



# Unforgettable You

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**Category:** Romance, Lesbian Romance

**Description:** Reid: According to my mother, I ruined my life the minute I quit ballet in college and destroyed her dreams of having a professional dancer in the family. My steady bartending job, friends, and fanfic hobby weren't good enough apparently. Not that I cared what she thought anymore. Mostly. Things had been pretty conflict-free up until my new neighbor showed up and threw everything into chaos.

Sophie: I never expected to run into Reid Hayward of all people when I moved into my first off-campus apartment. To say that she isn't thrilled to see me is an understatement. That's fair, considering the last time we saw each other she and my sister were in the middle of a very loud breakup that I witnessed. Reid is still livid though, as if I was the one who lied to her and ended the relationship years ago.

Reid: The last time I saw Sophie Love, she was this annoying teenager who was always asking to tag along on my dates with her sister. That was a longggg time ago, because she's all grown up now and I'm doing my very best not to notice. That becomes even more of a challenge when I discover that our beds are up against the same wall and I can hear...a lot of things. Personal, intimate things, if you know what I mean. My first instinct is to pound on the wall to get her to stop. My second is to listen.

Sophie: Mortification doesn't begin to cover the way I feel after I realize she heard me last night. The awkward conversation after doesn't kill me, but it does give me an idea. You see, I've only recently realized I'm not as straight as I always thought, and Reid works at the only sapphic bar in the state. If there's anyone who knows about this stuff, it's her. What if she took me under her wing and taught me how to date a woman? Reid doesn't even like me, so it wouldn't mean anything. Just a way to get all my nervousness and fumbling out of the way before I try to do this for real. It's a wild idea, but what's even wilder is that she agrees.

**Total Pages (Source):** 85

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 4:17 pm*

## Chapter One

Reid

“Hey! Hey bartender! Hey!” The words cut through the noise of the bar and grated on my ears. Instead of telling the speaker to fuck off like I wanted to, I had to put a smile on my face and move over to where the woman was snapping her fingers and yelling at me.

“What can I get for you?” I asked for what felt like the thousandth time that night.

The woman gave me a flirty look and leaned in. “Surprise me.”

Great. My favorite. The chances that I’d make something she wouldn’t like and would then complain about were high. Luckily, this was not my first rodeo. Figuratively. I’d never actually been to a rodeo.

“You got it,” I told her with a wink, and she giggled. Most of the time, I didn’t mind that part of my job involved flirting with customers to get better tips. But some nights? Like tonight? All I wanted was to go home and not have to talk or smile at anyone for at least ten hours.

Alas, I still had three hours left in my shift and they were going to be brutal as the night wore on and the alcohol flowed. I had no issues with cutting anyone off, and the bouncers would back me up, but still.

I made the woman one of our signature drinks that was a universal crowd pleaser and

she declared it was the best drink she'd ever had, so that was something. Hopefully she'd also tell me that with a generous tip.

As the night wore on, I switched my body to function on autopilot, moving back and forth, mixing drinks and wiping spills and keeping track of the other bartenders. It was Saturday night and even though it was the end of April, there wasn't much else to do in the city on a Friday night but to slog through the slush and get warm and wasted in a bar. If I didn't work here, it might be something I'd do. Not every weekend, but if I was with my friends then I would. Although, now that two of my closest friends were happily coupled, they weren't as much fun to go out with and I'd told them that to their faces.

At least I still had Jo. She was single as hell while she fought her way through grad school, and I was single because I hated most people. That, and my one and only brush with serious romance ended up earning me one spectacularly broken heart. Never again.

"Can I tell you a secret?" a voice slurred in what she thought was a whisper but was actually a tipsy yell.

"Sure," I told her, smiling. She could barely focus her eyes so if she was trying to order another drink, she was out of luck. I'd be ordering her a car to take her home. I glanced over and caught one of the bouncer's eyes in case I needed some backup.

"I'm not even, I'm not even a lesbian," she tried to tell me but ended up telling just about everyone.

"Okay," I said.

"I wish I was. Men are just the worsttttt, you know? My fiancé cheated on me with his fucking coworker. She's a whore."

I nodded because this was also part of my job: coddling people who got emotional when they drank. I wouldn't say that I was a therapist, but I did a lot of listening to people's problems.

"I'm so sorry to hear that," I said. "Are you here by yourself?"

She shook her head and nearly knocked herself over. "My friend Shhhara is with me."

Well where the hell was she? Come get your friend, Shhhara.

"There you are!" a voice said as a woman came over to my new friend.

"Shhharaaaaa," the other girl said, throwing her arms around her friend and almost falling into her. "I'm gonna get another drink."

"No, baby, you're not. We're gonna go home, okay?"

"You good?" I asked Sara, who looked to be steady on her feet.

"Why aren't I gayyyyyy?" the other woman wailed.

Sara gave me a sheepish look.

"She won't even remember in the morning," I said.

"I would hope not," Sara said, dragging her friend away from the bar.

Shaking my head, I moved on to the next person and realized it was Jo.

"What's a girl like you doing in a place like this?" I asked.

## Page 2

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She winked at me. “Wouldn’t you like to know.”

I flagged down one of the other bartenders and said I was taking a break. Jo followed me outside, even though it was cold. The interior of the bar could get stifling on busy nights.

“Ahhh,” I said, filling my lungs with city air. The smell of cigarettes and weed combined with pavement and gasoline and all the other city smells that I couldn’t help but love. It helped wash away the smell of the bar which was mostly alcohol and sweat and too many bodies packed in one space together.

“Rough night?” she asked, leaning against the brick wall of the building.

“Just like every other night. What are you doing here?” Ever since she’d started school, she’d been hard to pin down because she was so busy. I missed her just as much as I missed Cade and Hunter. I couldn’t help but feel a little abandoned while my friends were on all these new adventures.

“Had to get out. I was going to lose my mind,” she said, rubbing her eyes. She did look tired, even under the weak light.

Her wavy hair was pulled into a loose bun on top of her head and her skin was pale.

“You need more sunshine, kid,” I said.

She rolled her eyes. “You’re one to talk. You work vampire hours.”

That was true. I slept through a lot of days after my shifts. I worked just enough to get by. Sometimes I got a little bit of money teaching a baby ballet class here and there. For some reason the little kids thought me being surly was funny and none of the parents had complained. I wasn't mean or anything, but I also wasn't sunshines and rainbows and a cutesy voice. They got talked to like they were people and my goal was for them to have fun, not to have perfect form. If they wanted to spend the entire class spinning in a circle over and over, I wasn't going to do much to stop it. You had to pick your battles and I didn't really want to battle with kids.

"It's not so bad," I said, and she gave me a look.

"You literally complain about this job all the time," she said. It was true, but it was rude of her to point it out.

"Yeah, well," I said and then couldn't think of anything else. Talking so much at my job seemed to use up all my words, and then I had nothing left over.

"Don't," I told her when I saw her open her mouth to start telling me that I should get a different job. I couldn't count how many times I'd had that conversation with my friends. I wasn't quitting my job at Sapph. Yes, it sucked, but it sucked a hell of a lot less than living under my mother's thumb like I used to.

Plus, working as a bartender really pissed her off and that was a little extra twist of satisfaction.

"I'm fine," I said.

Jo raised her hands. "Okay. I didn't come to harass you."

I snorted. "Yeah you did."

She grinned. “Maybe a little bit. You know it’s out of love.” It was. I teased my friends right back. With affection.

“Any good stories?” Jo asked. My friends always wanted to know my best Sapph stories.

“Almost had to call a car for a drunk girl who just had to tell me that she wasn’t a lesbian and her fiancé had cheated on her. Fortunately, her friend seemed sober enough and took her home. I wonder if she’s even going to remember coming here.” Probably not. “How’s school?” I asked.

She blew out a breath and closed her eyes. “Sometimes I wish I could go back in time and tell the me who decided that grad school was a good idea that she should do something else. Anything else.”

“Awww,” I said, reaching out and squeezing her shoulder. I wasn’t much into touching, but I knew she was having a rough time.

“It’ll be fine. It will all be worth it in the end, but right now it doesn’t feel like it, you know?”

How many times had I told myself the same thing when I’d been bandaging my bleeding toes after a particularly rough dance class? It hadn’t worked out for me, but there was a big difference between what I’d been doing and what Jo was doing now.

She was living life on her own terms and that was fucking beautiful.

“Can I help?” I asked.

She gave me an exhausted smile. “Make me that drink I like and let me sit at the bar and not think about the paper I need to write or all the research I need to do. I just

want to be in a room of people and just...be. And see pretty girls dancing.” She let out a little sigh.

I inhaled a deep breath and got a whiff of someone else’s cigarette. I’d smoked for a brief period a few years ago in another attempt to piss off my mom before I switched to vapes. I’d given both up without much fuss, but every now and then a craving hit me like a truck.

Fuck. I needed to get back to work to get my mind off it.



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Jo and I went back inside, and I made her the drink she wanted and went back to doing my damn job.

I got home after three, as usual. Having odd hours meant that I experienced the world in those strange in-between times that not many other people did.

My apartment was close enough to the bar that I was able to walk home. Sure, sometimes it was a little sketchy, but I felt safe most of the time.

The first thing I did upon locking my door and dropping my stuff was to strip naked, leaving my clothes in a pile on the floor and stumbling into the shower.

It didn't matter that the water wasn't warm yet. I just loved the feeling of washing off the night and letting it go down the drain. All the forced smiles and small talk and waiting on people took their toll on me.

Even though I was exhausted, I still wasn't ready to sleep yet, so after I showered so long I ran out of hot water, I got out and went to my kitchen.

Food options were slim, since I needed to go grocery shopping, but I had some leftover fried rice and egg rolls that were probably okay that I ate cold while standing up in the kitchen. It didn't make sense that I'd been standing all night and was still standing, but I was too hungry to care.

I'd thrown on an oversize T-shirt and underwear and once my stomach wasn't screaming, I shuffled to my bedroom to try and wind down so I could sleep. It was always a fight. I'd never been one of those people who could crash in a few minutes

and stay knocked out the whole night.

Working bar hours had made it even worse so now it was a battle every time. I'd tried all the tricks like turning off devices and meditation and counting and all that crap, but nothing had worked so now I'd just read until I finally passed out. My work schedule made doing things during the day difficult, but I was only working four shifts a week now. I'd done five or more and burned out so bad that I'd almost had to quit. Slowing down was the only option, and as much as I hated it, I refused to run my body into the ground again. Not after so many years of dancing.

Winding down after a shift when I was finally in bed was actually one of my favorite parts of the week.

My first step was to log onto my favorite fanfic site and check to see if some of my favorite fics had updated. One of them hadn't had any updates in three years and I was starting to wonder if it would ever be finished. I was so close to sending a message to the author and begging.

I made sure to ignore my own stats; too tired to deal with all that right now. I confined my fanfic writing to certain hours that I could really devote to it.

I read fanfic for a while and then switched to the library app because I had an ebook that was going to expire soon, and I wanted to finish it before it was due.

When it came to my reading tastes, they were kind of all over the place. Most of what I read was romance, from the sweet to the depraved and everything in between. If a book was captivating, I didn't really care about much else. As long as it kept my attention, I was in.

When I'd first gotten into fanfic, I hadn't really wanted much romance at all. I guess I'd thought that it was silly or boring or cringey, but then I read a few and one in

particular that was so good I could barely think about anything else. That had been a hard time. I'd been a junior in high school and my entire life had been school, dance, repeat. I'd been too strung out from dance to really have friends, but there was a group of people I had lunch and sometimes spent time with, and one of the girls (who I had a raging crush on, in hindsight) had told me about a great story she read and then it was all over after that. It just so happened the story was set in the world of a show that I'd become obsessed with. I lost so much sleep from reading that my teachers started worrying about me and my mom and I had never fought so much before.

