their positions in the starting blocks. Just run your race, Sierra reminded herself as she waited for the gun to sound. Give it your best. That's all you can do.

As soon as she heard the gun, Sierra shot from her starting blocks. She shut out the voices telling her and the other competitors how to run the race and focused on the person in front of her. She easily passed that person, and when it was time to cut in, she was in front of everyone aside from Ellie who was right beside her. She slipped in

behind Ellie to go around the turn to keep from running more than she had to. By the time they got to the final turn, they were way too close for Sierra to stay behind. She moved into the second lane and inched closer to Ellie. At this moment, Ellie wasn't the girl she was falling in love with. She was the person Sierra had to beat to be a conference champion. By the last straightaway, they were side by side. Sierra wasn't giving up, but neither was Ellie. Every time Sierra tried to push ahead, Ellie matched her stride for stride. As they closed in on the finish line, Sierra kicked into high gear. All of her muscles burned as she attempted to get ahead. She leaned across the finish line, but so did Ellie, so it was impossible to know who won.

After exerting all of her energy, she could barely stand. She tried to stumble to the side of the track, but could barely stay on her feet. Two strong, but shaky, hands grabbed her, and the shockwave it sent through her body told her exactly who it was.

"You did amazing," Ellie whispered. "No matter what happens, I'm so proud of you." Before they broke apart, Ellie leaned against Sierra as if she needed Sierra to hold her up. That was clearly an act to sneak the kiss to Sierra's neck that made her mind go to one thing only, and it was not the race.

Ellie kept her arm around Sierra as they walked off the track, both of them watching the marquee to see the results. A moment later, they did, and it was revealed that Ellie beat her by 0.005 of a second. Sierra didn't care about that as much as the times they had both run, that blew her expectations out of the water.

Sierra subtly squeezed Ellie's side. "You did it, baby," she whispered. "You won."

Ellie smiled over at her and there was an extra sparkle in her eyes. "I sure did."

The way Ellie stared at her as she said the words told Sierra she wasn't referring to the race.

## Chapter 29

Ellie

It sucked not being able to celebrate with Sierra the way Ellie wanted to. They had just run the race of their lives in the 400 and given their team a first and second-place finish. With another of their teammates finishing fourth, that race had made a huge difference to the point total. Ellie wanted to drag Sierra away so she could talk to her and congratulate her the correct way, but they still had a meet to focus on.

The second day of the conference championship always went by quickly, so she knew it would be no time at all before they were running the 200 and then the 4x400.

For the 200, Sierra was ranked fourth while Ellie was ranked sixth. Since the finals were two heats of four runners, Ellie was in the first heat while Sierra was in the second, faster, heat. If Ellie wanted to do better than she was seeded to do, she knew she had to not only win her heat, but win it by a decent amount.

She pushed herself to make sure that happened, then anxiously watched Sierra's race. Sierra finished third, which meant she had finished better than she was predicted to. Oddly enough, even in separate heats, Sierra and Ellie had practically run the same time again, this time with Sierra coming out ahead. Ellie was happy for her. Plus, that put Ellie fourth for the race and got them even closer to that championship trophy.

After cooling down, Ellie gathered their relay team together and led them over to their coach so they could get an update on where they stood for the meet. Their coach informed them that if the last track event that was left aside from their own, as well as the final field event, went as expected, there would be no pressure on the relay team.

Of course, neither event went how it was supposed to, so with only the relay to go, they were down by one point. As the top-seeded team in the relay, they should have

felt good about their chances. The problem was, the second-seeded team, whose qualifying time was much too close to theirs, was the team currently winning the meet.

This whole championship was riding on their relay team. It was riding on Ellie. She wanted to give her teammates an elaborate speech to inspire them, but she was too nervous to form words. Instead, she gave them each an anxious nod before walking toward the starting line.

A hand gently grabbed her arm, and when Ellie turned to see who it was, she found Sierra standing beside her. "We've got this," Sierra reassured her. "You've got this. I believe in you."

Ellie didn't need an inspirational speech. Sierra believed in her, and those words were what was going to get her through this race even though her legs were tight and her body was aching.

She watched as her first teammate stepped onto the track, looking just as nervous as Ellie felt. When the gun went off, her teammate was a little sluggish. She was clearly still feeling the strain from running the 400 earlier in the day. When she handed off the baton, they were in fourth place, which was not the position they needed to be in, but Ellie wasn't losing hope. Their second runner eventually moved them up to third, but the first two teams were pulling way ahead, especially the team that was currently winning the meet. Ellie really didn't know if they had any chance at this point, and she was starting to feel defeated until Sierra took the baton.

Sierra closed the distance between herself and the second-place team and by the beginning of her second lap, she moved past them. The first-place team was still a decent amount ahead, but Sierra was quickly closing that gap as well.

When Ellie stepped on the track to wait for the hand off, the race was neck and neck.

Ellie watched Sierra coming toward her and turned to start running as soon as her body told her it was the right time. When she looked over her shoulder to grab the baton, she was in the perfect position. It easily slipped into her hand, the slight contact with Sierra's fingers causing a spark to shoot through her arm. That spark gave Ellie the extra energy she needed to win this race.

She and her competition remained side by side throughout the first lap. All around them, the crowd was going crazy, but Ellie tuned all of that out. Her focus was on one thing only—winning this race. She started to pull away when there was about 150 meters left in the race and she didn't let up until she stumbled across the finish line. Her legs gave out from under her, but someone grabbed her before she hit the ground.

She wasn't surprised when she looked up and found herself gazing into deep blue eyes. "I told you, you could do it, baby," Sierra said quietly.

Ellie wanted to stay like this forever, but their special moment was broken up by their teammates rushing onto the track and attacking both of them with hugs and high fives.

When Ellie finally broke free, she looked around the gym to search for her family and found them standing beside the track with Sierra's family as if they were old friends. Ellie walked over to them and was wrapped up in congratulatory hugs from her brother, her moms, and her Uncle Dalton, Aunt Shelby, and three of her cousins. After they were done making a big deal out of her, Sierra's family, including an aunt and uncle Ellie was meeting for the first time, congratulated her with high fives.

A hand landed on the small of her back, and she looked over to find Sierra standing next to her. She stayed like this the whole time they talked to their families, and Ellie could have floated away because she was feeling so light and happy.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:03 pm*

Unfortunately, this moment was also broken up, because they had to receive their trophies for the 4x400, and even more importantly, the team trophy. After getting their relay trophies, they listened as the announcer went through the team results, starting with the last place team. When they finally got to first place and announced West End as the winners, their whole team erupted into cheers once again. All of her teammates pushed Ellie into the middle to accept the trophy on their behalf. As she held it high in the air, she was pretty sure this day couldn't get any better.

At least, that's what she thought until they announced her as the meet MVP, and she received another trophy to add to her collection of hardware from the weekend. Her teammates took turns congratulating her, and Ellie didn't miss the fact that Sierra held her a little longer than everyone else when they hugged. Now the day definitely couldn't get any better. Right? There was no way. Ellie was on such a high, she was pretty positive she couldn't get any higher.

When they were back on the bus, Juniper stared down at all of the trophies and medals on Ellie's lap. "You killed it today," Juniper said with a pride to her voice that made Ellie feel proud of herself.

"You had an awesome weekend too," Ellie told her. "Your 400 time was so good."

It was true. Juniper had run her career personal best, which was an especially big deal since times were normally much better during outdoor season when they only had to run one lap for the 400.

"Not good enough," Juniper said with a defeated sigh, most likely referring to the fact that she had finished ninth during the qualifying races and had missed the finals by

one position.

Ellie understood how frustrating that must be, but it was also the best finish Juniper ever had at a conference meet, so Ellie wanted her to be able to celebrate that. “You still did better than ever. That’s what you need to focus on. You should be so proud of yourself. I’m proud of you, and I have no doubt your dad would be too.”

“Do you really think so?”

Even though it was dark on the bus, Ellie could tell Juniper was on the edge of tears, so she reached over and grabbed her hand.

“I know so. You’ve worked so hard this semester, and we still have a whole outdoor season. There’s no question in my mind that by the time of the outdoor conference meet, you’ll be on that podium.”

Juniper laid her head on Ellie’s shoulder and sighed once again, but this time, it was a contented sigh. “Thanks. That means a lot coming from the meet MVP.” When she picked her head back up, she smiled at Ellie in the way she always did when she was about to give her bad news. “So, would you hate me if I didn’t go to the track party tonight?”

It was a strange question for a plethora of reasons. Juniper always went to the party that was held after the conference meet, while Ellie was the one that only went half the time, and it always took a bunch of convincing from Juniper to get her there. It was also strange since the party was at Chris’s place. It seemed like an odd time to decide not to go. “Skipping your own boyfriend’s party?” Ellie asked.

“Yes, but only because he is also skipping. We decided to celebrate by ourselves... at our place.”

Ah. Now it made sense. “So, what you’re saying is that I need to find somewhere else to stay.”

Juniper shook her head. “No. I’m not going to kick you out of our own place. I just wanted to warn you that I’m going to be a bit preoccupied.”

Ellie laughed. “Don’t worry. I’ll see if I can crash with one of the other girls from the team.” And I know exactly which girl to crash with.

Ellie took out her phone and sent a text to Sierra. Any chance I can stay in your dorm room after the party so I don’t have to listen to my roommate have sex all night? It worked out since Teresa wouldn’t be back until the next day.

That works for me :) I didn’t realize you were going to the party.

Ellie didn’t have to go to the party, and she would certainly skip it if Sierra wasn’t interested. The only reason she was considering it was because they had so much to celebrate this time. Only if you want to. If not, we can do whatever you want. Ellie definitely wouldn’t hate celebrating by snuggling in bed with Sierra.

I was kind of hoping we could have a party of our own...

If Ellie had any doubt over what that text meant, the next one cleared it right up. I’m ready.

Ellie was wrong. This day could get better, and she was about to have the best night of her life.

## Chapter 30

Sierra



Sierra paced back and forth in the lobby of her dorm as she waited for Ellie to arrive. Given what they planned to do tonight, they had both decided it would be in their best interests to shower before Ellie came over.

Sierra had meant what she said when she told Ellie she was ready. She was pretty sure she had been ready for a while now, and their rendezvous in the hotel room had confirmed that for her. She needed all of Ellie. It wasn't a question. Of course, that didn't stop her from being extremely nervous, so she let all of that nervous energy out in the form of pacing.

Her legs were aching from the weekend, but it didn't matter. She wouldn't have been able to stop herself if she tried. After a few minutes, Ellie called to say she had arrived, and Sierra let her in.