Looking back, I'd been so desperate for something that brought me joy in those days. School didn't, most of the time. Dance hadn't for a long time. I was so grateful that I'd found fanfic at a time in my life when things could have gone very differently. I wouldn't say that it saved my life, but it definitely was a bright spot during a dark time and still brought me so much joy, both reading and writing it.

I didn't finish my library book before I passed out and the next time I woke, sun streamed through my window and my tablet was under me and digging into my back.

"Fuck," I said as I rubbed my eyes and tried to wake up. Caffeine needed to happen immediately. I had another shift tonight and then a few days off, which I always looked forward to. Cade and Eloise were having a party at their house, and I'd agreed to go. The food and drinks alone were worth showing up for. I guess the company wasn't so bad either. Cade's girlfriend Eloise had grown on me. She was incredibly impressive, and I would die before I admitted it, but I was kind of in awe of her. Not that I wanted to be a famous romance writer, but anyone who could consistently hit bestseller lists year after year was someone to admire. I'd read her books and while they weren't my favorites, they sure as hell kept me turning the pages. In my opinion, they would have been better if they'd been sapphic, but Eloise had heard us tell her that enough times already.

I stared at the ceiling and gave myself a pep talk to get up. If I got up, then I could order breakfast because I didn't really have much in the kitchen that would make a decent breakfast. I could eat it on the couch with the curtains open and the sunshine pouring in and hopefully giving me some vitamin D so I didn't actually turn into a vampire. I loved reading about vampires, but becoming one wasn't on my agenda.

I scrolled my phone for something new to order for breakfast, but ended up just getting the same sandwich, hash browns, and bubble tea that I always did.

My brain took a while to come online and I puttered around trying to clean and get ready for my day. In between sucking down the bubble tea and inhaling my sandwich, I finally did some laundry and picked up so I wasn't living in a disgusting pit.

Housekeeping was usually low on my priority list and my apartment had gotten bad lately.

Once things were kind of in order, I only had a little bit of sunlight left, so I went outside to walk around my neighborhood while listening to an audiobook. Even though the weather was cold, and the sidewalks were slushy, the sun was warm on my skin.

Since my book was so good, I kept walking all the way down to the waterfront. The wind coming off the water was sharp and cut through my spring coat. I wrapped my arms around myself and breathed deeply. I did love living by the ocean. Even on the gloomiest days of spring it was beautiful.

By the time I got back home, the sun had sunk below the horizon and it was time to get ready for work. Another night, another shift.

I awoke on Sunday to noise. A lot of noise. Banging and thumping and sounds that I

couldn't ignore.

"What the fuck," I croaked as I glared at the wall behind my bed. The sounds were coming from the apartment next to mine. Things had been pretty quiet over there for a while, but it sounded like someone was moving in. Great. Fantastic. Just what I needed in my life.

When it came to my neighbors, my philosophy was that their lives were none of my business. Anything other than a polite nod was too much contact. I didn't want to be friends; I didn't want to knock on their door for a cup of sugar. We could live in the same space, but we didn't have to be besties.

Hopefully my new neighbor wasn't one of those overly friendly types. My building was pretty small but quiet for the most part. It wasn't the cheapest place around, but it wasn't as nice as Hunter's place. To be fair, she had one of the nicest apartments in the whole city, but that's what happened when you had a trust fund to supplement your income. Not that I resented her for it. She worked hard at a bunch of things when she could have just sat on her ass and done nothing. I never would have thought that I'd be close with someone like that, but she'd changed my perceptions of rich people. Plus, her parents were assholes. We had that in common.

"For fuck's sake," I said as the banging and noise continued. Moving was usually loud, but this felt like an attack. I'd hoped to have some quiet time to read until I had to go over to Cade and Eloise's house.

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Guess that wasn't happening.

### Chapter Two

Sophie

I winced as the movers dropped another box on the floor none too gently. I'd looked up reviews for movers before I'd hired this company, but I was also pretty broke and hadn't been able to afford the companies with all the good reviews. So here I was with these three guys who were rushing like their asses were on fire. I kept trying to speak up and ask them to be more gentle, but they were mostly ignoring me and by the time I was annoyed enough to say anything, they were packing up and heading out and I was staring at mountains of boxes and furniture and I was sweaty and sore and hungry and wanted to cry.

It was going to be a long day.

A few hours later I was even sweatier and my arms ached and I'd barely done anything. I was so faint from hunger that I thought I was going to pass out, so I pulled up the delivery app and looked to see what I wanted to order. I really shouldn't be ordering food considering how much money I'd just dropped on hiring movers, but I literally didn't have any food or energy to make anything even if I had groceries available.

My soul was craving comfort food, so chicken tikka masala, naan, basmati rice, and mango lassi was the ticket. While I waited for the delivery, I shoved some boxes to the side so I could claim a corner of my couch to sit on. At least my bed was put

together, although I still had to get my sheets and blankets unpacked. Hopefully the box of bedding that I'd labeled so carefully was actually in the bedroom. Chances weren't good.

I couldn't move until I got the notification that my food was delivered, groaning at the idea of having to walk down the stairs to get it. My legs and back were going to be screaming tomorrow. At least I was done with school for the semester so I wouldn't have to drag myself to campus. I'd also scheduled my move when I wasn't working my part-time summer job at the library. My parents had been in contact with me all day and asking me for updates. They would have been here to help, but my dad had an appointment with a back specialist in Massachusetts that he couldn't miss so they'd gone down to Boston for that.

This was my first time living on my own and not in student housing and I had to admit, I was nervous about it. I was truly on my own now. No roommates, no housing office I could walk to and complain if I had a problem. Granted, the issues I'd had in student housing had rarely been fixed, but still. I was a grown up now, even if I didn't exactly feel like it.

My phone buzzed with a new message.

Please tell me you're not dead and buried under a pile of boxes my best friend Larison sent.

Not at the moment I responded, sending her a sweaty selfie.

Larison and I had been friends since high school through thick and thin. We'd been through all our most awkward phases together. Bad grades and bad haircuts and learning to drive and first relationships. I'd held her hand in the hospital when her daughter, Juniper, had been born. Juniper's father had bailed the second Larison told him she was pregnant, so I'd gone to all her appointments with her. I'd cried when

she asked me to be Juni's godmother. We'd both cried when she announced she'd been accepted into grad school to get her Masters in Library Science, but that she and Juniper would be moving so she could attend.

I hated that we weren't in the same city anymore, but I understood that her choices as a single mom were different from mine. She'd be graduating at the end of the summer and I was already petitioning for her to move here so I could resume my godmother duties.

Larison sent me a video of Juniper singing along with one of her favorite princess movies and I wished I was there to sit and watch it with her fifty times in a row and sing and twirl in the living room. I missed doing that so much.

My food arrived and I hauled my butt downstairs to grab it. On the way back up the too-steep stairs, the door to the apartment next to mine opened. Guess I was going to at least get a look at one of my new neighbors. I hadn't seen anyone coming or going when I moved in, but it might be nice to introduce myself. Make some friends. I'd been so focused on school in the past that I'd cut myself off from doing much socially and then had been frustrated when I was lonely all the time and didn't have anything fun to do when I wasn't studying.

This could be a chance to turn over a new leaf and try something different for once. Larison had been up my ass about making new friends for a long time. It would be nice to get her off my back.

I put a smile on my face as I panted from climbing the stairs and stepped aside so my neighbor could pass me. She had dark brown hair and wore a heavy winter coat and hat that looked like it might have been handmade. She locked her door and then turned to face me.

"Hi," I said and, as the word left my mouth, it hit me who she was. "Reid?"



## Chapter Three

Reid

I had my earbuds in and hadn't heard someone coming up the stairs as I was leaving to go for a walk. But then she'd been there at the top of the stairs, giving me a brilliant smile and a greeting. A second later, all the blood had drained from her face and she'd said my name.

How did she know my name?

"Uh, yeah?" I asked, yanking out my earbuds. She probably knew me from Sapph. I stared at her face, trying to place her. You'd think I'd remember someone this pretty. Her eyes were a beautiful shade of blue-green that made me think of tropical ocean water. She wore sweatpants with paint stains on them and a ripped oversized T-shirt, her hair up in a ponytail. I couldn't tell if it was brown or blonde. Some kind of in-between shade. Didn't matter.

"Uh, yes? Do I know you?" I asked as she gaped at me.

"Reid Hayward?" she asked.

"Ummm," I said, not wanting to confirm my last name. How did this woman know my last name?

She pointed to herself. "It's Sophie. Sophie Love," she said, and my stomach plunged to the floor as I blinked at her. Holy shit.

"Sophie Love?" I asked, searching her face. "Are you fucking serious?"

She bit her full bottom lip between her teeth. Had I thought she was pretty? Well,

now she wasn't. She couldn't be.

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“Yup. It’s, uh, been a long time?” That sounded like a question.

“Yeah, it has.” The last time I’d seen her, she’d been what, Thirteen? Fourteen? Something like that. She’d had braces and acne and had been kind of annoying.

She let out a long breath. “Soooo, how have you been?” Oh, were we really doing this? Pretending to do the small talk thing as if the last time I’d seen her, her older sister hadn’t been absolutely ripping my still-beating heart out of my chest and stomping on it in the front yard of their house while she watched from the window?

Fuck. That.

“I have to get to work,” I said (which wasn’t true, but right now I couldn’t remember where the hell I was supposed to be going), clenching my teeth and shoving past her, making her stumble a little. I should probably feel bad about that, but I didn’t.

Seeing her had ignited the rage that had been mostly dormant inside me for the past few years. Oh, it was back now. With a vengeance. People said that you never forgot your first heartbreak, but that was an understatement. Sophie’s sister, Kaylee, had literally ruined my life. I could barely even think of her name without wanting to black out with rage. Still. Time had dulled the pain, but not by much.

Fuck her. FUCK HER FOREVER.

Her sister could fuck all the way off too. She was guilty by association. Was that rational? No. But I didn’t care about being fair or rational.

My phone went off as I shook with anger outside and I remembered that Stace had agreed to give me a ride to Cade and Eloise's house. Right.

Stace waved at me and I headed for her car that was parked near the entrance to my apartment.

"Whoa, are you okay?" Stace asked as I got in and slammed the door. Hunter had turned around in her seat with a smile on her face that fell when she saw my expression.

"You will never believe who moved into the apartment next to mine."

An hour later my mood wasn't any better, but I had a drink in my hand that I hadn't had to mix, and a plate of excellent food.

"If you keep scowling like that, your face is going to get stuck that way," Cade said, sitting down next to me on the couch. Everyone else was in the kitchen talking and laughing and I'd retreated to the sitting area near the kitchen. It wasn't a full formal living room. No, that was in another area of the house. Because this place was massive. Eloise was a famous and wealthy author so it made sense. It always hit me a little when I walked in that my friend Cade now lived a completely different lifestyle from mine.

"Bite me," I said, chomping on a carrot that I'd dipped in some lemon pepper hummus.

"Are you really going to be a grump for the rest of the night?" Cade asked, resting her head on my shoulder.

"Yes," I said, and she laughed.

“Do you want to talk about it?”

“No,” I growled.

Cade sighed as she sat up and faced me.

“Are you sure?”

“I don’t want to talk about it,” I said for what felt like the thirtieth time.

Cade searched my face and then nodded. She knew how I got when I dug my heels in. Once I got to that point, there was no use in pushing. I’d shut down or I’d leave.

“Hey, I have a new ARC for you. Do you want to borrow it? I think it’s right up your alley.” One of the benefits of being friends with a woman whose girlfriend was a famous author was the access to books I hadn’t had before. Cade got all kinds of advanced copies of books through Eloise and her work as an author assistant that she vetted and passed on to me and Hunter and Jo. Cade had impeccable taste and had never steered me wrong with a book recommendation.