They were both quiet as they rode the elevator up to Sierra's floor and walked down the long hallway to her room. Once they were inside with the door shut behind them, Ellie turned toward Sierra and pushed a wet piece of hair behind her ear. "Are you sure you want to do this? Because if you're not ready, I can wait. I don't want to pressure you into anything."

While Ellie's reassurance was very sweet, Sierra had to laugh at it. "Did you forget that I was the one who told you I was ready? You haven't pressured me into anything. I want this. I really want it."

"Thank god." Ellie blew out a long breath. "It was so hot competing against you this weekend, I didn't know how I could possibly make it through tonight without touching you."

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:03 pm*

Just hearing Ellie talk about touching her already had Sierra on edge. There was no doubt in her mind this was what she wanted, and she didn't want to wait any longer for it.

"Get on the bed," she said, her voice coming out much more husky and demanding than she meant for it to.

The desire burning in Ellie's eyes told Sierra she didn't mind one bit. Without being told which bed was Sierra's, Ellie chose the correct one.

As soon as Ellie was situated with her back resting against Sierra's pillows, Sierra got onto the bed as well and straddled Ellie's lap. Without saying another word, their mouths came together in a searing kiss. Sierra didn't know if it was from the adrenaline of the meet or the knowledge of what was to come, but this kiss somehow blew all of their other kisses out of the water. It was hard and soft all at once. It was rushed, yet sensual. It was absolutely perfect.

Without even realizing what she was doing, Sierra began to move her hips against Ellie's lap, which caused them both to let out long, deep moans, which only served to turn Sierra on even more. Before she could overthink what she was doing and try to slow down, she brought her hands to the bottom of Ellie's shirt and lifted it over her head. Sierra got a preview of Ellie's tight stomach whenever her uniform top rode up, but that was nothing compared to having it on full display right in front of her. What made it even hotter was the fact that those abs were waiting for Sierra to touch them. They were all hers, and she was pretty sure that made her the luckiest girl in the entire universe.

“Could you be any more perfect?” She growled as she ran her fingers across Ellie’s stomach. It was as if she was an animal in heat, but she didn’t care. After the year she had, she deserved to get a little wild.

Ellie licked her lips as she watched Sierra explore her body. “Definitely. I could be you. Speaking of which,” she moved her hand inside Sierra’s shirt and that one touch made her whole body feel like it was on fire. “May I?”

Sierra couldn’t get any words out with how dry her mouth was, so she nodded in response. Ellie was slow and meticulous as she removed Sierra’s shirt, her fingers grazing over Sierra’s skin as she lifted. Sierra bit her lip as she tried to hold back another moan. It had only been a few months since she last had sex. Why did she feel like she might climax from this touch alone?

Ellie must have realized how much Sierra needed her, because she didn’t stop with her shirt. She lifted Sierra’s sports bra over her head as well and gawked at her naked chest. “You are most definitely the one who is perfect. Can I please touch you?”

“I might die if you don’t,” Sierra said with a strained laugh.

Then, Ellie’s hands were on her, and it was pure ecstasy.

Sierra clawed at Ellie’s skin as she struggled to remove her bra as well, but it was worth the effort. Ellie had the most wonderful boobs Sierra had ever seen (not that she had seen many, but still). She leaned in and tentatively brought one nipple into her mouth. When Ellie expressed her pleasure, Sierra brought her hand to the other nipple and gave them both the attention they deserved.

Ellie groaned and pushed Sierra off of her, but their bodies didn’t stay apart for long. Soon, Ellie was on top of her, with her hands quickly breaking the plane of Sierra’s sweatpants. Sierra lifted her hips wordlessly to let Ellie know she was ready for them

to come off, and Ellie followed her silent request. Sierra removed Ellie's sweatpants as well, and after a few seconds of them wrestling to remove each other's underwear, they were both completely naked.

Ellie gave Sierra a few quick kisses before pulling back to look into her eyes. "I really want to take this slow, so I can worship you the way you deserve, but that's going to have to wait for round two. I need to watch you come."

Ellie's fingers moved to Sierra's center, and before long, two of her fingers were deep inside of Sierra. Watching Sierra come wasn't going to be an issue. The issue was that Sierra didn't want to be the only one who came, so she brought her hand to Ellie's center as well. She groaned when she ran her fingers through Ellie's folds and found how wet she was. After getting her fingers lubricated with Ellie's pleasure, Sierra pushed two inside of her as well.

"Think you can handle three?" Ellie asked through deep gasping breaths.

"I can handle anything you throw at me." Sierra purposely made herself sound more confident than she felt because she knew how much that would turn Ellie on.

Ellie grunted before adding a third finger. She moved in and out of Sierra, pushing her closer and closer to the edge. "Fuck me."

Ellie's commanding voice was almost enough to make Sierra topple over the edge, but she had a job to do. She added a third finger as well, and fucked Ellie just as hard as Ellie was fucking her. When she started to lose all control, she felt Ellie tensing up. She curled a finger and listened as Ellie screamed out in pleasure at the same time Sierra came harder than she ever had before.

"Holy shit." Sierra stared up at the ceiling as she fought to get her breathing under control. "Seriously. Holy shit. It's never felt like that before. It's never been that

good.”

Ellie rolled onto her side and stared at Sierra, a satisfied smile on her face. “Can I quote you on that? Do you have any Post-it notes? I’ll write it on there and leave it on Teresa’s bed.”

Sierra laughed harder than she ever had before. “Please do it.”

“I totally would, but I don’t think I can tear myself away from you.”

“I get it. The feeling’s mutual.”

“What are you doing for spring break?” Ellie asked as they continued to stay lost in each other’s eyes.

“No big plans. Just going home.”

“I know it’s too late to plan anything really fancy, but do you want to go on a trip with me? Even if we end up in a fancy hotel room in the middle of nowhere, it’ll be worth it to have more uninterrupted time with you.”

Uninterrupted time sounded perfect, and Sierra was sure her moms would be okay with it since they seemed to like Ellie so much. “I would love that.”

“Great.” Ellie’s face lit up. “Just have to get through this week and then we can get away for more of this.” She tickled her fingers up Sierra’s leg.

“We’re not going to have more of that right now?” Sierra asked, trying to keep her voice from sounding disappointed at the prospect of it being one and done for that night. Not that she could blame Ellie for being tired. It’d been a very big weekend for them.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:03 pm*

Ellie smirked and placed a few kisses across Sierra's chest. "Oh, I plan to do a lot more of this tonight. If you agree, I also think we should skip our classes tomorrow, so we don't have to put clothes on until it's time for the anti-Christ to return."

"I think I can make that work." Sierra didn't have anything big happening in her classes scheduled for the next day, but even if she did, she probably wouldn't care. Naked time with Ellie was much more important.

"In that case..." Ellie rolled back on top of Sierra and kissed her as if it was the first time all over again.

\*\*\*

They spent the rest of the night into the early morning hours exploring each other with their hands and mouths. When they could barely keep their eyes open, they drifted to sleep in each other's arms.

When Sierra awoke to the feeling of Ellie kissing her neck, she checked her phone and was surprised to see how late they had slept in. Luckily, they hadn't slept into the afternoon, so they had time for at least one more round before they would have to get dressed and leave the room to prepare for Teresa's arrival.

"If you're going to do that, you better follow through," Sierra said as she pulled Ellie on top of her.

Ellie smirked down at her. "You don't have to worry about that. I always follow through."

Sierra brought her hands into Ellie's hair to encourage her lips to meet Sierra's in another perfect kiss. She was so distracted by Ellie's hand sneaking down her side, she didn't hear her dorm room door open.

What she did hear was Teresa's raised voice asking, "What the fuck is going on here?"

Ellie scrambled off of Sierra and pulled the comforter over herself. Sierra did the same as she thought about what to say. "Teresa, this is my..." she hesitated before saying the word girlfriend, because they had never actually defined what this was. She had no doubt that they were on the same page with how they felt about each other, but she wasn't sure whether or not Ellie was okay with putting a label on it.

Ellie held the comforter over her body with one hand and reached the other out toward Teresa. "I'm her girlfriend, Ellie. I would say it's nice to meet you, but unfortunately, I've heard too much about you, and I don't like to lie."

When Sierra giggled at Ellie's response, Teresa glared at her. "I'll ask you again... what the fuck is going on here?"

Sierra shrugged. With Ellie beside her, Teresa wasn't able to scare her the way she usually did. "You weren't supposed to be back until this afternoon, so I had my girlfriend stay over last night. This is my room too. You've had guys over to do this exact same thing plenty of times."

"Yeah, guys. I'm not stinking up the room with my disgusting lifestyle."

Those words sounded more like something Teresa's dad would say than her own, but Sierra was done making excuses for her. "You didn't seem to mind this lifestyle when you were the one on top of me."

She hoped that visual didn't upset Ellie, but the way she chuckled told Sierra it didn't.

Teresa glowered at both of them. "Don't act like you're not the one with the problem. You've been obsessed with me from the moment we met. You manipulated me into your bed and convinced yourself I loved you when I really just felt sorry for you. You're nothing but a..."

"Shut your fucking mouth," Ellie interrupted, "before I do it for you."

Sierra smiled at Ellie and kissed her cheek. "Thanks, babe, but I got this." She narrowed her eyes when she looked back at Teresa. "You can say whatever you want to make yourself feel better, but the truth is, you fell in love with me, but you didn't have the guts to follow through. Instead of admitting that something happened between us, you've spent this whole year making me your personal punching bag. You got with guys and rubbed it in my face. You gaslit me to make me feel like I was the crazy one. You treated me like complete shit. And I just put up with it, because I really thought I loved you. But I've come to realize that you never deserved me, and by ending things between us, you did me the biggest favor of my life. Oh, also, you're kind of interrupting another round of super hot sex with my girlfriend, so you should probably leave."

Teresa looked like there was so much she wanted to say, but instead, she huffed and stormed out of the room.

The room was silent for a few seconds before Ellie broke into a fit of laughter. When she stopped laughing, she brought herself into the same position she had been in before they were rudely interrupted. "I think you should know that was the hottest fucking thing I've ever seen. I'm so turned on right now."

Sierra lifted an eyebrow. "Maybe you should do something about that."



Ellie smirked back at her. “Don’t worry. I plan on it.”

## Chapter 31

Ellie

After some last minute planning and a lot of discussions, Ellie and Sierra had decided to stay in Pennsylvania for Spring Break. They had rented a tiny cottage by a lake for three nights, and while most of their teammates would have scoffed at the idea of staying in cool Pennsylvania over somewhere tropical and warm, Ellie couldn’t wait. She was about to have three full days away with Sierra with no interruptions, sneaking around, or studying. Nothing sounded more perfect than that. The only responsibility they would have was working out, but working out with her biggest competition was a pretty good deal.

“Have I mentioned how excited I am for this?” Sierra squeezed Ellie’s hand and bounced up and down in the passenger seat.

In the week since telling off Teresa, Ellie could see a visible change in Sierra. She appeared lighter as if a huge weight had been lifted off her shoulders, and Ellie loved seeing it.

Speaking of that big, scary L word, Ellie had also realized, with no doubt in her mind, that she loved the girl sitting next to her. She had no idea when she would tell her since she didn’t want to scare her off so early in their relationship, but she knew these feelings were real, and it was getting harder and harder to hold them in.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:03 pm*

Ellie squeezed Sierra's hand back. "You have told me... about a million times," she teased. "But I like it, because I'm super excited too."

After traveling down a bunch of back roads, the cottage finally came into view. It looked just as cute in person as it did in the pictures, which made Ellie even more excited about their stay.

She pulled into the driveway and opened her trunk so they could get out their overnight bags and the groceries they had picked up on the way. Even though neither of them could cook anything fancy (or really, anything at all), they decided they would rather stay in and eat microwave pizza and ramen noodles than go out to a restaurant. This week was about having time together with just the two of them, and they planned to take full advantage of that.

After typing in the code to get into the house, Ellie opened the door and motioned for Sierra to walk in before her.

"Wow," Sierra whispered as she looked around. "It really is like the pictures." She looked back at Ellie and grabbed her hand. "Rustic and romantic. I love it."

"I love..." Now is not the time. "It too."

After exploring the small house and putting their bags in the bedroom, they went into the kitchen to make something to eat for dinner. Two microwaved pizzas later, they were sitting on the couch, snuggled close together, and watching a movie.

"I know it's pretty cold outside, but after the movie, how would you feel about

bundling up, grabbing a bunch of blankets, and watching the stars?” Ellie asked.

Instead of answering right away, Sierra rested a hand on Ellie’s cheek and kissed her softly. She pulled away just enough that Ellie was able to see the extra sparkle in your eyes. “Sometimes it doesn’t feel like you’re real,” Sierra told her, an awe to her tone that made it clear she was telling the truth. “Where did you come from, Eleanor Patricia Finch?”

Ellie poked Sierra in the side. “I thought I told you never to speak that name out loud again.”

Sierra yelped and wiggled away from Ellie, a laugh escaping her throat as she did. “What do you prefer? Ellie Patty?”

Ew.Ellie made a gagging motion with her hand. “That’s even worse. I didn’t know that was possible.”

Sierra crossed her arms and smiled proudly. “You’re welcome.”

Ellie pounced on Sierra and began to tickle her sides. Sierra tried to get away, but Ellie had her pinned down so she couldn’t. “Take it back.”

“Take what back?” Sierra asked between giggles.

“Promise to never call me Ellie Patty ever again.”

“I can’t.” More giggles.

“Promise to never call me Ellie Patty again, or I’ll withhold kisses for the rest of the trip.”

Sierra put her hands in the air as though she were surrendering. "Okay. You win. I won't call you Ellie Patty."

Ellie laughed before leaning in to give Sierra a kiss. This girl is crazy if she thinks I could go an hour without kissing her, let alone a few days. "I can't believe you actually fell for that."

"Fell for what?" Sierra tilted her head as she asked the question, but quickly stole another kiss from Ellie as if she actually believed they could be kept from her.

"Me lying about withholding kisses. I could never."

"I know." Sierra smirked in a way that made it appear like she was trying to hold in laughter. "Ellie Patty."

After the movie ended, Sierra and Ellie went to their room to christen the bed, and after working up an appetite, they made themselves more food. After being completely satisfied in more than one way, they grabbed blankets and headed out to their yard that overlooked the lake. They made it out before the sun had completely set, so they were able to watch it setting beyond the lake. Ellie looked from the sunset to Sierra and back to the sun. "You know, this sunset is the second most beautiful thing I've seen recently."

"Oh yeah? And what's the first?" The smile on Sierra's face said that she knew exactly what the first was.

Ellie put an arm around her and pulled her in close. "I think you already know."

"Can you tell me?" she asked softly, almost unsure, as if she had to hear the words from Ellie to truly believe they were true.

“Sierra.” Ellie stared at Sierra until she finally looked over at her and let their eyes meet. “I think you’re the most beautiful girl in the entire world. From the first time I saw you, I haven’t been able to take my eyes off of you. Now that I know you, you’re even more beautiful to me. Please don’t ever doubt that. Okay?”

Sierra broke their eye contact to gaze down at the blanket they were sitting on. “Sometimes it’s hard, you know? Teresa used to say all the right things. She made all of these promises to me, and then suddenly, it was like she became a different person overnight. I realize you’re not her, and I keep reminding myself of that, but when the person you thought you knew better than anyone else in this world changes right before your eyes, it’s almost impossible to convince yourself it won’t happen with everyone else.”

“That makes sense.” Ellie had gotten her heart broken before, but it wasn’t to the extent of Sierra’s. Ellie never dated someone she had been friends with before. Sure, there was the usual progression, but it was pretty obvious early on in all of her relationships the direction they were headed in. Everyone knows relationships can end. No one goes into a friendship believing it will. This person who was supposed to be on Sierra’s side forever was now her enemy. Ellie couldn’t even begin to imagine how much that must suck. “I want you to know I’m not going to hurt you, though.”

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:03 pm*

Sierra sighed and laid her head on Ellie's shoulder. "And I want you to know that I'm really trying to believe you, but it's tough to ignore the voice in my head telling me otherwise."

"Well, I hope this week together helps to silence that voice a little bit."

"Me too."

As the trip passed by way too quickly, Ellie wasn't sure if it had eased Sierra's worries at all, but she did know it had caused Ellie to fall even harder. There was nothing magical about this trip. It was very domestic. They spent every day much like the first. They woke up in bed together, drank coffee by the lake, spent most of the day switching between watching movies and talking, then ended their night under the stars. One night they even made love underneath them, and Ellie thought her heart might burst into a million tiny love-filled pieces. It took everything in her not to tell Sierra she loved her at that moment, but with Sierra's clear hesitance, she didn't want to push anything and scare her away.

On their last night of vacation, they laid under the stars together, neither of them saying a word for a very long time. Ellie was thinking about how much she didn't want to leave, and she wondered if that's where Sierra's head was as well.

After close to an hour of silence, Sierra rolled onto her side to look over at Ellie. "I think I'm ready to tell people about us."

It was as if Sierra had said the four-letter word Ellie had been holding inside with the way Ellie's heart jumped in her chest. "Really? You're sure you're ready?"

“I am.” Sierra furrowed her eyebrows. “Are you not? Do you want to keep it a secret?”

Ellie grabbed Sierra’s hands. It was hard to understand why her making sure Sierra was ready would make Sierra think she was questioning it, but the trauma from her last relationship was still very much present. Ellie needed to keep reminding herself of that. Things she didn’t think twice about were the same things that kept Sierra up at night. “Of course I’m ready. I’ve been ready from the beginning. I do want to talk to Juniper first, of course. As my best friend, I think it’s important she hears it directly from me personally, rather than finding out at the same time as everyone else. It might take her a little bit to get used to it, but I have no doubt that she’ll come around when she sees how happy you make me.”

“Yeah, she’ll just have to get over the fact that she hates me.” Sierra squeezed her eyes shut, and Ellie worried she might start to cry.

“That’s not it,” Ellie reassured her. “I honestly think she’s over that. I just don’t think she’s going to be super happy that I’ve been lying to her.”

That was the one thing that made Ellie okay with continuing to keep this a secret. She knew Juniper was going to be pissed when she found out Ellie had been lying to her, and even though she knew she would have to deal with that eventually, she had no problem putting it off.

“I’m sorry you had to lie because of me,” Sierra said softly.

Ellie put a hand on Sierra’s cheek. “I’d do it all over again if I had to. You’re worth it.”

A relaxed grin took over Sierra’s face. “Thank you for saying that.” She looked back down at the blanket and picked at a loose thread. “When do you think you’ll tell

Juniper?”

“How about tomorrow, right when we get back to school?” She lifted Sierra’s chin to force their eyes to meet. “Then, tomorrow night, I’ll take you on a date to celebrate no longer being in the closet.”

“That sounds perfect.”

And it would have been perfect if Ellie didn’t walk into her apartment the next day to find Juniper crying hysterically and completely inconsolable. Was this some weird déjà vu or had everything just come full circle to the first time Ellie had asked Sierra to dinner? At least now Sierra knew her well enough to understand if she had to cancel. At least, Ellie hoped that was the case.

## Chapter 32

Sierra

Sierra couldn’t stop herself from skipping into her dorm room after returning to campus from her trip with Ellie. She was so happy she was pretty sure nothing could ruin the mood. That theory was about to be tested, though, since she walked into her room to find Teresa had already returned.

Teresa looked up from whatever she was doing on her phone, and the devilish look in her eyes told Sierra this wasn’t going to be one of those times they ignored each other and went on with their days. “How was your break? Was it hard being away from your girlfriend?”

Something about the way she said girlfriend made Sierra want to slap her. She said the word as if it was fake. Almost as if Sierra had made Ellie up to piss Teresa off. “No, it wasn’t hard, because I wasn’t away from her.” Sierra held her head high in the



air. There was no way she was going to let Teresa get the best of her. “We went on a trip together. It was fantastic. Thanks for asking.”

Teresa scoffed. “I didn’t ask.”

“I know.” Sierra took off her shoes and hopped onto her bed, immediately relaxing against her pillows to prove to Teresa just how unbothered she was by her.

Teresa turned away from Sierra, and Sierra was hopeful that was the end of the conversation until Teresa shook her head and turned back around. “You know what? I don’t know what you’re trying to prove, but it can fucking stop right now.”

Her accusation made Sierra sit up straighter. What the hell was she even getting at? “I’m not trying to prove anything. I’m finally happy again, and you can’t handle that.”

“That’s not true at all. Why should I care if you’re happy or not? You mean nothing to me.”

Sierra would be lying if she said those words didn’t sting. As much as she tried not to care about Teresa, it still hurt that the person who used to be her everything saw her as nothing. Was that really the case, though? Sierra swore she could see something in Teresa’s eyes that told her it wasn’t. It was as if there was a small piece of the old Teresa sneaking through and Sierra swore she could see a pain in her eyes. She hated the fact that seeing that hurt just as much as hearing Teresa’s cold words. She shouldn’t still care about Teresa. Not after everything she had put her through. But at the same time, that’s what made her different from someone like Teresa. When she cared about someone, she really cared about them, and that didn’t just go away overnight.

Sierra shook her head back at Teresa. “I don’t think that’s true. I think I do mean

something to you, and that's why you're being so rude to me right now. If you didn't care, you would just let it be."