“Yeah, give it to me.” I doubted a book was going to turn my frown upside down, but it might give my mind a little break. Ever since I’d seen Sophie, I’d been thrown mentally back in time to that night when I’d found out that not only had Kaylee applied and decided to go to a different college than I had, she’d also been cheating on me nearly our entire relationship with the same girl who’d made my life in middle school hell. It wasn’t possible to articulate the layers of betrayal. I didn’t even remember most of it. At least not after I’d thrown up on the lawn when she’d tried to touch me.

Somehow I’d driven home somehow and had gone right to bed. I’d stayed there for almost a week.

Cade brought me back to the present when she handed me the book.

“Thanks,” I said, wanting to take the book upstairs to the library and dive into it right now so I didn’t have to talk to anyone.

I downed the rest of my drink.

“Want a refill?” Cade asked, taking the glass from me.

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“Yes please,” I told her.

“You got it.” She squeezed my shoulder before she got up and went to the kitchen. I watched her wind her arms around Eloise from behind and set her chin on Eloise’s shoulder. They were beautiful together, I had to admit. Hunter and I had been skeptical of the relationship at first, her more than me, but Cade and Eloise were in it for the long haul. Lucky them.

Love hadn’t worked out for me, but it was beautiful seeing my friends happy. Stace and Hunter were also plastered to each other and laughing at something that Cade had said. Eloise’s friend Camile and her husband John were also here, as well as a few of the new friends that Cade had made in the neighborhood. Jo hadn’t been able to come, but I wished she was here.

It was a nice group of people and I couldn’t help but feel a tiny bit of guilt for being the moody bitch scowling in the corner.

I couldn’t help it, though. They didn’t know what I’d been through.

Cade must have gotten distracted by her sexy girlfriend and forgotten about my drink, so I got up and went to make it myself.

“You don’t have to be a bartender here,” Eloise said as I measured everything into one of her shakers. I did love having decent supplies on hand. Eloise had the best of everything in her house, and that included her cocktail tools and top shelf alcohol. It would be a crime not to take advantage. Plus, I wasn’t driving.

I shrugged. She opened her mouth and I could tell she was going to ask if I was okay, but she seemed to change her mind at the last minute and gave me a smile instead.

I took my bad mood and my new drink back to the couch and pretty much stayed there the rest of the night until Stace and Hunter came to ask me if I was ready to go. I'd been ready at least an hour ago, but I didn't want to be the annoying friend who begged to go home early.

I cringed the closer we got to my apartment, crossing my fingers that I wasn't going to have another run-in with Sophie. She seemed like the kind of person who would want to hash it out. From what I remembered she'd been a yapper. Always barging into Kaylee's room and wanting to talk about this and that and begging to go on our dates. More than once she'd almost interrupted us in the middle of sex.

Fuck. I hadn't thought about all of this in detail for a long time. For the most part, I tried my hardest to forget about all of it. Now it was at the forefront of my mind again, as if all my anger and grief and hurt had been resurrected.

I hated it. I was so angry at Sophie for making me relive all this. I wasn't sure if I believed in a higher power, but if there was one who had thrown Sophie in my path, that power was an asshole.

I glared at her door as I unlocked mine and stepped inside. I couldn't hear any sounds coming from her apartment, but just knowing she was over there breathing was enough to make me want to pound on the wall and tell her to stop.

Yes, it wasn't fair to her to convict her of her sister's crimes, but I was tired and my social battery was drained and my skin was raw and I hated everything.

I groaned as I flopped on my bed and then screamed into my pillow.



Why? Out of all the places she could have moved, why here? Why right next to me?

“Fuck,” I said as I tried to blink away tears. I hated crying more than anything. Hated it.

I sniffed and did my best to ignore them as they soaked into my pillowcase.

I hated this.

## Chapter Four

Sophie

Reid definitely wasn't happy to see me, and truly, I couldn't blame her. The way things had ended between her and Kaylee was brutal, and I'd just been watching from the window in the living room. I shouldn't have, but they'd been so loud it had scared me.

Reid had screamed as if she'd been physically hurt and then she'd doubled over, heaving onto the lawn. Kaylee tried to help her, but Reid slapped her away. A short time later she'd stumbled to her car and Kaylee had followed her. She didn't come back for a long time.

Our parents had been away for the weekend on a retreat, or else they probably would have intervened.

Kaylee hadn't come home until late that night and when I'd tried to talk to her, she'd yelled at me to get out of her room and wouldn't stop throwing things at me until I left her alone.

Over the next few days I'd tried to ask her what had happened. From what I'd heard,

she had cheated on Reid, but I couldn't believe Kaylee would have done that. She loved Reid. They'd been perfect together. I'd been so envious of their relationship.

Dating was out of the question for me, being socially awkward and skittish around boys. At the time, I hadn't known why.

I'd mostly kept to myself, with the exception of Larison. It wasn't all bad, because I'd discovered a passion for books that was now leading me to getting my MFA in creative writing on the way to hopefully getting a job in the publishing industry.

If I said I didn't listen for any sounds in the apartment next door the rest of the night, I would have been lying. Every time I heard anything in another part of the building, I jumped. Most of my time was spent unpacking and trying to turn my apartment into a home instead of towers of boxes. I figured as long as I had my bedroom and kitchen mostly done, and clothes to sleep in and wear tomorrow, I could call it a night.

It took much longer than I anticipated, and I knew I wasn't going to get to my book collection for a while. I'd ordered some bookcases since my new place actually had room for them and I wasn't going to have to store my books in random wobbly piles or shove them under the bed.

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I kept telling myself that I wanted to stay up so I could get more boxes taken care of, but I was staying up to hear when Reid came back. Since she'd left, I'd gone over and over my options and I really thought it would be good to just have a quick chat with her and see if she was okay.

She and Kaylee had broken up years ago, but I didn't think you got over something like that. Not that I'd know. My own relationships had been lukewarm and short-lived. I hadn't figured it out until this year. Not that Reid needed to know anything about that.

I just wanted to...apologize? Not exactly that, but something. We weren't going to be best friends, but it would be good to be cordial, right? What if one of us had an emergency?

While I waited for her to get back, I practiced what I might say. It was something I'd done for as long as I could remember. Whether it was a presentation for school, a phone call, or a conversation with a friend, I always thought about what I'd say ahead of time. So often when I'd be with someone my mouth would get ahead of me and spoke before I thought, and it had gotten me into many sticky situations.

That couldn't happen with Reid. I needed to keep things short and sweet and let her know that I would give her her space, but if she needed anything, she could knock on my door. I could be a good neighbor.

I wasn't going to bring up Kaylee.

As if she'd heard me thinking her name, I got a message pretty late that night from

Kaylee asking if I was all moved in. She must have just seen all the messages in the family group chat.

After everything had gone down with Reid, Kaylee had moved across the country to go to school in California and she'd ended up staying, getting a job as a foley artist after she graduated. Her work was seriously cool, and she was engaged to her longtime girlfriend. She was happy, and I hoped Reid was. Not that it was any of my business, but I needed to know that she'd recovered from what had happened.

Kaylee had admitted how wrong she'd been years later and she'd wondered if she should reach out to Reid, but had decided it was wise not to open old wounds.

I didn't necessarily agree with her on that. Reid probably had moved on, but I still felt the need to try and smooth things over. In the service of being a good neighbor.

When I finally heard Reid come back that night, I almost died tripping over boxes in my effort to press my ear against the wall.

This was an older building, so the walls were pretty thin, and I could hear her moving around and then turning on the shower.

Yeah, I didn't need to be listening to that, so I stepped back, blushing as if she'd caught me.

I'd approach her tomorrow. If most of my shit wasn't in boxes and I actually had groceries, I would have made her cupcakes as an excuse to go over.

That was okay. I could order some. I tried to remember what she'd liked back when I knew her, but it wasn't like she and Kaylee had let me hang around a lot. Hmmm. I'd just have to cross my fingers and get an assortment and wish for the best.

Tomorrow. I'd handle all that tomorrow.

I absolutely collapsed that night and when I woke up the next day it was almost noon. Shit. I hadn't meant to sleep that late, but I'd stayed up to wait for Reid and now I was dealing with the consequences. I was also so sore from unpacking, especially my shoulders. Groaning as I got up, it hit me that I hadn't taken a shower last night and I was feeling pretty gross.

First order of business: shower. Second, food. Third, Reid.

It was a pain navigating a new grocery store, but I guess I'd figure it out eventually. It was a different chain than the one closest to campus that I was used to, and they didn't have some of my favorite things. There was a good bakery, and I found a box of four different flavor cupcakes that I could take to Reid. For a moment I thought about getting her a card, but what the hell kind of card could I get? They didn't make cards for this kind of situation.

The cupcakes would have to be enough.

By the time I put everything away in my cabinets, it was late afternoon and I was starving again so I ripped open a bag of salad and didn't even bother to put it in a bowl. Just poured on the dressing, gave it a shake, and started stabbing at it with a fork.

Before I went to talk to Reid, I went to check myself in the mirror I'd set up in my bedroom to make sure I was presentable before putting my ear to the room next door to make sure she was home. I heard the water turn on, so she must be there.

Carrying the cupcakes with shaky hands, I left my apartment and knocked on Reid's door, my stomach doing all kinds of anxious gymnastics.

Reid opened the door with narrowed eyes, and I tried to remember the words I'd practiced, but my mind absolutely blanked.

"Uh, hi. I just, um, wanted to bring you these?" Shit. I was doing that thing where I made everything sound like a question. My face flamed red as I presented the cupcakes to Reid.

"What the hell is this?" Reid asked.

"Cupcakes?" Her eyes narrowed even further, until they were barely slits.

I opened my mouth to say something and then closed it again. I needed to think.

"I just wanted to say I'm sorry for whatever happened in the past and I hoped that we could be cordial to each other and if you need anything, you can knock on my door. Like a cup of sugar or something. Or a tampon. I buy the multipacks so I always have those. Or pads. I've got a lot of pads." It took me too long to shut off the flow of words from my mouth and I knew right then that I'd said too much.

Like usual.

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My entire body was one big blush and I wished she'd just take the cupcakes from me so I could run back to my apartment and die of mortification in peace.

"I don't want your cupcakes," she said, and then the door was shut in my face. I heard the lock click.

"Okay," I whispered and went back to my apartment. That was a bust, but at least I had all the cupcakes to myself now?

I didn't see Reid again for a few days, but I thought about her. All. The. Time. It was so bad that even Larison noticed when I kept zoning out during our regular video chats.

"Is there something going on that I don't know about?" she asked me, leaning closer to her screen so she could squint at my face, pushing her glasses up her nose.

"No," I said. I hadn't told her about the Reid situation. Mostly because it was really freaking embarrassing. I'd tried to make amends and she'd shut the door in my face, but I might have made the whole thing worse. Thinking that I'd caused her pain made me sick to my stomach.

"Sophieeeeeee," Larison said in her mom Voice. It was Friday night and Juniper was already in bed so we could talk without being adorably interrupted.

"Don't use that tone with me," I said, pointing my finger at her.

"Then tell me what's wrong and I won't have to."

She raised one eyebrow and smirked at me.

I sighed. “Fine.” I gave her the rundown of everything, including the cupcake disaster.

“Aw, my poor Soph. You tried to do a good thing and it blew up in your face.”

“Pretty much. And now I feel like I should definitely leave her alone. Like, the message was clear. Should I pretend that I don’t see her? Should I say hi?”

Larison blew out a breath. “I think you try to be cordial and don’t overthink it.”

I snorted.

“Not easy for you, my love, but I don’t think you need to worry about this as much as you are. You’re not the one who cheated on her. You were literally just there. And you tried to be nice and she let you know that she doesn’t want to have any further contact. So it’s time to drop it and move on.” I knew she was right, but that didn’t stop me from still wanting to do something to fix it.