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:03 pm*

Teresa laughed and crossed her arms in front of her chest. “If you honestly believe that, I feel sorry for you.” She walked away and flopped back onto her bed and Sierra once again let herself believe the conversation was over between them.

But Teresa had no sooner gotten herself comfortable in bed and put her headphones in, than she ripped them back out. “You know what? It might not seem like it to you, but I’ve been tryingreallyhard to be nice to you. You’ve finally pushed me over the edge now, so it’s time I’m brutally honest with you. When we first got together, I really thought I loved you. But it wasn’tyouthat I loved. It was the way you made me feel. When you care about someone, it’s all-encompassing, and people eat that shit up. There’s something really comforting about knowingyou have someone who would do anything for you, and I fell right into that trap in the same way I’m sure your little girlfriend is right now. Then we got to school, and I realized something. I can do so much better. There are so many other people out here who can give me the attention I crave without having so many expectations in return. I can screw someone without having to scream from the rooftops about us dating. Don’t get me wrong, you were a good fuck, but you’re a dime a dozen. You aren’t worth the effort, and before long, your stupid girlfriend is going to realize that too.”

Sierra could feel her eyes burning, but she blinked to hold her tears inside. She could not give Teresa the pleasure of seeing her cry again. She wouldn’t, no matter how much she wanted to at that moment. “You don’t know what you’re talking about. You know nothing about Ellie.” Teresa didn’t see the way Ellie looked at Sierra. She didn’t hear the things she said to her or the promises she made. Those are all things Teresa did too, the annoying voice in her head reminded her. She needed to silence that voice. She wouldn’t let Teresa ruin this for her.

“I might not know Ellie, but I do know you. You’re the type of girl people fall hard and fast for. The one they would do anything for because you’re worth it.” Teresa spoke the exact words Ellie had said on their trip as if she had been there with them. “You’re the girl who seemed like a good idea at the time. But, when it comes down to it, you’re not worth it. I realized that and soon she will too.”

Voices swirled around in Sierra’s head, and she could hardly take it. All of the voices she had worked so hard to silence were screaming at her now. Her biggest insecurities were running on repeat through her brain. She held her head as if that was somehow going to stop them. “Just shut up, okay?” she shouted at Teresa.

When Sierra forced herself to look over at Teresa, she found a proud smile on her face, as if she had accomplished exactly what she set out to do. Bitch.

Teresa put both of her hands in the air. “Don’t shoot the messenger, okay?”

“Whatever.” Sierra had nothing left to say to Teresa. Soon, Sierra would be back with Ellie and all of these insecurities would be drowned out by the love and respect Ellie gave her.

Teresa got off of her bed and calmly walked over to her closet. She slowly sifted through her clothes, acting as if she hadn’t just said a million hurtful things in one breath. “Well, I have a date tonight, so don’t wait up.”

Sierra knew she shouldn’t continue to interact with Teresa, but she couldn’t help herself. It felt good to put Teresa in her place and she needed to do that again. “Don’t worry. I won’t. I have a date too, but I’m sure I won’t be coming back after mine.”

“Enjoy it while it lasts.”

Teresa was still watching her when Sierra felt her phone vibrate. She smiled when

she looked at it and found it was Ellie who had texted her. Unfortunately, that smile didn't last for long. Her smile, and her heart, dropped as soon as she read the words. I really hate to do this, but I'm having a roommate emergency. I'm going to have to cancel our date for tonight. Raincheck?

Sierra immediately silenced the voice in her head trying to tell her that Ellie didn't want to see her. That wasn't the case. That was just Teresa getting inside of her head with all of her bullshit. It probably went badly telling Juniper about them. Sierra couldn't be angry when the emergency was most likely due to their relationship. Now, she just felt guilty. Is she really pissed about us? I'm so sorry.

It took longer than usual, but eventually, another text came through from Ellie. Didn't get to tell her yet. Not the right time.

Not the right time? Why was it suddenly not the right time? Last night, Ellie made it sound like now was the perfect time, or at least as good as it was going to get. What made her change her mind?

"Something wrong?" Teresa asked, clearly happy to see the scowl on Sierra's face.

"No. I'm good. Great, actually." She threw her phone down and faked a smile for Teresa.

Teresa laughed. "You act like I don't know what your fake smile looks like. Let me guess. Trouble in paradise?"

Sierra shook her head. "No. Ellie had to cancel, because her best friend needs her right now. She's a good friend like that." Unlike some people I know.

Teresa smirked and rolled her eyes. "Okay. You keep telling yourself that, but don't say I didn't warn you."

Instead of saying anything else to Teresa, Sierra took out the newest mystery novel by her favorite writer and started to read. Rather than get stuck on what Teresa had said, she would immerse herself in solving the mystery and wait to hear from Ellie.

The only problem was, after reading for hours, there were still no more texts from Ellie. Sierra forced herself to get up and go to the dining hall for dinner, but she didn't have an appetite and mostly just played with her food. After trying to study at the library, she gave up on that as well, and went back to her room.

Luckily, Teresa wasn't there anymore, so she read more of her novel. When she realized she hadn't actually been paying attention to anything she was reading, she decided to go to sleep. She shut her eyes and tried to stop overthinking everything, but it was impossible, especially when she kept imagining she felt her phone vibrating. Every time she checked, there was still nothing from Ellie.

It was just past midnight, when Sierra decided she would send Ellie a message. I hope everything is okay

Her eyes became heavy, and she finally drifted to sleep as she waited for the text that didn't come.

## Chapter 33

Ellie

One day earlier

Ellie tapped lightly on Juniper's door and waited for a response. A minute later, the door opened, and Juniper was standing in front of her with red, puffy eyes and pink cheeks.

Ellie immediately pulled Juniper into her arms. “Aw, sweetie. What happened?”

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:03 pm*

“My whole life is shit, and everyone sucks.”

Ellie patted her best friend’s back. “That’s a start, but maybe you could give me a few more details.”

Juniper pulled away from Ellie, then slumped over to her bed and motioned for Ellie to do the same. “Chris and I are fighting,” she said once Ellie was sitting next to her.

“I’m sorry. Is it bad? Like breakup bad?” Ellie asked. Juniper must really like him if she was this upset over a fight. Ellie would have never expected it from her.

Juniper shook her head and wiped some of the tears from her face. “I don’t think so. I’m really pissed at him right now, but it has more to do with my own shit than anything to do with him.”

“Did something happen?”

Before they had left for break, Juniper seemed to be doing great. Track was going better than ever. Her relationship with Chris was the best she ever had. It seemed like nothing could bring her down, which made this switch even more concerning.

“So, as you know, Chris came to visit for spring break. I was feeling extra cheesy, so I decided to show him some of my old artwork from elementary school. My mom has a bin in her room that has that kind of stuff in it, so we went in and started to dig. At the bottom of the bin, I found this book my dad used to always read, so I took it out to tell Chris about it.” She closed her eyes, but that didn’t stop a stream of tears from flooding her cheeks. “A note fell out. It was a love note, but it wasn’t from my mom.



It was from some other woman talking about how much she loved their time together and how she couldn't wait for them to finally be together with no one else in the way."

Holy shit. No wonder Juniper was so upset. This was a lot to take in about the man she held up on a pedestal. "God, June, I wish I knew what to say. That's awful."

"And that's not the worst part. I went back and forth all week about whether or not I should tell my mom, but I had to. It was eating me up inside and I needed someone to talk to other than Chris. He was understanding and left sooner than he was planning so I could talk to her alone. It turns out, she already knew. She found out at his funeral when this other woman showed up. Fucking bitch."

"The lady he was cheating on your mom with had the nerve to show up where his grieving family was?" Ellie couldn't believe any of this. It sounded like something that would happen in a movie, not in real life. "That takes a lot of nerve."

"Yeah. The worst part is, I saw her that day. I noticed that her and my mom were having a heated discussion, but when I asked my mom who it was, she said it was someone my dad went to school with. She lied to me, and she's been lying ever since. She was acting so weird after the funeral, but I didn't think anything of it. Her husband had died. There was no reason to think she was acting weird because she just found out she had been cheated on."

"Wow." Ellie really didn't know what to say. Out of all the things Juniper could have told her, this was the last thing she expected. "That's so messed up."

"Yep. So, it turns out my dad is a fucking man-whore who was planning on leaving us either way, and my mom, who I felt sick over telling all week, already knew. Then, the cherry on top of the mother fucking cake was Chris telling me he understood why she kept it a secret."

While Ellie could also kind of understand where Juniper's mom was coming from, she wasn't going to tell her that right now when she was clearly hurting. "I'm so sorry, Juney."

"Now Chris and I are fighting, because I don't know if I can trust him. I know I'm probably being irrational, but if he thinks it's okay for my mom to lie to me, does that mean he would too?" Juniper shook her head, then took Ellie's hand in hers. "I swear you might be the only person in my life I feel like I can actually trust right now."

A sick feeling immediately settled in Ellie's gut. Juniper thought Ellie was the only person she could trust, and Ellie was more guilty than anyone else. At least everyone else in Juniper's life meant well. Her mom lied to try to save her from learning the truth about her dad. Chris didn't even lie. He was in trouble for telling the truth. The only person Ellie's lies benefited were her. They kept her from getting in trouble. Right now, she didn't feel much better than Juniper's dad.

One thing was for sure. As much as it sucked, now was not the time to tell Juniper about her and Sierra. She didn't want her to have to feel more pain than she was right now. She just hoped Sierra understood and didn't think she was pulling away from her.

Speaking of Sierra, Ellie needed to text her. She obviously couldn't leave Juniper right now, and it didn't seem like that would change later in the day either. She figured it was better to cancel now than after Sierra had gotten herself ready to go. Maybe this way, Sierra would have time to make other plans instead.

She told Juniper she had to go to the bathroom and sent the text to Sierra once she was out of her room. It pained her to send it, but she had to be there for her best friend right now. A best friend that I keep lying to. The pit in Ellie's stomach got worse. This was definitely not how she expected this day to go. She went to the bathroom and splashed some water on her face, then checked her phone again to find

a response from Sierra. Is she really pissed about us? I'm so sorry.

Of course Sierra would assume this was about them since that's what Ellie was supposed to be talking to Juniper about right now. She wanted to explain everything to her so Sierra knew she didn't have to worry, but there was only so much she could tell her. This story wasn't hers to tell. It was Juniper's business and Sierra was probably the last person she wanted it shared with. Ellie needed to respect that.

"Ellie? Everything okay in there?" Juniper asked.