“Did you tell Kaylee?” Larison asked.

“Uh, no. Absolutely not. I didn’t want to dig that up for her either.” Even though my sister had been the one who’d absolutely fucked up, it was still something she wasn’t proud of and something she didn’t like bringing up.

The best course of action was to drop all of it, pretend that Reid and I were strangers, and move on with my life. I had my part-time summer job and one online summer class I needed to stay focused on. I still had one year left in my masters and then I’d finally be ready to start working in publishing.



This summer I was also hoping to find some work online, maybe an internship or something. Those were so competitive, and many of the jobs were in New York, but I was hoping I could stay in Maine and have a good career. Time would tell. I hadn't exactly figured out what facet of publishing I wanted to narrow in on. I just...couldn't decide. It would feel so final. As if once I made the decision, I'd have to give myself to that thing one thousand percent and I wouldn't be able to change my mind.

It was a worry that I hadn't shared with anyone, not even Larison. I guess I was so scared of making a wrong choice and being judged for changing my mind if I chose wrong.

Juniper woke up and Larison had to put her back to sleep, so I let her go and lay back on my bed.

Since it was Friday night in my new place, I probably should have gone out or something, but I didn't like going to regular bars alone anymore. I'd never been good at saying no to guys when they asked me out and now it was even worse so I tended to avoid places where it might happen.

There was a sapphic bar nearby, but I definitely wasn't ready to go there. No way. I was still wrestling with the revelation that I was queer and could barely use the word "lesbian" in my own head, let alone out loud. The fear that the Label Police would show up to my door and arrest me for not being a "real" lesbian was ridiculous, but it didn't stop me from thinking something like that could happen.

When they checked your ID at Sapph, did they require you have a carabiner on your belt? Did you have to name three sapphic musical acts? Did they check the length of your fingernails? I had no idea and the uncertainty was probably making my anxiety worse, but that was how I'd always been.

When I'd told Larison in January that I didn't think I was straight she'd just smiled and told me she'd known the whole time and had been waiting for me to figure it out. She'd come out as bisexual years ago, and I'd joke about being her token straight friend then. Oops.

I'd burst into tears and hadn't been able to stop crying. Telling my family had been a little less dramatic, but they'd taken it in stride since Kaylee had paved the way for me years ago. It was almost a nonevent. All of my stress about telling them had been for nothing, but that was how anxiety worked most of the time. Rarely was it rational.

Someday. Someday I'd be brave enough to go to a queer bar and someday I'd be bold enough to go to Pride, but I wasn't there yet.

Baby steps.

Instead of going out and painting the town red (whatever that meant), I was in bed and missing my best friend and goddaughter and trying to decide what to read. You'd think that having to read so much for school would make me want to do anything besides reading in my free time, but that wasn't the case. I had my pleasure reading to decompress from my school reading.

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Right now I was in the midst of a steamy sapphic vampire novel and alternating that with a very sweet gay hockey romance. I knew literally nothing about hockey but fortunately that wasn't a problem.

I opened the hockey romance on my ereader before I realized that I needed a snack and maybe some tea. I'd treated myself to a new kettle when I moved in, so I filled it up and waited for the water to heat while I put together a little plate with cookies and crackers and cheese and olives.

"Wild night," I said to myself as I settled into bed with my snacks and my book. To really create some ambience, I got up and put on a record. Kaylee had gotten me a turntable for Christmas a few years ago and now I collected records. My new neighborhood had an amazing vintage record store down the street and I'd already visited and spent too much money.

Between the music and the snacks and the book, I had everything I could need.

Didn't stop me from listening for any sounds from next door. I'd been noticing what time she left, trying to figure out her schedule so I could avoid her. She seemed to go out late in the afternoons sometimes and then get back very late. Sometimes I'd wake up when I heard her come back. My bed was shoved up against our shared wall with what I assumed was her bedroom on the other side, and she wasn't the quietest when she arrived home. From her job, I was guessing? Graveyard shift or something. That made me curious to know where she worked and what she was doing.

I'd looked for her on social media, but her pages were so sparse and she barely posted anything so there were no answers there.

I hoped she didn't hate me. I just... I didn't want her to hate me.

## Chapter Five

Reid

I couldn't fucking believe that she brought me fucking cupcakes. Like she was Susie Sunshine, the perfect neighbor or something. I knew that if I didn't send a clear message that under no circumstances did I ever want to talk to her, then she wouldn't leave me alone. She had that look.

Too sweet. Way too nice. She looked like the kind of person who woke up in the morning and smiled. She looked like the kind of person who sang while they unloaded the dishwasher and picked up pennies on the sidewalk claiming they were lucky.

The easiest thing had been to shut the door in her face. Even if I'd wanted the cupcakes.

Once I heard her go back to her apartment, the guilt hit me. It wasn't fair that I had to be a bitch to someone like her. But I couldn't deal with the alternative.

She looked too much like Kaylee. Way too much. Made me sick to think about. Like their parents' DNA was so strong that they'd produced two almost identical daughters several years apart.

I'd liked her parents. They'd been lovely to me. The kind of people who made me a part of the family the second I'd started dating their daughter. I'd gotten a Christmas sweater and been in the family photos and had gone on vacation with them.

Losing Kaylee had meant losing them too. That part had almost been harder. I'd

developed a strong relationship with her mom and then it was just...gone. Ended. Because of Kaylee's selfish choices.

I hadn't seen her in a few days. That was fine. That was how I liked it. In time, I'd forget that she was even here.

Right now, though, I was still sticking my head out of my door cautiously before going into the hallway so I didn't bump into her. It was probably silly, but I didn't want to risk seeing her. I kind of wanted to apologize, but then that might give her encouragement.

Jo, Cade, and Hunter thought I was an idiot. I'd told them about the fiasco, and I'd been admonished for being an asshole.

This wasn't news, but they didn't get it. None of them had been through a relationship like that. How a betrayal fundamentally changed who you were as a person. How it had broken my trust in just about everyone and everything.

Eventually they left me alone about it, but still asked if I'd seen Sophie lately. I told them no.

Until that Sunday when I was coming back from a long walk in the park. I couldn't wait until it was just a little bit warmer so I could go on long hikes in the mountains again.

I bounded up the stairs, still energized from my walk when I heard someone cursing.

Sophie. Standing outside her door with a laundry basket on her hip as she jiggled the handle of her door and cursed again.

There was no way for me to back away and leave her like this. I might be a bitch, but

I wasn't a monster.

"Locked out?" I asked and she spun around.

"Oh," she said, her face immediately going red. "Yeah. I thought I had my keys in my hand, but I guess I...didn't."

"You don't have a spare in your car or anything? Or with a friend?"

She pressed her lips together and shook her head.

Christ, she looked like Kaylee. Looking at her was hard, so I lowered my gaze.

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And now I was staring at her tits. Great. They were very nice tits though. She wasn't wearing a bra and I could see her nipples pressing through her thin shirt.

Looking at her nipples wasn't a good idea either, so I focused on her face again and was hit by a bolt of pain, but then the longer I gazed at her face, the more subtle differences I saw. Kaylee's eyes had been truly blue, where Sophie's flirted between blue and green. Kaylee had dyed her hair blonder, especially in the summer. Sophie's cheeks were rounder, her face...sweeter. Except for her chin. That was all stubbornness.

"You'll have to message Tyler and have him bring the master key. He's usually pretty good about showing up, but it might take a while."

A nice person would invite her inside to wait for Tyler the head of maintenance to get over here. Was I that nice? I wasn't feeling particularly nice, but then she bit her lip and I found the words falling out of my mouth anyway.

"You can come in and hang out until he gets here. Fold your laundry while you wait or whatever."

Her eyes widened.

"Are you sure?"

Instead of answering her, I unlocked the door and held it open for her. "Just get in." I wasn't going to ask her again.

Sophie scurried ahead of me, nearly taking me out with her laundry basket.

I didn't care what she thought of my place, but I'd cleaned up and organized yesterday.

Sophie looked around and I instantly regretted letting her in.

I set my crap down by the door, and Sophie set her basket down on the couch and started typing on her phone.

Annoyed by the quiet and this woman invading my space, I decided to mostly ignore her and went to my bedroom to change out of my hiking clothes. Normally I'd put on an old stretched out dance tank and some booty shorts, but I wasn't gonna wear that with Sophie here, so I pulled on a pair of leggings and a regular T-shirt. I made sure to put on a bra, even though I didn't want to.

I brushed through my hair and wished I could take a shower, but I wasn't going to get naked with her here, so it would have to wait. If I could, I would have hidden in the bedroom as long as she was here, but my laptop was in the living room and I really needed to upload the new chapter of my current fic. I'd gotten myself on a schedule of regular updates and I didn't want to disappoint my readers. Sure, I was writing everything for free, but I still felt a responsibility. Every week I'd get comments that people loved my stories and they were helping get them through some rough times. Readers would sometimes pour their hearts out in their messages and that affected me. I couldn't let them down.

Bracing myself, I went back into the living room and found Sophie folding her laundry and chewing her lip.

"Is he on his way?" I asked and she spun to face me, holding a pair of lacy underwear in her hands that she'd been in the midst of folding.



They were pink and feminine and for a second I lost the ability to both breathe and swallow.

Sophie yelped and dropped the underwear onto the floor before diving down to grab them. She shoved them into the basket, her face beet red again. It was cute how much she blushed.

No, it wasn't.

"Tyler?" I prompted her when she didn't say anything and wouldn't look me in the eye. "Is he on his way with the master key?"

"Yeah. He'll be here in twenty minutes he said."

I nodded.

"He's usually pretty prompt, so he probably will be." As far as property managers went, Tyler was a good one. He'd show up when shit broke, and he wouldn't make you feel bad about it. He and I often shot the shit when he came to fix things, or I ran into him when he was dealing with a finicky dryer. It was one of the reasons I liked living here, even if the amenities weren't the best.

Sophie nodded and started chewing her lip again. I wanted to tell her to stop doing that. She was going to make it bleed.

I coughed and realized I should maybe be a good hostess or something.

"Do you, uh, want anything? Water?"

She shook her head and went back to folding laundry.

“Suit yourself,” I said as I poured myself a glass of filtered water from the pitcher in the fridge and then downed it, trying not to watch her too much.

She’d finished her folding and was fiddling with the corner of something.

“You can sit down, you know. My couch won’t bite.” Sophie jumped at the sound of my voice and her eyes flew to my face.

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The afternoon sun streamed in through the windows and lit her up from behind, haloing her in light.

“I’m okay,” she said, picking at a hole in the hem of her shirt. She seemed to vibrate with energy even when she was standing still.

“Sophie. Sit down. I’m not going to yell at you.”

She raised one eyebrow, skeptical. That movement made me laugh.

“I know I shut the door in your face the last time. I...I guess I’m sorry about that.” I hopped up and sat on the kitchen counter, my back against the cabinets.

“You are sorry, or you guess you are?” she asked. There was the jut of that stubborn chin. She might be nervous, but there was a strong spine underneath.

“I mean, my methods probably weren’t the best, but I wanted to send a message. I should have just said no thank you. The door slamming was excessive.”

She crossed her arms and looked away from me and toward my bookshelf.

“I was trying to be nice,” she said in a quiet voice.

“I know. But I didn’t want it. I still don’t want it. It’s really fucking hard to look at you.” My voice cracked and I had to swallow past the knot of pain that had worked its way up my throat. Fuck. I couldn’t let her see me fall apart.

Her eyes went wide. “Oh. I didn’t think about that.”

I clenched my teeth together to stop a bunch of really terrible words from coming out of my mouth. It wasn’t Sophie’s fault that she looked like her sister. It wasn’t her fault that her sister was a lying, cheating piece of shit.

You couldn’t help who your family was, and I knew that better than anyone.

“I can go wait in the hallway.” She reached to pick up her laundry and I shook my head.

“You don’t have to. But I think I’m going to just stay in my bedroom until you leave. If that’s okay.” That was the best I could do. Staying in the living room and looking at each other was going to cause me to say things that weren’t kind or nice and I’d done enough of that already.

“Of course. That’s fine. Do whatever you need to do. Thank you for letting me hang out here. I appreciate it.”

Pushing myself off the counter, I kept as much space between us as I could.

“I’m not a total bitch,” I said before I opened my door and walked into my bedroom. She was silent as I shut the door between us and breathed a sigh of relief.

The next fifteen minutes passed by like hours. I did everything I could to ignore the fact that Sophie was on the other side of my bedroom door. Probably sitting on my couch. Definitely looking at my apartment and judging it. Not that I cared. It didn’t matter if she hated my decor or decided I was messy or had bad taste in furniture or books.

It didn’t fucking matter.

I'd forgotten to grab my laptop, and there was no way I could go out and get it now, so I did my best to just try and read, but I kept stopping and listening.

When a message notification went off in the other room and I heard her walking out the door, I exhaled and flopped onto my bed. I'd been alternating between sitting down and hovering by the door nearly the whole time.

I waited at least five minutes before venturing out, still tentative as if she was going to pop back up and try to scare me.

She didn't, but her presence was still here in the air. A slightly sweet fruity fragrance like grapefruit mixed with soft florals. It was pleasant.

A little paranoid, I walked around to make sure she hadn't messed with anything. Had to be sure.

After a quick check of my apartment, I assured myself that everything was where I'd left it and there was no evidence that Sophie had been here, other than the dissipating scent in the air.

Relief.

Now I could definitely go back to ignoring her.

Chapter Six

Sophie

## Page 12

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 4:17 pm*

Of course Reid had been walking up the stairs when I noticed that I'd forgotten my keys. Of course. My luck was just that terrible.

What surprised me the most was her inviting me into her place. The tension was thick and hard to breathe through once she'd shut the door. I'd done my best to chill out and just fold my laundry, but then Reid had surprised me while I was checking a pair of underwear to make sure they weren't ripped and I'd only embarrassed myself further.

Then she'd literally had to leave the room because I looked too much like Kaylee. I hadn't thought about that. People always told me I was a copy of my sister and hearing that had been both annoying and flattering. Kaylee was absolutely gorgeous, but I couldn't see how we were that much alike.

Reid stayed in her room while I attempted not to do anything to mess up her place. It was different than I'd thought it would be, actually. I guess I assumed it would be darker, moodier or something. But Reid's place was light and bright, with plenty of soft pastels and a cream-colored couch. She also had a number of bookshelves and I did take a good long look at those and had been shocked at the titles carefully lined up on her shelves.

Romance. They were nearly all romance, along with a few writing manuals that I recognized because I'd used them myself.

So. Much. Romance. Hoping she wouldn't mind, I took some shots of her bookshelves so I could look through her titles later. I had no doubt that she had good taste, and I was going to see where we had any overlap.

Tyler finally arrived with the master key and I thanked him profusely as he unlocked my door. He was in his early thirties and assured me it was no problem. I promised that I would get a spare key made and put it somewhere safe. I had no idea where that would be, but I'd figure it out. This could never happen to me again.

Once I was back in my apartment, I pulled up the pictures I'd taken of Reid's bookshelves and went through them. I grabbed a notebook and started making a list to cross reference with my own collection.

We had a ton of books in common, and she also had quite a few that were on my TBR. There were others that I wasn't familiar with and I put stars next to those on my lists so I could look them up and see if I might want to read them. I was always looking for new books even when I had an enormous pile to read.

What a delightful surprise. Reid was probably never going to talk to me again, but at least I'd have good reading material for a long time.

I did my best not to think about Reid and put her from my mind, but it was impossible not to, with her right next door. She definitely did work nights, and I caught her leaving once and got a look at her shirt as she was putting her coat on.

Sapph. She worked at Sapph. Bartending, I was guessing. That made sense. I bet she was good at it too. She seemed like the kind of person who would know how to mix a drink.

Well now I definitely couldn't go there. I mean, not when she was working. The only sapphic bar in the state being off limits to me just after I'd come out was some kind of cosmic punishment. I wasn't a fan.

On Friday afternoon, I had a brief conversation with my best friend. "You need to go out tonight. Live a little. You don't even need to hire a sitter!" Larison told me while

Juniper struggled to snatch the phone from her.

“I mean, I guess I could. I feel like I’m even more nervous around guys now, though. I know that doesn’t make any sense, but it’s true. I’m scared someone is going to hit on me and then I have to decide whether I come out or not and what if they won’t leave me alone?” I knew I got all up in my head about it and always imagined the worst.

“Auntie Sophieeeee,” Juniper wailed. She was four and wasn’t shy about demanding her share of attention.

“What is it, Miss Juni?” I asked. Larison rolled her eyes fondly.

“You gotta watch my dance!” In an effort to burn off some of Juniper’s boundless energy, Larison had signed her up for dance classes and every week she just had to perform for me. Even though she was so young, she was incredibly coordinated, and I didn’t think it was me just being a proud godmother.

Larison put on some music and set up the phone so I could watch Juniper’s performance. I made sure to give her a standing ovation as she curtsied at the end, pretending to hold the edges of a skirt.

“I can’t wait to see you perform.” The dance studio was doing a livestreamed performance for their end-of-the-summer recital and I was going to be logged in.

“That was beautiful, baby. Good job.” Larison gave her a kiss and then told her that she should have some time for herself so we could talk. She only whined a little until she ran to her toy box and pulled out her dolls.

“How is it being so far away?” I asked her once I heard Juniper singing to herself. Larison’s moms had been there every step of the way when she’d gotten



unexpectedly pregnant with Juniper after a one-night stand. She'd found the guy and he wanted nothing to do with any of it, which had almost been a relief. Her moms had been behind her a thousand percent and I'd stepped up in my duties as best friend, throwing her a shower and making sure I learned anything I needed to know to help when Juni came screaming into the world. I'd fallen in love with her the second she'd blinked her eyes at me in the delivery room.

Now she was four years old, turning five this October, and this September she'd be headed to pre-k. I was going to be an absolute mess.

"It's not easy, that's for sure," Larison said, and I could see how tired she was. She'd confessed to me that one of the reasons she wanted to go away to school was so she could learn how to parent Juniper on her own. Needed to know she could handle everything on her own and not depended on her moms and me so much. I understood, but I still thought she might be making a mistake.

Now it was nearly a year later, and I could see my friend was struggling.

"Juni looks happy though," I pointed out. Larison smiled.

"She is. That's all that matters, really."

I shook my head. "No, it's not. You need to be happy too." One job I took very seriously was making sure that Larison knew she was also a person and not just a mom, and that her needs and wants were important too. Juniper would flourish best when her mom taking care of herself, physically and mentally.

"I know, I know." She rolled her eyes. "I'm just strung out with finals next week. You know. Once I'm only taking two classes this summer and Juni is at camp, things will be good. They'll calm down and I'll be able to breathe."

I swore I said the same thing to myself all the time. That this week was going to be hell, but once I got through it, next week would be better.

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So far, it had never happened. But maybe next week?

Larison harassed me a little more about going out and I bullied her back about taking more time for herself and we ended with laughing about something silly from high school.

“Any other encounters with your nemesis?” Larison asked.

“She’s not my nemesis,” I said. “She’s just my sister’s ex and she happens to be my neighbor. That’s not nemesis material.” At least not in the real world. Maybe if this was a romance and our kingdoms were at war or something. Or one of us was an assassin sent to kill the other. That sounded stressful. I was glad that wasn’t the case. Fun to read about, though.

“Okay, sure,” Larison said. “She’s not your nemesis. But you blush whenever she comes up.”

I groaned and hid my face. “I do not.” I probably did. To be fair, I blushed a lot. It was just a thing with me.

“Mmmm, interesting,” Larison said with an evil laugh.

“Shut upppppp,” I said.

Juniper admonished me for saying that and I apologized to Larison. Called out by my own goddaughter.

“Listen, I need to feed this one, so I’m gonna let you go. But you should do something fun tonight. Promise me you’ll leave your apartment. Even if you just run to pick up pizza or something.”

I sighed, but I agreed. I could do that. I went out of my apartment all the time. It was officially summer, I was free from studying, and my brain wasn’t just exhausted soup sloshing around in my skull like during the school year. There wasn’t a better time to try and live it up.

Instead of just getting pizza and bringing it back to my apartment, I decided to be a little bolder. I brought my ereader with me just in case, but I found a trendy place that had wings and beer and forced myself to go in. Being alone might make me a target, but I was going to have to learn how to deal with going out eventually. This was good practice.

I found a spot at the end of the bar and parked myself. The female bartender smiled kindly while sliding a menu toward me.

“Meeting someone?” she asked.

“Nope. Just me.” I tried not to blush or cringe when I admitted I was by myself.

A few minutes later, I’d put in an order and the bartender had made me something delicious and peachy. I pulled out my ereader and started reading while conversation buzzed around me and various sports games flashed on the multiple televisions. Maybe I could have picked a different place, but this wasn’t so bad. As long as I didn’t get hit on, I’d be set. So far, so good. Apparently hunching over in the corner like a gremlin with my book was giving off enough of a “don’t talk to me vibe.”

My basket of wings, fried pickles, and fries arrived and I dug in.

“Reading anything good?” the bartender asked, nodding to my ereader as I set it down to eat.

“Oh, yes. It’s very good.” I’d gone back to finish up the sapphic vampire novel, but I didn’t know if she wanted to hear about that.

“What’s it about?” she asked, seemingly interested.

“Oh, uh, it’s about vampires,” I said.

She raised her eyebrows. “That sounds hot. What’s it called?”

Figuring I had nothing to lose, I pulled out the packet of reading tabs I used when I flagged my favorite parts in my physical books and wrote down the name and author for her.

“Thanks. I’m always looking for something new and you look like you have good taste,” she said, winking at me.

Please let it be too dark in here so she doesn’t see my blush.

In hindsight, my own queerness had always been there. Every time I’d been around a pretty girl, even from a young age, I’d become tongue-tied. I’d always told myself that it was because beautiful girls and women were intimidating, and I was just unsure around them because of my own feminine shortcomings. I wanted to be them.

Now I knew the truth, and it was so obvious.

“I don’t know about that, but it’s a good book,” I managed to say before she was called away. There, that was normal. See? I could be normal around attractive women. I wasn’t a total lost cause.

I didn't know if I was ready to hurl myself into the sapphic dating scene, but I did want to date at some point. I'd never had those teen years of fumbling and figuring things out and testing the waters. Now I was an adult and everyone around me had been professionally dating for years and here I was, still trying to figure out what my type was.

My dates with guys didn't count. My kisses with them didn't count either. I'd never managed to shove down my own discomfort long enough to go further than a little groping, so I was still inexperienced when it came to sex. And sapphic sex? That was a whole other situation.

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Now that I had the summer mostly stretched out in front of me, I had more free time and brain space to devote to my personal life.

Too bad I had to avoid the one place where I could get my feet wet.

I ended up staying at the restaurant for longer than I anticipated. I had a second drink and the bartender almost talked me into a third, but I cut myself off. She kept checking on me and I didn't think it was my imagination that she was giving me looks of interest. Not that I was going to do anything about it, but still. It was nice to be noticed that way by someone. The sapphic in her recognized the sapphic in me and that was flattering.

In the past when I'd thought about dating, it had been with fear and dread and now there was still some fear, but also nervous excitement. It was such a colossal change that it was hard to explain to someone else.

At least I had Larison. She'd come out as bisexual just before she'd gotten pregnant with Juniper and it had been so confusing for me at the time. It had thrown a spotlight on my own struggles and I hadn't been ready to deal with all of that at the time.