Ellie had no choice but to type out a quick text in response to Sierra's question. She hoped her very limited explanation was enough to hold her over until they could actually talk. It should be. They had such a nice week together. One canceled date shouldn't be enough to throw them off course. Plus, Ellie would definitely make it up to her. Her body heated up as she thought about all of the ways she could do that.

There was a knock at the bathroom door. "Ellie?"

"Yeah, sorry. Be right out."

When Ellie opened the door, Juniper was standing right outside of it. Ellie had never seen her like this. She looked so weak and defeated. Even when she was upset over the relay, it wasn't like this. "I'm sorry I'm being so clingy. I just don't want to be alone right now."

Ellie sat her phone down so she could reach out her hand and take Juniper's. "You're not alone. Don't worry. What do you need? Tell me what you want to do, and I'm all in."

"This is going to sound really strange coming from me, but I could actually use a workout. I need to work off all of this excess energy I have from being so pissed."

“Let’s do it.” Ellie was never going to turn down an extra workout. If it helped Juniper feel better, it was twice as beneficial. Ellie turned to pick her phone back up but stopped when Juniper grabbed her arm.

“Any chance you could leave your phone? If you take yours, I’m going to feel like I have to take mine, and I just kind of want to be cut off from the world right now.”

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:03 pm*

Ellie stared longingly at her phone. She wanted to send another text to Sierra, but she couldn't do it with Juniper watching her. She forced her eyes away from the phone and smiled at Juniper. "Let's do it."

After a tough workout and showers, Ellie and Juniper ordered takeout. They sat on the couch talking while they waited for it to arrive.

"I know I need to talk to my mom and Chris and make things right with both of them, but what about my dad? I'm so pissed at him, but I'm also pissed at myself for being mad at him. If he was still alive, I would never forgive him for this. But, he's not. Just because he's dead, does that suddenly make it okay?" Juniper groaned. "I'm so confused right now."

"It's okay to be confused. It's also okay to be mad at him or forgive him or not forgive him. In the end, you need to do what's best for you."

"I probably shouldn't have gotten mad at Chris though, huh?"

"Probably not. I think he was just trying to make you feel better."

Juniper cringed. "And I've been a total bitch to him. Is it okay if I call him quick?"

"Of course. Take your time." This worked in Ellie's favor. If Juniper and Chris made up, maybe Juniper would go to see him. It was too late for their dinner date, but if Ellie could spend any time with Sierra, she'd be happy.

Once Juniper left the room, Ellie stood from the couch to grab her phone. When she

hit the side button, the screen remained black. After trying multiple buttons, Ellie realized her phone was dead. She walked over to her bag from spring break that still hadn't made it to her room and rooted through it to find her charger. After tearing through the whole bag, she realized it wasn't there. Shit. She must have left it at the cottage.

She ran up the stairs to her bedroom and started opening all of the drawers in search of another one, but it was no use. She didn't have another one. She also knew that Juniper's phone used a different type of charger so she couldn't even borrow one from her.

"All's good."

Ellie jumped at the sound of Juniper's voice and turned to see her standing in Ellie's doorway. "You two made up?"

"Yep. He can't resist my charm. Don't worry, though. I already told him we were having a girl's night, so I'm all yours."

"Perfect." Ish. "Could part of our girls' night involve running out to buy a new charger? I left mine... at home." The lies keep adding up today. Great.

"Of course. We'll go after we eat."

Unfortunately, after eating, Juniper had another breakdown, which pushed back their trip even more. By the time they got back to the house with the new charger, Ellie could barely keep her eyes open. She gave Juniper a tight squeeze before saying goodnight and going to bed. She plugged her phone in beside her bed and tried to keep her eyes open while she waited for it to turn back on, but it was no use.

Ellie shot up to sunshine streaming through her window. She looked at her phone and

found that it was already 7:45, and her first class started at 8.

“Shit,” she muttered as she jumped out of bed. “Shit. Shit. Shit.”

She pulled on a pair of sweatpants and a shirt, grabbed her backpack, and ran out of her apartment. Their campus wasn’t very big, so she was luckily able to make it to class only a few minutes late. Her professor gave her an annoyed look, but didn’t say anything as she took her seat. Once his eyes were off of her and back on the board, she pulled out her phone.

She had a bunch of texts, but she ignored all of them except for the one from Sierra. Sorry. Super crazy night and morning. Any chance you can meet for lunch? I miss you.

Ellie checked her phone a few times throughout class, but it wasn’t until she was leaving to head to her next one that she got a response. I have classes this afternoon. Maybe after practice?

Can’t wait :)

Sierra didn’t text Ellie again throughout the day, but Ellie figured that was because she was busy with classes. When they got to practice, it was clear something was wrong. Sierra looked tired, and any time Ellie tried to share one of their secret smiles, Sierra looked away. Weird.

When practice ended, Ellie told Juniper she had to stick around to practice handoffs and waited for Sierra to slowly pack up her bags. “It’s about time,” Ellie joked when Sierra finally walked over to her. “I was starting to think you were avoiding me.”

When Sierra didn’t laugh at her joke, Ellie became nervous. She reached out and grabbed her hand and was happy to find that Sierra didn’t pull away from her.

“What’s wrong? Did I do something?”

Sierra shook her head. “It’s not you. It’s me.”

Okay, that sounds very much like the beginning of a break up.

“Not going to lie, you’re kind of scaring me.”

“Why can’t you tell Juniper about us?”

“I…” Ellie opened and closed her mouth a few times as she tried to think of how to explain it without telling any of Juniper’s personal business. “Juniper found out something really upsetting this past week. It’s not my story to tell, but she’s not in a great place right now.”



*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:03 pm*

“She seemed okay during practice.”

“That’s just Juniper. She’s good at covering up her emotions.” Until recently, she barely even showed them to Ellie.

Sierra nodded as if she understood, and Ellie really hoped that was the case. “So, how long do we have to wait?”

Ellie grabbed Sierra’s other hand, so she was now holding both. “Not too long. I promise. The last thing I want is for you to feel like my dirty little secret.”

“I want to believe you.” Sierra shook her head. “I do believe you.”

Ellie wasn’t convinced. Where the hell was Sierra’s doubt coming from, though? Two days ago, things had been perfect between them. “Are you sure?” Ellie asked tentatively.

“I want to be sure.”

What the hell was she talking about? Ellie felt like they were going in circles, and she had no idea why. “What does that even mean? Why does it suddenly feel like you don’t trust me?”

Sierra dropped Ellie’s hands and looked toward the ground. “I’m sorry. Last night when you canceled our plans and then didn’t say anything else, I got inside my own head. It felt like you were pulling away, and I realize how dumb and overbearing that sounds, but my brain isn’t logical sometimes. It made me realize that I’m not over

what happened with Teresa. Maybe we jumped into this too fast. Maybe I'm not ready."

Ellie couldn't believe what she was hearing. This was the girl she had stayed up late talking to every night last week. It was the girl she made love to underneath the stars. And after one night she was having doubts? How? Why? None of it made sense. "I'm really sorry about yesterday. Juniper was really upset, so I was trying to be there for her. Then my phone died, and I realized I forgot my charger at the cottage. By the time it finally had enough charge to turn on, I had fallen asleep. I never meant to make you doubt me. I promise." Ellie grimaced as she tried to hold in her tears. She didn't need to make a scene out in public like this.

When Sierra looked at her, she did have tears in her eyes. "I know. You did nothing wrong. Like I said, it's me. Not you."

Why was she making all of this sound so final? Was she...? Ellie bent down and put her hands on her knees to try to level herself while the world spun around her. "Are you breaking up with me?"

"I just need some time."

Ellie wanted to ask her what that meant. She wanted to fight for her—to show her everything she was giving up if she walked away. But, she also knew that wasn't what Sierra needed. For much too long, Teresa had controlled Sierra's life. It was time for Sierra to make her own decisions. If that decision was to not be with Ellie, Ellie needed to respect that. Even if it felt like someone was physically ripping her heart out of her chest.

She brought her hand to her chest as if that would somehow ease the pain. When it didn't, she had to force herself to do the last thing she ever wanted to do. She needed to walk away.

“Take all the time you need,” she told Sierra before forcing her feet to move and leave the woman she had fallen madly in love with.

## Chapter 34

Sierra

“Take all the time you need.” Those words had haunted Sierra ever since Ellie said them to her a week ago. And it had been a very long week. Even with how awkward things had been with Teresa all year, she still couldn’t think of a time that passed this slowly. To say she was miserable would be an understatement.

She missed the way Ellie smiled at her during practice. She missed her good morning texts and falling asleep in her arms. She missed how happy she was only a week prior. She couldn’t even be happy after both she and Ellie had a great first outdoor meet, because they didn’t get to celebrate it together. The worst part was it was all Sierra’s fault. Why couldn’t she fall for Ellie at a better time? Why did Sierra meet the perfect girl when she was still trying to move on from her past?

Right girl. Wrong time. At least, that’s what Sierra kept telling herself to keep from admitting the truth—she might have made the biggest mistake of her entire life.

She knew exactly who she needed to talk to right now. It was the one person she could always count on to be brutally honest with her, even when she didn’t want to hear it.

“Hello?” Sienna said, picking up the phone after only one ring as if she was waiting for the call.

“Hey! How’s it going?” Sierra asked, trying to keep her voice as level as possible.

“What’s wrong?”

“How do you know something is wrong?” Sierra shouldn’t be surprised since Sienna somehow always knew.

“First of all, you’re calling out of nowhere on a Monday night. Also, I can hear it in your voice. So, spill. What’s going on?”

Sierra had to take a deep breath to prepare herself to speak the words out loud. Hearing them leave her mouth was going to hurt like hell. “Ellie and I are on a break. Or broken up. I really don’t know. But we’re not together right now. And we haven’t talked in a week. I didn’t know a heart could break twice, but mine is definitely broken again, and somehow this one hurts even more than the first.”

“Did Ellie end things? How could she do that? She was so fucking into you. And after all of the encouragement I gave and how—”

“It wasn’t Ellie,” Sierra said to stop her sister’s rant. “It was me. I panicked.”

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:03 pm*

“Youpanicked?” Sienna sounded completely flabbergasted.

“Last week when I got back from spring break, Teresa gave me a long lecture about how no one would ever actually love me. Apparently, I’m easy to fall for, but not worth sticking around for.”

“And you listened to her? She’s a bitch who is jealous that you’re happy while she’s still living her miserable closeted life. You did exactly what she wanted you to do.”

“It wasn’t only that.” Sierra went on to tell her sister the story about how they were supposed to come clean about dating, but Ellie changed her mind for some unspoken reason. Even reciting the story made her feel dumb. In her heart, she knew Ellie hadn’t actually done anything wrong. The real problem was her gut reaction to the situation and the fact that she still felt like she couldn’t trust another person. That wasn’t Ellie’s fault.