Since my apartment was so close to the restaurant, I walked home. It was chilly, but I'd worn a thick coat and had gloves and a hat.

Larison was going to be so proud of me, I told myself as I climbed the stairs. I'd gone out, I'd socialized, and I'd done the things that other twenty-two-year-olds did.

"Behind you," a voice said, and I almost tripped on the top step. I managed to catch

myself on the railing and step aside, looking over my shoulder.

Reid.

“Oh,” I said. I wasn’t expecting her back this early. She didn’t usually return until at least three and it was barely midnight.

“Hi.”

“Hey,” she said, yawning and getting her keys out of her bag. She looked drained.

“Long night?” I asked as she fumbled with the lock.

She just grunted and pushed her door open, giving me a little salute before closing it.

Okay then.

I went inside my own apartment and headed for the shower and then my pajamas and bed.

Things were getting steamy in my book and I hadn’t masturbated in a while. I’d been so exhausted with moving and everything else. Plus, there was the fact that now I allowed myself to actually fantasize about women.

For years, whenever I’d give myself the freedom for sexual creativity, my mind had always gravitated toward women. At the time, I told myself I was just comfortable with women’s bodies. They were like mine, so it was a familiar and non-threatening way to let myself explore.

I’d explained and rationalized so many things before I came out.



Now I didn't have to. Now I was free. Truly free.

Free and frisky. I set my ereader aside and went for the bottom drawer in my nightstand, grabbing my tried and true bestie. My wand vibrator. It was only the second one I'd ever bought, and I'd literally called out of work when I knew it was going to be delivered so I could intercept it before my parents got home. That had been the summer after my freshman year of college, and I'd been absolutely terrified that my parents were going to find out about my new vibrator collection I was hiding under my bed.

Having my own place was the best. I could do whatever I wanted.

And tonight? I wanted to get off. Repeatedly.

This baby was fully charged, and I was ready.

I stripped off my clothes and set out a towel just in case things got a little messy. They usually did, something which used to embarrass me until I found out that a lot of people thought it was a good thing.

I started off with teasing my nipples and gently stroking my stomach before widening my legs and stroking my clit, which was already throbbing and sensitive. I was so wet too. Wet enough that two fingers slid easily inside as I moaned, arching my head back. Fuck, that felt good. So, so good.

The vibrator was right on the blankets next to me, but I was going to get my first orgasm the old-fashioned way.

It didn't take long before my legs were shaking, and I was crying out as a few tears rolled down my cheeks and my first climax rolled through me.

Not the best I'd ever had, but not the worst. It was time for the big guns.

I started the vibrator on low and hovered it lightly on my skin so it was only a whisper of sensation. Sometimes that worked better than direct contact.

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My second orgasm snuck up on me and I was in the middle of it before I realized it was even happening.

I panted as I came down and turned the vibrator off to give myself a break and went back to pinching and pulling at my nipples. Pretty soon, I was ready to go again, and I wanted to make the third one the best.

I took my time and slowly built the tension by increasing the levels of the vibrator until I was almost at the max.

Fuck, it was almost too good, and I didn't hold back as I moaned and thrashed and got closer and closer until I detonated, crying out.

The last of the waves rolled through me as I heard a sound.

Someone was pounding on the wall.

### Chapter Seven

Reid

I'd felt a headache coming on while I was at work. My patience was frayed, and I was so close to losing it that my supervisor had taken one look at my face and had told me to clock out early and shoved me toward the back office to get my shit.

Sometimes you just hit your limit and tonight I'd hit my limit.

I almost walked right into Sophie heading up the stairs. In my burned-out state I saw that brightness in her eyes that meant she wanted to talk to me. I wasn't up for it. Not tonight.

I'd literally just grunted at her and shut the door. If that made her mad, then so be it.

First thing, I'd shoved leftover cold chicken in my mouth along with whatever else I could consume quickly since I was starving. Once I was fed, I hit the shower and fell into bed, barely having enough energy to pull on a long T-shirt.

It was time for sleep, but then I heard something that made my eyes snap open.

A moan. A sexual kind of moan, coming from the other side of the wall.

Sophie's bedroom.

I froze, barely breathing as I listened for it again.

Oh. Oh fuck. She was...well. She was getting off. And I didn't hear anyone else, so I was pretty sure she was by herself.

I should put some headphones on. I should turn on my TV and crank the volume.

I should block her out.

That wasn't what I ended up doing.

No, I was the fucking freak who kept listening. Who jumped when I heard a buzzing sound. Fuck, she had a vibrator too. A loud one. Mine were all expensive and whisper quiet, so she must have one of those old-school grinders over there. She couldn't be aware of how loud it was.

The sound increased, her gasps and moans and whimpers increased, and I heard her come again.

Now was the time to stop. To not be a total and complete pervert.

But I didn't.

I kept listening. I kept listening as my hand raised the hem of my shirt and stroked between my legs.

It was like listening to porn. Sort of.

Live porn. Live porn of my ex's little sister.

Jesus fuck, this was a bad idea. I had to stop.

My thoughts weren't affecting my behavior because my hand was still between my legs and circling my clit with rapid strokes as I shut my eyes and listened to Sophie get closer to another climax.

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She came. Loudly.

I did too, my vision whiting out as the orgasm rushed down my spine and grabbed hold, gripping me so hard I didn't know if I was even breathing anymore. I clamped my bottom lip between my teeth and muffled my noises with my arm so she wouldn't hear me.

And then I raised my fist and slammed it against the wall.

She had to stop. We had to stop.

I could almost hear her gasp after I pounded on the wall and then the vibrator went silent. So did she.

Shit. Post-orgasm clarity was kicking in and I knew I'd made a mistake. If I couldn't stop listening to her, the least I could have done was to let her finish and not draw attention to the fact that I could hear her.

Now she knew that I knew and the next time we saw each other, it was going to be weird.

Why couldn't I have left well enough alone? I should have stayed at work.

As tired as I'd been when I'd walked into my apartment, it took me a long time to fall asleep that night. I couldn't stop replaying what had happened earlier. Couldn't stop thinking about the sounds she'd made that I'd heard even over the rumbling of the vibrator.

She sounded beautiful. Loud and so sweet at the same time. Her noises had plucked at something deep inside me. Better than any porn I'd ever listened to, if I was honest. I'd come harder than I had in a while. A long while.

Lately my climaxes had been lackluster. I'd chalked the change up to being tired from work and a lack of imagination with my fantasies. My tried and true scenarios weren't working for me anymore. I needed new material, but it wasn't a priority.

The next morning, I woke up horny again. Shit.

My clit throbbed between my legs, bringing me into consciousness better than an alarm clock. When was the last time that had happened? I didn't even know.

A sleepy moan escaped my mouth as I put my hand on my pussy that was already wet. Like it had been doing its own thing while I slept and just waiting for me to wake up again.

"Fuckkkkkk." I was so damn close already.

With just a few swipes of my hand, a quick hard orgasm shot through me, making me shake and tremble and gasp.

"Holy crap," I said, my chest heaving. That was one way to wake up. I stared at my ceiling and enjoyed the post-climax tingles.

Most days I had to be dragged kicking and screaming into wakefulness but not today. I was all the way up now.

I had a shift that night, but my morning masturbation session had me feeling like I'd woken up on the right side of the bed for the first time in years. I caught myself humming as I made breakfast from scratch instead of being lazy and ordering

something or walking to the closest coffee shop.

This pancake mix had been sitting in my cupboards for so long, and since I was feeling so damn good, I added both milk and white chocolate chips to the batter. I also sliced up some potatoes before tossing them in spices and lining them on a tray in the air fryer. Some bacon got tossed into a pan and I even got out my milk frother and made myself a dreamy latte with caramel syrup.

I ate on the couch with the sun pouring through the curtains and decided that I should definitely take advantage of the weather and go outside. I could hit the library and get some new books and maybe even hit that weird bookstore that Stace had told me about ages ago. I'd gone a few times and it was the most disorganized place I'd ever been in, but it had the most eclectic collection of books I'd ever seen in my life. If you wanted to learn how to marry a ghost, they had it. If you wanted a book about fixing model trains, they had many. Whatever niche topic you wanted to know about, they probably had a book for it. The adventure was in finding it.

That early climax had set the tone for the rest of my day and I found myself smiling at people on the street. Like I'd had a personality transplant.

As I practically skipped down the sidewalk, I tried to think of what I should say to Sophie when I saw her again. The best course of action, I thought, was to agree to pretend that it hadn't happened. Just forget about it. Or at least tell her that I was going to forget about it.

I absolutely wasn't going to forget about it. That would be completely impossible. All of those sounds were burned in my brain for eternity.

She was probably embarrassed, which was why it would be good to drop it and move forward.



A little voice in the back of my mind that sounded like my meanest third grade teacher admonished me for thinking about Sophie that way. She was my ex's younger sister. I didn't play by those "off limits" rules, but she was off limits for different reasons.

Her older sister had broken my heart and I wasn't going to let another member of the Love family (oh the irony of their last name) get another chance.

The likelihood that she was even interested in me was slim. Very slim.

This was just a thing that we'd laugh about at some point. No big deal.

I arrived back at my apartment with too many books. I'd been smart and brought my tote bag for the library, and the bookstore had given me a recycled shopping bag for my purchases.

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“Oh my god,” I said as I dropped both bags outside my door so I could get my key out.

“Hi,” A voice said, and my heart nearly stopped for a second when I realized that Sophie was standing right next to me. How had she snuck up like that?

“Heyyyyy,” I said slowly, turning to face her. Her entire face was beet red, and she couldn’t make eye contact with me.

“Sorry about last night,” I said, keeping things vague.

She let out a little squeaking noise.

“I shouldn’t have banged on the wall,” I clarified.

She nodded like a bobblehead as she twisted her fingers together so hard that I thought that one of them was going to snap.

“I’m sorry,” she gasped out. “I didn’t know I was that loud.” The last part was mumbled so low that I barely heard it.

“We can just forget about it,” I said, and she finally looked up at me before her eyes skittered away again.

“Okay,” she said, nodding again. “Let’s forget it.”

“Sounds good,” I said, turning back to my books that I needed to drag inside before I

got ready for work. Tonight was definitely going to be better than last night and Sophie was partially responsible. I wasn't going to tell her that, though.

Sophie went back inside, and I breathed a sigh of relief.

## Chapter Eight

Sophie

It was hard to believe that my conversation with Reid didn't kill me. Death from embarrassment wasn't real, but if it was ever going to happen, this would have been the situation responsible.

As much as I wanted to hide in my apartment and literally never leave, getting the first encounter over with would be better than putting it off and just simmering in a pot of my own anxiety for hours. I was getting better at confronting things and I was proud of myself for that.

Reid hadn't seemed embarrassed or awkward at all. She was a cool customer, always. I wished I had that kind of confidence. That kind of ease with myself instead of being a ball of nerves all the damn time.

She'd said that we should just forget about it, which was the best-case scenario. I mean, she probably would. I sure as hell wouldn't. Knowing that she had definitely heard me masturbating and knew what I sounded like when I came was a level of humiliation that I never quite reached and might never reach again.

My masturbating days were over. Finished. I should throw away all my vibrators and take up celibacy.

Only one very small problem.

The idea that she'd heard me? That she might have listened?

It turned me on. It turned me on so hard that I could barely think for the rest of the day.

No matter what I tried to do, my brain was stuck on what had happened last night. Stuck so hard that I kept wanting to put my hands in shorts dozens of times, but I'd held back.

Eventually things got so bad that I ended up taking a bath and masturbating with a washcloth in my mouth to muffle any sounds and music blasting. Just in case.

Even after I came hard, twice, I got out of the tub and didn't feel satisfied.

Summer was supposed to be a chance to do what I wanted, but so far I was feeling...untethered.