“I’m trying to think of a nice way to put this, but I can’t, so I’m just going to say it. You’re a fucking idiot.”

Sierra rolled her eyes even though her sister couldn’t see her. “Wow. Thanks. Way to make me feel better.” This is why you called her, Sierra reminded herself.

“I’m just being honest with you. Ellie is cool and down to earth, and at Christmas it was so obvious you two were into each other, the rest of us were taking bets on when you were going to kiss.”

“That’s not true!” Is it? No, it couldn’t be.

“I guess you’ll never know. But, my point is, Ellie isn’t Teresa. She never was and she never will be. I understand why you got worried, but it sounds to me like Ellie is just being a good friend. If you were going through something shitty, you wouldn’t want me going around telling random people, would you?”

Sierra was going through something shitty, and Sienna was right. If her sister shared this with someone else, it would kill her. “No. You’re right.”

“Good. Now that we’ve established that, we need to figure out how you’re going to get your girl back, because you don’t let someone like Ellie Finch get away.”

Sierra sighed. “That’s the problem. I want Ellie, but I’m not sure if I’m ready to give my heart away to someone again. I thought I was, but last weekend showed me that I’m probably not.”

“You might not think you’re ready to give your heart away, but here’s the thing—you already have.”

“I...” Sierra wanted to argue with her, but she couldn’t, because she knew Sienna was right.

“Do you love her?” Her question made Sierra lose her breath, and when she didn’t answer right away, Sienna spoke again. “And don’t bullshit me. I can see right through you. Or in this case, I guess hear right through you.”

“I think the right way to word that is you can hear the words I’m not saying.” Avoidance. Great tactic.

“Stop avoiding my question. Although, I must say, your lack of response already gave me the answer I was looking for.”

“Great. Then I guess I don’t need to say it.”Don’t make me say it.

Sienna chuckled. “You dug your own grave, sis. You’re not getting out of this one.”

“Fine.” Sierra took another deep breath and blew it out. “You’re right. I love her. I’m more in love with her than I ever was with Teresa, and that scares the shit out of me.”

“Love is supposed to be scary. If it wasn’t, it wouldn’t be worth it.”

Sienna rolled her eyes again. This wasnotthe kind of wisdom she needed right now. “You sound like a Hallmark card. Or mom.”

“Ew. You’re right. I’m sorry. What I meant to say is that you need to get your fucking shit together and figure out how to get your fucking girl back before you mess up the rest of your fucking life. Is that better?”

“A little harsh, but yes, I liked it.”

“Cool. Now, what’s the plan?”

If only Sierra knew that. “I have no idea. I need to figure something out, but I just need a little bit of time. I clearly need to sort my own shit out before I drag Ellie back into it.”

“Just don’t wait too long. A girl like Ellie isn’t going to wait around forever.”

“If it’s meant to be, she will.”Really, Sierra?She shook her head at herself.

Sienna snickered. “Now who sounds like a Hallmark card?”

“I know. That was terrible. I’m sorry.”

## Page 75

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:03 pm*

“It’s all good. Keep me updated this week. Also, tell your roommate to go fuck herself, okay?”

“Sounds good. Love you, sis.”

“Love you too, idiot.”

After hanging up with her sister, Sierra already felt a hundred pounds lighter. Things were far from being resolved, but she knew she needed to find a way to make them right. It might take a little bit of time and a lot of effort, but Sierra was ready to do whatever it took. She was done being scared.

### Chapter 35

Ellie

Ellie stared out the window of the bus and wondered how the end of her college career had taken such a bad turn. It had been two weeks since Sierra ended things between them, and even though Sierra had said she just needed time, they still hadn’t talked. Ellie had no idea if they were done for good, but it was starting to feel like that. She was trying to be respectful of Sierra by giving her time and space, but it was hard when all she wanted to do was beg her to give them another chance.

To say she was blindsided by the breakup would be an understatement. She thought everything was perfect, and suddenly, it wasn’t. What the hell was she supposed to do? Her heart was breaking, and the worst part was she had no one to talk to about it.



She leaned her head against the window as the tears started to fall and prayed that Juniper didn't notice. She swore she could feel eyes on her, but when Juniper didn't say anything, she figured she must have imagined it. She shut her eyes to make it seem like she was sleeping and stayed like that the rest of the bus ride back to school.

When they got back, she quickly followed Juniper off of the bus and forced herself to keep looking ahead so she didn't turn around to look at Sierra. As much as she wanted to, she knew that would only make the pain worse.

"Hey, ladies, what's the plan tonight?" Chris asked as he walked over from the boys' bus to greet them.

Juniper put her hand on his chest and leaned in to give him a kiss. The scene made Ellie's heart clench, and she had to fight back her tears once again.

After the kiss, Juniper used her hand to playfully push Chris away. "Ellie and I are having a girls' night, so you need to find something else to do."

Ellie's head shot up. "We are?"

Juniper turned around and crossed her arms in front of her chest. "We are, and you better not try to fight me on it."

Ellie shrugged. "No fighting here." It wasn't like she had anything else to do. The person her heart longed to spend time with wasn't talking to her. God, this sucks.

"Perfect." Juniper blew Chris a kiss, then linked her arm with Ellie's and started to walk. "Let's get out of here."

Once they were back at the apartment, Juniper informed Ellie she had fifteen minutes before she had to meet her down in the living room. Ellie used that time to take a

quick shower and change into sweats. When she walked into the living room, Juniper was already sitting on the couch with her legs tucked underneath her.

She patted the spot next to her. “We need to talk.”

Even though Juniper was smiling, Ellie immediately began to panic. Nothing positive ever followed those words. Did Juniper know Ellie had lied to her? Was she pissed? She didn’t look pissed.

Juniper rolled her eyes. “I can see your brain working double right now. Just sit the fuck down. It’s not like you’re in trouble.”

Ellie blew out her breath. That was good, at least. Maybe this had nothing at all to do with the lies she had been keeping. She followed Juniper’s directions and sat next to her on the couch.

“Good girl.” Juniper grabbed ahold of Ellie’s hand. “Now, tell me what’s wrong.”

“What’s wrong? With me? Nothing. I’m great. Just out here living the dream.” Okay, I might have tried to sell that just a little too hard.

Juniper rolled her eyes. “Don’t lie to me. You’re really bad at it.”

Was she, though? She had been lying to Juniper for months, and Juniper had no idea. “Apparently I’m not,” Ellie said weakly. Shit. I can’t believe I just said that.

Juniper furrowed her eyebrows. “What do you mean?”

Tears immediately sprung to Ellie’s eyes, but she had no idea if it had more to do with her heartbreak or the potential blowout that was about to come when she told Juniper the truth. “I’ve been lying to you.”

“Okay... now you’re actually scaring me. What’s going on? You’re not sick or something, are you?”

Ellie laughed through her tears. “Don’t be so nice to me. I don’t deserve it.”

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:03 pm*

Juniper squeezed Ellie's hand. "Why don't you tell me and let me decide?"

"I was... kind of... dating someone."

"Okay, I'm going to need more than that." Juniper sat up straighter, and when Ellie didn't answer right away, she spoke again. "It was Sierra, wasn't it?"

Ellie snapped her eyes to Juniper's. "What? How did you know that?"

"I kind of had my suspicions after the whole picking up class notes thing. I wasn't sure, so I paid extra attention at practice and meets. You two aren't very good at keeping your eyes off of each other. You know that, right? But anyway... you were kind of dating her? I take it from your moping over these past two weeks, you're kind of not anymore?"

Ellie shook her head as more tears burst from her eyes. "I wasn't just kind of dating her. I was madly in love with her. I am madly in love with her."

Just like that, the whole story spilled from her lips, starting with their time together over Christmas up until their breakup.

Juniper rubbed her forehead. "Shit. So, what I'm hearing is this was my fault?"

"Not at all. I'm honestly not sure what happened. I think she just got scared. Her ex, who is actually the redhead from the track party, is an awful human, and I think she really messed her up."

“Wait.” Juniper held a hand up and chuckled. “I don’t mean to laugh, but let me get this straight. The girl I caught you checking out multiple times is the ex of the girl you were dating?”

Ellie put on her most angelic smile. “So, it turns out, I was actually checking out Sierra all of those times.”

“You know what? That completely tracks. It makes much more sense. I’m not sure why I didn’t realize that.”

“So,” Ellie hesitated before asking the question, because she was scared to hear the answer. “Do you completely hate me now?”

Juniper looked stunned by her question. “Seriously? Of course not. It sucks that I was left in the dark for so long, but at the same time, I get it. The only thing I’m mad at you for is putting me in this predicament.”

“What predicament?”

“I was starting to think that maybe Sierra wasn’t so bad, and I figured if she’s good enough for you, she must actually be pretty great. But now, I don’t know what to think. She hurt my best friend, so all I want to do is cut a bitch.”

Ellie chuckled. Even though it didn’t heal her broken heart, being able to share this with her best friend definitely helped. It was almost like a band-aid for her heart. The cut was still very much there, but she felt better knowing she had something to help it heal. “Please don’t do that. I think she might be hurting too right now.” And that fact made Ellie’s pain even worse. Sierra might have broken her heart, but Ellie still wanted nothing more than for her to be happy.

“She’s definitely hurting right now. It’s written all over her face.”

“I hadn’t noticed. I’ve been trying very hard to avoid looking at that face.”

“Well, in case you were wondering, she clearly loves you just as much as you love her. It’s pretty obvious.”

“That’s good to know... I guess.” Was it, though? It’s not like it changed anything.

“So, what’s the plan?”

“What do you mean?” Ellie searched Juniper’s face for some kind of clue as to what she was talking about.

“The plan to get your girl back. Duh.”

For the first time in weeks, Ellie felt a genuine smile spread across her face. It was so comforting to know that, even after everything, her best friend had her back. Unfortunately, it didn’t take long for reality to settle back in, and when it did, the smile fell from Ellie’s face, and the pain returned. She stared down at the couch as the little bit of hope she had gained dwindled away. “That’s not up to me. Sierra was the one who ended things. She asked for time, and I have to respect that. My heart is in her hands.”

Ellie hoped and prayed she was gentle with it.

## Chapter 36

### Sierra

Sierra sighed as she walked into her dorm. It had been a week and a half since she talked to her sister and decided to make things right with Ellie, but she still had not found the courage to do it. What if she told Ellie she wanted her back, and Ellie was

already over her? It had only been two and a half weeks, but it was two and a half weeks of not talking whatsoever. It might as well have been two and a half years. That's what it felt like, at least.