Having all this time stretched out in front of me, even with my part-time job hours and my class coming up felt almost dangerous. I was so used to being a student that when I didn't have an absolutely packed academic schedule, my brain went into panic mode.

Right now, I needed to relax for a few days. I knew this. But doing that wasn't as easy as it sounded, and this whole thing with Reid wasn't making it any better.

Before I'd seen her, I'd run out to the farmers' market to get some fresh veggies and fruit and bread and then I'd come back and made a huge bowl of pasta salad to have for the week, cleaned up, rearranged my books, and sent Larison a million funny memes.

Then Reid had come back and I'd seized my moment to talk to her. The rest of my

night had been taken up with making dinner and reading and staring in the mirror deciding whether I wanted to get bangs or not.

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DO NOT GET BANGS Larison sent when I asked her if I should make an appointment.

Deep down I knew she was right, but my skin was itchy for change.

I thought again about last night when I'd almost sort of flirted with the bartender. I really did need someone to help me figure out my new sapphic identity.

Reid wouldn't have had any issues flirting with the bartender, I bet. She'd have all the right lines and the right looks and would know everything to say and do. I hadn't seen her in action in many years, but even when she'd been younger, she'd had game. It was probably even better now.

What if...what if she shared her knowledge with me? Let me try things out with her? Kind of like dating practice. So I wouldn't go out and fall on my face and make a total fool of myself. She'd already witnessed my most embarrassing moment. Anything else wouldn't be as bad.

She didn't even like me, so there was no chance of developing feelings.

There was nothing in it for her, though. Why on earth would she help me? She had no incentive, but it couldn't hurt to ask, right? She might be my only shot to figure this out before I made a complete fool of myself.

Reid was off from the bar on Sundays, but I knew she slept late, so I waited until the afternoon to knock on her door. Since the cupcakes hadn't worked out last time, this time I brought peaches from the farmers' market. I couldn't show up at her door with

nothing. That would be rude.

Reid opened the door with slightly narrowed eyes and glanced down at the bowl of peaches I held out to her.

“No cupcakes?” she asked, raising one dark eyebrow. She didn’t look pissed, and she hadn’t shut the door in my face, so this was already going better than the last time I’d knocked on her door.

“Those didn’t go over so well last time, so I decided to change it up,” I told her. “They’re fresh from the farmers’ market.”

She licked her bottom lip as I tried not to stare.

“Is there a reason you’re knocking on my door and bringing me peaches?” she asked.

Now or never.

“I’m a lesbian,” I said, which wasn’t in the script I’d practiced before I’d walked over. I’d planned to open up more slowly, but that wasn’t what I ended up saying. As usual. Things never went the way I planned them.

“Okay?” she asked. “What does that have to do with peaches?”

“Can I come in? There’s something I want to ask you.” And I was tired of holding the peach bowl in my sweaty hands.

“I guess?” Reid said with a shrug, moving aside to let me into her apartment.

I set the peaches down on her counter and wiped my hands on my sweatpants.

“Okay, so,” I said, taking a shaky breath. “I’m a lesbian.”

Reid nodded slowly. “Yeah, you said that already.”

“Right. Well, I had to say that first. I came out a few months ago and it’s all been kind of hard. I feel like there’s all these things that I’m missing. I don’t know how to flirt or date or anything. And I don’t know how to learn, really. I feel like this isn’t something you can just read articles about. I need to practice.” Even if reading books worked for someone else, it wouldn’t work for me because the second I got into a real situation, my anxiety would kick in and I’d forget.

I needed to learn by doing. By screwing up and getting the nerves out before I went ahead and tried for real. I needed to train.

“Uh huhhhh,” Reid said, crossing her arms and I could see the wheels turning in her head.

“You’re confident. And I know you work at Sapph, so you see all kinds of people and probably have witnessed tons of dates and flirting and you’ve seen it all. Basically, you’re an expert. And I want you to teach me. I want to learn how to date women. From you.”

For a second she was silent. And then she started to laugh. Her eyes crinkled up as she let out a rich, warm sound that made my heart thump a little bit harder in my chest.

Reid had a gorgeous laugh.

“Oh, fuck,” she said, wiping her eyes as she let out a few more chuckles. “You want to be my...sapphic padawan?”



I snorted at the Star Wars reference. I wouldn't have pegged her as a nerd, but I'd seen her bookshelf. I also remembered what movies she'd taken my sister to. She might appear to be too cool for sci-fi, but she wasn't.

“Essentially, yes. Teach me the ways of the sapphic force.” Two could play this nerd game.

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She seemed surprised that I'd picked up on her reference.

Reid looked away from me and it almost looked like she was fighting a smile.

"You can't be serious," Reid said.

"I'm very serious. That's why I brought the peaches," I said, gesturing to them.

Reid snorted and rolled her eyes to the ceiling.

"Ohhh, this is such a bad idea."

"It's not, though. I know there's nothing in it for you. But maybe...maybe you could help me out anyway? Even if I don't deserve it? I just... I have a hard time with social stuff, and it would be so nice to figure things out when there's no pressure. Please, Reid? Please?" Begging hadn't been in the plan either, but here I was.

Reid ran a hand down her face and groaned, bending over and then standing back up. She pressed her lips together and shook her head before she spoke.

"What did you have in mind?"

## Chapter Nine

Reid

Why? Why was I entertaining this ridiculous idea? This wasn't going to happen. No

way was I agreeing to this.

Except I was absolutely agreeing to this. She looked so earnest and adorable and I couldn't say no when she begged me. Sweet girls had always been my downfall. Case in point: her sister.

But there was a softness to Sophie that Kaylee hadn't had. Since Kaylee had been the older sister, she'd been more of a go-getter. More aggressive.

Sophie wasn't like that. I'd remembered that she was an anxious kid and I guess that had followed her into adulthood. That was rough. Cade had ADHD and it sometimes caused her to have anxiety about social situations. She was more outgoing than Sophie, though. I'd paid attention and noticed that she didn't have anyone over to her place that I had seen.

She was bright, though. And funny. There was just something about her that made you want to step closer. At least she had that effect on me.

Which was how I found myself listening as she laid out this outlandish plan for me to "teach" her my sapphic skills. Like I was some kind of expert. She was right that I'd seen a lot of people at Sapph. I'd heard a lot of bad lines, seen a lot of people strike out and fail. I'd seen more than a few successful seductions too.

Sophie kept talking and all I could do was stare at her face. Now that I'd been around her more, I could fully separate her from Kaylee. The similarities hadn't completely faded, but I could see her now as Sophie, and not just as an imitation of Kaylee.

"Are you sure you're okay with this? I figured since you don't really like me, it's easy to keep things very platonic. You know, mentor and mentee."

I held my hand up to stop her before she kept going.

“I don’t hate you, Sophie,” I said. Her eyes went wide. “I know things were rough when we first saw each other, but I’m working on that. You don’t deserve to be permanently tied to what your sister did.” That was the truth.

She bit her lip and nodded. The urge to reach out and pull that lip out of her mouth was strong. I clenched my hands behind my back instead.

“How is Kaylee?” I asked and my tone sounded fake in my own ears, but I was making an attempt.

Sophie gave me a look of surprise. “Do you really want to know? Or are you just trying to be polite?”

I snorted. “The second thing.”

Sophie nodded. “I figured. We don’t have to talk about her if you don’t want to. Ever. And I haven’t told her that you’re here. That we live so close to each other.”

That was surprising. I assumed she would have.

“You can tell her. I don’t care.” I knew I sounded defensive, but I didn’t care. I was allowed to be defensive about this.

She sighed. “I don’t want to get into all that.” Her eyes snapped to mine. “So. When are you free? I work part time, but I think we can figure out when we can hang out together. Do you want to do it at my place or here?”

We were doing this. I was going to teach my ex’s little sister how to pick up women. This was the plot of a very bad movie, but Sophie had begged me, and I was weak.

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“Do I get snacks if we do it at your place?” I asked.

“Absolutely. What do you want? I’ll get whatever it is. Thank you for doing this, Reid. I know you don’t have to, but I appreciate it more than you’ll ever know.”

Well, fuck. Now I wanted to give her a hug and I wasn’t a hugger. What was this woman doing to me?

“I do like cupcakes,” I said. “That was just a bad day for me.”

“Oh,” she said, smiling. “Good. Cupcakes it is. What kind?”

“Chocolate. I really like chocolate.”

“That works. You still want the peaches?”

I moved toward the bowl to stop her from taking them back.

“Yeah, I still want the peaches. I’ll bring the bowl back next time we see each other.”

She pulled her phone out and fiddled with it. Wordlessly, I put my hand out and she unlocked it and gave it to me.

I typed in my number and then gave it back to her. I’d put myself in as Jedi Master Reid to keep up with the Star Wars theme.

She let out a little giggle and then sent me a message. I put her in my phone as

Padawan Sophie.

“Yeah, just let me know when you’re free and, um, we’ll do this.” I couldn’t for the life of me remember exactly what she’d told me these lessons would entail, but I’d figure that out later.

“Sounds good,” I said, and she scurried to the door as if she wanted to escape. Friday night must still be hanging over her head. I was doing my best to act like it had never happened and I didn’t remember any part of it in too-vivid detail.

“Thanks, Reid,” she said before she left.

“You’re welcome,” I said to the closed door.

The peaches were absolutely delicious, and I ate two of them over the sink in the minutes after she left before I looked up peach cobbler recipes online. I only had a handful of the ingredients that I needed, and Sunday was normally when I shopped for groceries, so I added what I was missing to my list and headed out.

While I was going down the aisles and bopping my head to the music, a new message popped up.

Do you prefer chocolate cupcakes with chocolate frosting? Or something else?

It was from Padawan Sophie.

I hadn’t expected her to send me a message right away, but maybe it was easier for her to talk to me this way than in person.

All chocolate, all the time I told her. I liked all forms of the substance. Milk, dark, white, you name it, I loved it and would shove it in my mouth. Give it to me, right

now.

Cade used to be the one always bringing chocolate for me, but now she was living in her mansion with Eloise, so I had to go to her if I wanted the good stuff.

There had definitely been a chocolate deficit in my life, and it was a good thing that Sophie was going to try and fill it. I guess I could give her some dating advice in exchange.

The whole idea of me letting her “practice” her skills on me was strange and interesting, I had to admit. Would this practice get physical? Would it involve kissing or anything else? Lines would have to be drawn, definitely.

I was waiting in a terrible checkout line when I sent her a message.

Have you ever kissed a woman? I sent it before I could ask myself if that was an appropriate question. If I was going to teach her, I at least had to know what she was working with. Something told me we were starting from zero. There was an innocence to Sophie that was both annoying and charming. Annoying in how charming it was.

Those three little dots flashed across my phone and then disappeared. Flashed and disappeared. Sophie didn’t know how to respond to what I’d said.

It’s okay if you haven’t. I just wanted to know what your experience level was. As your teacher.

The checkout line finally moved, and I didn’t get to read her answer until I was pushing my cart through the parking lot to my car.

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No. I haven't. I've kissed guys, though. I feel like that doesn't count because I hated it.

Aw. Poor Sophie. That sucked.

I'm sorry about that. Don't worry. We'll get you some good kisses.

I shouldn't be promising her anything. I wasn't some kind of dating expert. I definitely wasn't an expert on women by any means either.

I don't even know if I'm ready for that. I have to be honest with you Reid, I'm scared. All of this terrifies me.

Yeah, I could tell. She was like a baby deer abandoned in the woods, stumbling around with shaky legs and wide eyes.

It's going to be okay. I promise. Fuck, I did not need to be making any more promises.

Scoffing at myself, I threw my phone on the passenger seat and loaded my groceries into the car.

This was going to be a complete disaster.