When she opened the door to her room, she had to hold in a groan when she saw Teresa sitting on her bed. The two of them hadn't talked since the conversation that ruined everything for Sierra, and Sierra was hoping it stayed that way.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:03 pm*

It turned out today wasn't a lucky day, because Teresa turned to look at her with a malicious smile before she even made it fully into the room. Sierra braced herself for whatever she was about to say.

"You've been in the room a lot more recently. Trouble in paradise?"

Sierra's blood immediately started to boil. "That's none of your business," she said through gritted teeth.

Teresa laughed, and Sierra wanted nothing more than to smack the smug grin right off of her face. "So, I was right, huh?"

Sierra shook her head and walked to her bed, fully intent on ignoring Teresa. When she heard Teresa's feet hit their dorm room floor, she couldn't stop her eyes from drifting over. She watched as Teresa sauntered over to her and was highly confused when Teresa ran a finger up her arm in a flirtatious fashion.

"You know, I could make you feel better if you want," she said seductively.

What the...Sierra pulled her arm away. Teresa's touch was not the one she wanted. In fact, Teresa was the last person she ever wanted to touch her. "What the actual fuck?"

"We were good together. Weren't we?"

Seriously, what was happening? Did Sierra enter some New Age lesbian version of The Twilight Zone or something? Sierra scooted further away from Teresa. "I thought we were at one point, but it turned out, I was wrong."



“Aw, come on. How ’bout one last good fuck? For old time’s sake.”

“I thought this lifestyle was disgusting,” Sierra said, hitting Teresa with her own words.

“It’s disgusting when it becomes your whole life. I just want tonight.”

“You know, there was probably a time when I would have gone for that, but I’ve learned that I deserve so much better. You know who showed me that? Ellie did. She showed me what real love looks like, and it’s not this. Anyone who could treat me the way you’ve treated me these past few months never really loved me. That’s not a problem. That’s a you problem. And you’re right. Things aren’t the best between me and her right now, but I’m going to make them right, because when you find the right person, you fight for them. That’s what I plan to do.”

Teresa rolled her eyes and backed away from Sierra’s bed. “It’s all good. I was totally messing with you anyway. I have no interest in having sex with you.”

Sierra snorted. “Sure you don’t.” Sierra jumped from the bed and began walking toward the door. “Now, if you don’t mind, I have things to do.”

Teresa scoffed. “Fine, but don’t come crying to me when things don’t work out.”

“Don’t worry. I won’t.” Sierra opened the door but turned around to face Teresa one more time. “By the way, Teresa, go fuck yourself.”

When she turned back around and started to walk out the door, she ran right into a body.

“That was fucking awesome.”

Sierra looked up into the eyes of the person standing in front of her. “Juniper? What

are you doing here?”

“We have a problem.”

Sierra’s heart dropped, and panic ran through her veins. “What’s wrong? Is Ellie okay?”

“That depends on your definition of okay. She’s alive. She’s breathing. Still has all of her limbs. She’s completely devastated though.”

“Why is she devastated?” Sierra asked, in case it was anything other than the obvious.

“Seriously? I think we both know the reason.”

Sierra looked toward the ground in shame. “Yeah, you’re right.” Sierra moved her eyes back to Juniper’s again. “So, are you here to yell at me?”

Juniper shook her head and smiled. “I would, because no one hurts my best friend and gets away with it. But I have a feeling nothing I say could be worse than the things you’re telling yourself.”

She wasn’t wrong about that. “So, why are you here?” Sierra asked again.

Juniper waved her hand. “Walk with me.”

Sierra followed Juniper down the hallway and into the elevator. For all she knew, she was following Juniper to her death, but this was the closest she had felt to Ellie in weeks, and she didn’t want to lose that feeling.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:03 pm*

Juniper was silent until they were outside of the dorm. She stopped and turned to look at Sierra. “Do you love her?”

“Excuse me?” Sierra wasn’t sure she heard her right.

“Do you love Ellie? I’m only doing this if you really care about her.”

“I care about her more than anything else in this world. And yes, of course I love her. I’m so in love with her I don’t know what to do with myself.” Sierra couldn’t believe the first person she admitted it to was the girl who was her mortal enemy until this moment. “What are you doing exactly?”

Juniper smiled and lifted an eyebrow. “I’m going to help you get her back.”

That sounded perfect. There was only one problem. “And how do we do that?”

Juniper shrugged. “That’s what we have to figure out. Honestly, you could go knock on our apartment door right now and say ‘Yo, babe, take me back,’ and she would, but I think we need to do more than that. Don’t you?”

Sierra nodded. “I need to show her that I’m in this for real. I’m not going to run away again.”

“Okay. Let’s brainstorm. I think it should involve track since you two probably have wet dreams about the sport.”

Sierra chuckled. “I was thinking that too. Well, minus the wet dreams part.”

“Perfect. That’s a start.”

Sierra was still confused about who this girl was standing in front of her. “Why are you helping me?”

“I want my best friend to be happy again.”

Something about her words, combined with what they were planning, made Sierra emotional. She had to fight to keep herself from crying. “You’re a really good friend. Ellie is lucky to have you. I mean, you’re working together with someone you don’t even like, all because you care about her.”

Juniper waved her hand nonchalantly. “She would do the exact same thing for me. Plus, I think it’s important we start getting along seeing as how we’re going to be on the same relay team.” A wide grin spread across Juniper’s face. “Coach told me tonight. I earned my spot back. It works out since Kate never really liked running it anyway.”

It was strange how a feeling of pride filled Sierra on Juniper’s behalf even though they weren’t really friends. At least, not before tonight, but Sierra was getting ahead of herself if she thought this actually meant Juniper didn’t hate her anymore, especially given the latest circumstances. “So, is that why you’re suddenly being nice to me? You don’t hate me, because I’m no longer the girl who stole your spot on the relay?”

“Nah. I was planning on coming here before Coach even talked to me. Here’s the thing. My best friend clearly— well, let’s just say, if you’re good enough for my best friend, you must be pretty great.”

“Wow. Thank you.” Now, Sierra had to try even harder not to cry. She blinked to keep the tears back.

Juniper put up her hand. “No time to get emotional. We have to figure out how to get your girl back.”

Sierra grinned from ear to ear. Better words had never been spoken. “Let’s do it.”

## Chapter 37

Ellie

Ellie couldn’t believe almost another whole week had passed since things blew up between her and Sierra. Tomorrow she would be forced to get through yet another track meet without Sierra (the third one since the breakup, not that she was counting).

She walked to her room after showering from practice and put on sweats. Even though it was still early, her plan was to lie down and try to go to sleep. She had just laid down and shut her eyes when there was a knock on the door. At first, she ignored it in the hopes that Juniper would think she was already asleep, but when the knocking didn’t stop, she had no choice but to answer.

“Sorry, June. Going to sleep early tonight.”

When Juniper didn’t say anything in return, Ellie assumed she had left, but a few seconds later, her bedroom door opened. I really need to start locking that.

Juniper clapped her hands together. “I can’t let you do that. We have work to do. Did you eat yet?”

Ellie shook her head. “I’m really not that hungry.”

“Perfect. We need to go to the track.”

“The track?”What the hell is she talking about?“Why?”

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:03 pm*

“We, uh, have to practice handoffs. Coach’s orders. Since this is my first time running the 4x400 again, he wants me to do a few to make sure I’m ready.”

“But you don’t even hand off to me. Why would we practice? You hand off to...”  
Ellie swallowed hard. Just the thought of her made Ellie want to cry. “Sierra.”

Juniper chuckled. “You really think I want to practice with her?”

“I thought you said you didn’t have a problem with her anymore. Just a few days ago, you were offering to help me get her back.”

“I don’t have a problem with her. I just feel like it would be awkward to be alone with her. What the hell would we talk about?” Juniper brought her hands up in a praying motion and gave Ellie an angelic smile. “Please. It won’t take long. I promise when we get back, I’ll let you wallow in self-pity the rest of the night.”

“I wasn’t wall—” Ellie stopped herself, because there was no point in lying to Juniper. “Fine. Let’s do it.”

A few minutes later, they were at the track. As they got close to it, Juniper pointed and shook her head. “What’s all that shit? Did someone get trash on the track?”

Ellie looked where she was pointing and found that there was what looked to be paper littered around the length of the track. What the hell? That hadn’t been there a little while ago.

Juniper sighed dramatically. “We’re going to have to clean that up. I have to go to the

bathroom though, so you'll have to get started without me."

Juniper skipped away, leaving Ellie with no choice but to clean up the mess by herself. She walked over to the track and was confused when she found the first piece of paper was taped down. What the hell?

She was about to leave it in case it was supposed to be there for whatever reason, but she noticed her name written across the top. Again... What the hell?

When she picked it up off of the ground, she looked around to try to see if someone was playing a joke on her, but there was no one else there. As she read the note, she had an idea of what might be happening, but she tried to keep herself from getting too excited. Apparently, her heart didn't get the memo since it practically beat out of her chest as she scanned the words.

Ellie,

When I was thinking about where to go to college, I was drawn to West End because of the amazing track program, but also because of this one girl on the team. She ran the same event as me and was ridiculously fast. She was also super hot, but I tried not to think into that too much. I wanted to know her. I wanted to compete with her. She was my hero.

There was no name on the note, but Ellie had no trouble figuring out who it was from. She walked about fifty feet until she was part way around the first turn of the track, where there was another note waiting for her.

We both know how that turned out for me. When I arrived, I kind of thought she was a bit of a bitch. A lot of that had to do with me. You see, I was going through a lot and wasn't myself. My heart was broken into a million pieces, and I honestly didn't know if I would ever feel okay again.



Ellie smiled as she walked to the next note that was located at the end of the first hundred meters. Her smile grew even bigger when she picked it up and read what it said.

As the semester went on, I hated that girl more and more. I couldn't exactly figure out why, but she got under my skin so bad. To make matters worse, everyonce in a while, she actually acted like she wanted to talk to me. How crazy, right? :-p

The rest of the notes were also spaced about fifty feet apart and with each one, Ellie's smile grew more and more, and her heart filled with more love for the woman the notes were from.

At our first meet before Christmas break, my crazy moms decided to stay overnight even though they were calling for a big snowstorm. We woke up to find it had already started. To make matters worse, my dumbass twin fell and broke her ankle. It turned out she needed a doctor. As fate would have it, the doctor we went to see was the mom of my not-so-mortal enemy. What are the chances, right?

For some reason, my moms agreed to stay at the house with this girl and her moms (they were probably excited to hang out with other gay people). I was not happy about it. I tried my best to ignore her, but she wasn't having it.

The more I hung out with her, the more I wanted to spend all my time with her. I also couldn't stop thinking about kissing her. Ugh. Terrible, huh? I had no idea why this girl was having this effect on me, but one thing was for sure—my heart didn't hurt as much as it had before.

Then one night it happened. We kissed. It was the best kiss of my entire life. That wasn't the best part of the night though. The best part was falling asleep wrapped in her arms. I couldn't remember the last time I felt so safe and protected. I tried again to runaway from her, but she wouldn't let me. She had my heart and there was

nothing I could do about it, but give in and enjoy the ride.

They say you shouldn't meet your heroes. I always thought that was because they would disappoint you. It turns out, you shouldn't meet your heroes, because you just might end up falling in love with them.

Tears came to Ellie's eyes as she read the last words of the final note over and over again. She kept expecting them to change, as if she had imagined they were there. But they weren't going away. Was it possible that Sierra was just as in love with Ellie as Ellie was with her?

"It's true," Sierra's voice said from behind her. Ellie turned to find Sierra with a nervous smile on her face. "I'm head over heels in love with you, Ellie. I never should have run away from you, and I promise to never do it again. Well, except maybe on the track."

Ellie laughed through her tears. "In your dreams, rookie."

Sierra laughed along with her, tears in her eyes as well. "You're my dream. You didn't just repair my broken heart. You made it more full than it's ever been before. I didn't know I could love someone this much until I met you. I just hope I didn't mess everything up. Please tell me I'm not too late."

Ellie closed the remaining distance between her and Sierra and took Sierra in her arms. "You could never be too late. I'd wait for you forever. That's what you do when you love someone this much."

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:03 pm*

“You love me?” Sierra asked against Ellie’s neck.

“Sierra No-Middle-Name Finnegan, I’m so fucking in love with you I don’t know what to do with myself.”

“You could start by kissing me.”

That was not a problem. Ellie pulled back just enough to bring her lips to Sierra’s. Even though it had been less than three weeks since their last kiss, this one felt like the first time all over again. The only difference was that it was even better, because she was kissing the love of her life.

“Thank god.” Juniper’s voice caused Ellie and Sierra to jump apart. When Ellie looked over at her, she was standing with her hands on her hips and a wide grin on her face. “I’m really happy for you two, but I’m even happier for myself. Now that you’re done moping around, we can focus on doing what’s really important—getting our relay team to nationals.”

Ellie looked from Juniper to Sierra. “What do you think, babe? Can we do it?”

“I’d say so. We do make a pretty good team.”

“We really do, don’t we?” Ellie hoped they were on the same team for many years to come, maybe even forever. She would wait a little while to share that with Sierra, though. The girl was very good at running, after all.

Epilogue

Sierra

“In sixth place, we have West End.”

Sierra stepped up onto the podium with the rest of her relay team. She still couldn't believe how amazing her freshman year of track had been. Not only did they win the indoor and outdoor conference championships, but she finished second to her girlfriend in the 400 at both of those meets. To make things even better, the times they each ran at the outdoor conference championship were good enough to qualify them for the national meet in the 400 as well as the relay.

Sierra hadn't made it into finals for the 400 at nationals, but she still had plenty of time for that. What she really cared about was the fact that Ellie had ended her track career with a bang by finishing fifth in the 400 with a career best time and had led their relay team to a sixth place finish.

After they each received their trophies, Ellie grabbed ahold of Sierra's hand and held it tight while they announced the rest of the top relay teams. Ever since getting back together after Sierra momentarily lost her mind, Ellie never missed an opportunity to show that they were together. She was constantly touching Sierra in one way or another, whether it was an arm around her waist or shoulder, or their fingers interlocked. Ellie always told her it was because she was so proud to be her girlfriend and wanted everyone to know that she was the luckiest girl in the world. She was wrong about that, of course, since Sierra was actually the luckiest girl in the world.

When they stepped off of the podium, Ellie's hand remained tightly wrapped around Sierra's. “How are you feeling?” Ellie asked Juniper as they all walked together.

Sierra knew what Ellie was asking. Not long after getting back together with Ellie and becoming surprisingly good friends with Juniper, she had found out from Juniper what had happened with her dad. She couldn't imagine what that must be like, but it

made her understand Juniper a lot better.

Juniper sported a bigger grin than Sierra had ever seen on her before. “I’m doing fucking amazing. My dad might have done some things that I’m really not happy about, but he was always a good dad to me. I’m glad I could officially become his All-American Girl.”

“I’m glad too. We actually did it.”

“You sure did,” Chris said as he rushed over from the side of the track to wrap Juniper in a tight hug.

“Should we go find our families?” Ellie whispered to Sierra as Juniper and Chris became lost in each other.

“It shouldn’t be too hard,” Sierra said with a laugh. “I don’t think they’ve stopped screaming since our race started.”

Like clockwork, more screams came at that very moment. Ellie smirked at Sierra. “Found them.”

They walked to where their parents and siblings were all sitting together on the bleachers. Ellie and Sierra’s families were basically inseparable at track meets at this point. They had even booked the same hotel for this meet and apparently ate breakfast together every morning. Sierra didn’t want to get ahead of herself when they had been dating for less than half a year, but she couldn’t help thinking about what great in-laws the Finches would make.

“We are so proud of you girls,” Sierra’s mom said before pulling her and Ellie into a hug together.

“So proud,” Ellie’s mama echoed before doing the same.

The rest of their family members followed suit until Sierra and Ellie had been hugged by every single person.

“So, what’s next for you two?” Sienna asked as she looked between the two of them.

“Well, I obviously have three more years of this. Whether or not I’m lonely throughout those three years is up to this one.” Sierra playfully elbowed Ellie in the side. She didn’t actually put any pressure on Ellie to stay close to her, but when Ellie said she wanted to if she could find a job, it made Sierra so excited, she couldn’t help but ask for updates on the job hunt every single day.

Ellie smiled lovingly at Sierra before focusing her attention back on Sienna. “Juniper is keeping our apartment since she is doing grad school at West End next year, so if I hear back from one of the places I applied, I’ll stay with her. Otherwise, I unfortunately might have to look elsewhere.”

The thought of not being with Ellie next year saddened Sierra, but she also wanted Ellie to thrive, so if that meant the two of them had to be apart, she would deal with it.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:03 pm*

A vibration came from the bag Ellie was holding, and she reached in to grab her phone. Her eyes went wide when she looked down at it. "It's the zoo."

Ellie's top choice for a job was the zoo that was located about twenty minutes from school. She didn't think she wanted that to be her lifelong career, but since she knew she wanted to do something where she worked with or researched animals, she figured that was the perfect place to start.

Sierra nudged her. "Answer it."

Ellie chewed on her bottom lip. "What if it's bad news?"

"Better to know than to wonder, right?"

Ellie nodded, then picked up the phone and walked away from the group. Everyone was silent as they waited for what felt like forever for Ellie's conversation to end.

When Ellie walked back toward them with her eyes pointed at the ground, Sierra figured she must have gotten badnews. The sick feeling had just started to form in her stomach when Ellie looked up at her with a huge smile on her face. She picked Sierra up and twirled her around in a circle. "I got the job. Baby, we don't have to be apart. I got the job."

Sierra's heart burst with joy. Just when she thought this day couldn't get any better, it went and proved her wrong. Life was so good she didn't know how it could possibly go up from here, but with Ellie by her side, life kept getting better and better.

\*1 year later\*

Ellie

Ellie paced back and forth while she waited for Sierra's race to start. She had continued to blow everyone's expectations this year, and it had all come down to this moment. She was in the finals for the 400 at the national meet and since nine runners made finals, one of them wouldn't receive the All-American trophy. She only had to beat one person, but that wasn't going to be easy when she was the one ranked ninth going into the race. Even though it was a huge accomplishment just to make it into finals, she knew Sierra wouldn't be satisfied with that, and all she wanted was for her girlfriend to be happy.

Heavy hands landed on Ellie's shoulders, and she looked up to find Juniper smiling at her. "Would you calm down? She's going to do amazing."

Ellie was so lucky to have Juniper. She and Chris had flown down to Florida for nationals with her so they could all cheer on Sierra. Over the past year, they had become even closer, and Ellie, Sierra, Chris, and Juniper spent the majority of their free time together. Ellie couldn't help but laugh at the irony of Juniper being at Sierra's meet when just two years earlier she was telling her that they had to make Sierra's life hell to get her to leave West End. Thank god that didn't work.

"Why are you laughing?" Juniper asked. "Are you completely losing it?"

"I'm just happy."

"Of course you are. You're so in love it's disgusting." Juniper stuck her tongue out at Ellie, and Ellie stuck hers out back at her.

"Like you have any room to talk."



Juniper put her arm around Chris. "How could I resist? Look how cute he is." Juniper pointed toward the track. "Speaking of cute."

Ellie looked at the track to see Sierra taking her place. She was always cute, but with her eyebrows creased in total focused determination, she was sexy as hell right now.

Ellie couldn't help but lick her lips as she watched her, heart pounding when she heard the gun go off. She just needs to beat one person. Just one person.

Sierra was in the innermost lane which worked to her benefit, because she could see all the other runners. She was so competitive, Ellie had no doubt she would catch one of them. By the second turn of the race, Sierra had made up the stagger and passed one runner. Ellie jumped up and down as she shouted for her. All she needed to do was stay ahead of that girl and she would get All-American. As she went around the turn, she not only stayed ahead of that girl, but passed another one.

Ellie screamed even louder as Sierra reached the final straight away. The two girls she had passed were well behind her, and now she was neck and neck with two other girls. Ellie watched in amazement as she closed the distance, passing by one and then the other right at the finish line, putting her in fifth place.

Ellie gave both Juniper and Chris big hugs as they all celebrated together. Once Sierra gained some semblance of life back, her eyes scanned the crowd and quickly found Ellie's. When Ellie gave her two thumbs up, Sierra ran over to where she was standing outside of the track and jumped into her arms.

Ellie held her tight and spun her around. When she set her back down, she placed a quick, but hard, kiss on her lips. She put her arm around Sierra's waist as they both turned to look at the times as they came up on the big screen. Ellie's eyes went wide when she saw the time that was better than anything she had run in her whole career. If this was anyone else, Ellie would be disappointed that her school record had already been broken, but she was happy for Sierra. She saw how hard she worked and

couldn't be more proud of her.

Ellie pulled Sierra even closer to her as proud tears stung at her eyes. "New school record! Dude, I'm so proud of you."

Sierra turned to face Ellie fully, studying her face as she rested her hands on her hips. "That's crazy. I hear the girl who had it before me was super fast."

"Not as fast as her girlfriend. Turns out her girlfriend's better than her."

Sierra leaned in and rubbed her nose against Ellie's, causing Ellie's heart to grow even bigger. "Maybe we're just better together."

"We're definitely better together. I love you, Sierra No-Middle-Name Finnegan."

"I love you, Ellie Patty."