## Chapter Ten

Sophie



I didn't want to bug her, but I also didn't want her to forget or get too busy. And part of me really wanted to get started. So much of my anxiety was in the time leading up to an event or situation. Once I got there or whatever it was started, I was absolutely fine. Most of what I had imagined never came to pass. There was a lesson in there somewhere, but I doubt I would ever learn it.

Her question about kissing came totally out of the blue. When I'd laid out my plans to her, I had specifically mentioned that I didn't think we should do anything physical, at least at first. She could just give me some tips or something.

But then she asked if I'd kissed a woman and I had to be honest and tell her I hadn't. My kissing experience was all with guys and it had been anywhere from awful to mediocre. In fact, I'd never had a really good kiss. I always told myself that people were making too much out of it. That they couldn't possibly enjoy it as much as everyone said.

It was going to be so disappointing if I kissed a woman and it wasn't any better. Just one of the reasons I wanted to put it off as long as possible. I needed to be able to talk to a woman first.

Are you busy on Tuesday evening? I asked her. I was pretty sure she wasn't at the bar on Tuesday nights. And I got out of work in the afternoon on Tuesdays, so I had the rest of the night free.

Yeah, I can be free, miss padawan.

Every time she called me that, it made me laugh. It was so dorky but cute at the same time.

Great. I'll have the cupcakes ready for you. I'd made sure I had all the ingredients and I was going to spend Tuesday afternoon making them and frosting them to

perfection. I'd also got some cute galaxy sprinkles to use on them to keep with the space theme. I hoped she liked them.

I hadn't informed Larison of this new plan, so I told her on Monday while I was waiting for the cupcakes to bake and she was trying to do homework, clean the house, and take care of Juni. It was a challenge talking to her, but it was always worth it.

"Wait, hold on," she said when I explained my new arrangement with Reid. "Let me get this figured out. You asked your sister's ex-girlfriend to teach you how to date? Where the hell did you get that idea?"

"That's a grown-up word!" Juniper yelled.

"Exactly. And I'm a grown up. And we're at home, so I can say it," Larison said to Juniper.

"Oh," Juni said before scampering away again.

We both laughed.

"I don't know where the idea came from. It seemed like a good idea. It might blow up in my face. I don't know yet. She'll be here in an hour." The oven timer went off and I pulled the cupcakes out after checking to make sure that they were fully baked. They'd have to cool before I frosted them using my fancy piping tips and adding the sprinkles. Not only were they chocolate, they also had chocolate chips inside. If she wanted chocolate, she was going to get it and then some.

"This sounds like a terrible idea, but I don't want to discourage you. Just...promise me that if things get weird, that you'll stop. Don't do that thing you do when you try to be too nice to someone and ignore your own discomfort so you don't have to have a confrontation. And I want a full rundown after of how it went."

I rolled my eyes at her. “I’m not that bad. If I get uncomfortable, I’ll speak up. This was my idea in the first place.”

“I love you. But not all your ideas are good ones,” she said.

I gasped and then glared at her. “If I was there, I’d smack you.”

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“We don’t hit our friends,” Larison said with a smug look. “Hitting isn’t respectful.”

“Are you gentle parenting me right now?”

Larison propped her phone up against something. “Is it working?”

I kept glaring at her. “No.”

She blew out a noisy breath. “Yeah, it doesn’t work on my daughter either.”

The two of us laughed again.

Reid knocked on my door at the exact right time. The cupcakes were frosted and sprinkled and ready. I also made sure I had a variety of fun drinks on hand as well. My place was clean and inviting.

Stomach flipping, I opened the door and smiled at Reid. She held up two glasses filled with pink liquid.

“I made drinks,” she said. “Non-alcoholic.” She also had the bowl I’d given her with the peaches under her arm.

Oh. I hadn’t thought she’d bring anything. She didn’t have to.

“Thanks,” I said, letting her in and closing the door.

She set the glasses and bowl down and went right for the cupcakes.

“Aw, they’re cute,” she said, picking one up and immediately taking a bite.

“I hoped you’d like them,” I said as she rolled her eyes back in her head and let out a little moan as she chewed.

“Ohhh, these are good,” she said, her mouth full with her second bite.

I was glad she enjoyed them.

“Thanks,” I said, picking up one of the drinks and sipping it. I had no idea what was in it, but it was tropical and delicious. It was a challenge not to gulp it down immediately.

“You might have to make another one of these for me,” I said, taking another sip.

Reid shoved the rest of the cupcake in her mouth, getting chocolate all over her lips. I laughed and handed her a napkin.

She wiped the worst of it, but still had a lot left, and she’d smudged some of the frosting onto her chin.

“You’re worse than my goddaughter,” I said, grabbing another napkin. “May I?”

Reid’s brown eyes narrowed a fraction. They were almost golden in this light.

“I guess,” she said, leaning a little bit closer. Before I could wipe her face off, I went to the sink and dampened the napkin before approaching her and cleaning off the frosting.

“There,” I said, giving her chin one last swipe. Just making sure I got all of it.

Our faces were close, and her eyes flicked down to my mouth before she took a step backwards.

“Thanks,” she said, her voice tight before she picked up another cupcake and went to sit on the couch. “So. Are we doing this?”

“Um, yeah,” I said, taking the drinks over.

We were doing this.

## Chapter Eleven

Reid

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At least fifteen times today I'd opened up a message to tell Sophie that I wasn't coming over. That I couldn't do this little sapphic mentor thing with her.

And then I'd found myself mixing some fruity drinks and pounding my elbow on her door at exactly the time I'd told her I'd be there. I couldn't really explain why I had walked into her apartment and was going along with this. Curiosity?

I guess?

Sophie was obviously stressed out about this, shifting on the couch and taking constant little sips of her drink and fiddling with things.

"How about we start with conversation?" I wasn't going to tell her this, but I might have looked up a few things online so if she didn't have a full plan for this, I had something to say. A direction to go in.

Sophie nodded and set her drink down. "Okay."

"Do you want me to go for it?" I asked.

"Yeah."

She really needed to chill out. I wanted to put my hands on her shoulders and tell her to take at least ten deep breaths. But that would require me to touch her and I wasn't going to do that.

"Before we do that, how about we just kind of...shake it out." I raised my hands and

shook my hands and wiggled my shoulders, feeling like a fool. I knew I looked like one, but she followed my lead and did the same.

“Listen, you’re going to be fine. You’re not being graded on this. If you strike out, then that just means it wasn’t the right person for you. People will be drawn to you if you’re secure in yourself.” There was a difference between knowing who you were and putting up a confident front to hide your insecurities.

Sophie nodded and then I realized she had a notebook. She was taking notes. That was so damn cute.

Her handwriting was a messy scrawl, but that was cute too.

“Let’s pretend we’re at a bar and you see me, and you want to approach me.” I picked up my drink and sipped it. “What would you say?”

Sophie opened her mouth and then closed it. “Can’t I just...wait for someone to approach me? Do I have to do all the work?”

I snorted. “I mean, you don’t have to always be the one going up to people, but I think it’s a good place to start. Even if you don’t use it, you’ll still know that you could.”

She let out a long breath. “Okay. That makes sense.”

Sophie stood up and walked a few steps away and then came back.

“Hi, um, is that drink good?” She stopped and looked down at me and shrugged.

I decided to go along with it. “It is. I’d definitely recommend it. Are you here with someone or are you flying solo?”



“Oh, um, I’m here by myself.”

I put my hand out. “I’m Reid. Would you like to sit down? I’d be happy to order you one.”

Sophie sat and her eyes were intent on my face.

“Yeah, that sounds good,” she breathed.

“And scene,” I said, slashing my hand between us. “That wasn’t a bad first try.” It hadn’t been. I’d expected much worse.

“I just...I feel like I tell myself what I’m going to say ahead of time and then I see someone, and I forget everything.” She clutched her hands in her lap. “I’m kind of a disaster.”

“You’re not a disaster, Sophie. You’re just a late bloomer. I know that sounds like an insult, but it’s not. You’re just figuring things out later than some people do. There’s no shame in that. Some people are so scared of stepping out of their comfort zone that they never even try. You’re trying.”

Her cheeks went pink instead of red and she bit back a smile.

“Thanks,” she said.

“Do you want to try again? Or we could just talk?”

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“No, I want to give it another shot.”

So we did. The next time she was a little more confident, still a little awkward, but it worked for her. So many people would find her charming and would want to buy her a drink or take her out and make her laugh and blush.

After a few more tries, including when she attempted a terrible pickup line, she had a cupcake and asked me what was in the drink that I’d made. I told her and she wrote down the recipe to keep in her phone.

“You know, I don’t really date,” I told her after I’d had my third cupcake. I couldn’t stop eating them. They were so rich and the frosting was absolutely fluffy and perfect.

“Is there a reason for that?” she asked as she leaned back on the couch, facing me.

I pressed my lips together. I guess we were talking about this. It was kind of inevitable.

“Yup. Bad breakup.”

She cringed. “Sorry.”

I waved her off and licked some frosting off my finger. “Not your fault. I mean I’ve gone out with people since then, I haven’t been completely on my own, but I don’t feel the need to get into another serious relationship. I’m good by myself.”

I'd said those words who knew how many times to Cade and Hunter. They were even worse now that they were deliriously happy.

"Two of my best friends are both in love and the pressure for me to pair up just like them is intense," I admitted. I hadn't told anyone that. At least I had Jo, but she was so busy with school that she rarely had time for me either.

Sophie frowned. "I'm sorry. That must be hard. And I'm guessing that your friendships have changed now that they're in committed relationships." That was true.

"I'm happy for them. I really am. I feel like an asshole for missing them." I hadn't told them that either.

"I know what you mean. It's not the same, but my best friend Larison moved away for school and I know it was for the best for her and her daughter, but it still sucks. A lot." She frowned and looked at her empty glass.

"Want me to make another drink?" I asked, mostly to extricate myself from the uncomfortable turn this conversation had taken.

"Sure. Use whatever you want," she said, getting up and following me into the kitchen.

"Let's see what we're working with." I opened the fridge and she had lots of things, including grenadine. Excellent.

I paired some lime seltzer water with some pineapple juice and some grenadine. It wasn't the best thing I could do on the fly, but it would work.

"You're really good at that," Sophie said.

“Thank you. You’d think that after mixing drinks all we I’d want to turn it off, but my brain just kind of does it now without me knowing what’s happening.”

We had our second rounds of drinks in the kitchen and Sophie was biting her lip again.

“Something you wanna say?” I asked.

“Okay, but you can’t be mad.”

I raised my eyebrows. “I’m going to need more information before I decide if I’m going to be mad or not.”

I had no idea what the hell she was going to say. It could be anything from she stole the hair from my hairbrush and made a doll out of it to she accidentally grabbed a piece of my mail and opened it.

“So, uh, when I was waiting for Tyler, I took a look at your bookshelves and then I may, I mean, I did, take pictures of your shelves so I could see what books we had in common and maybe add some books to my TBR. I’m sorry if that’s weird.” She’d stepped back from me and cringed, as if she was bracing for impact.

“I was expecting something way worse. That’s not that bad. I mean, I would have let you, if you’d asked.” It wasn’t an outrageous request. “But now I want to look at your bookshelves.”

Sophie followed me over to the wall where she had three shelves shoved together. They were stuffed with books and a few other knickknacks, including some pictures of her. One of her and Kaylee posing together when they were younger made me gut clench. I quickly looked away. Things like that were going to happen if and when I hung out with Sophie. They were inevitable and I was going to have to deal with it.

Books. Back to the books.

Doing a quick scan, we did have a lot of books in common. A shocking amount.

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“I loved this one,” I said, pulling one thick volume off the shelf.

“Mmm, me too,” she said. “I was into sapphic romance for a while before I came out. In fact, those books are kind of why I figured things out.”

I turned around to face her. “Really?”

She nodded. “Yeah. I got absolutely sucked into this one series and it was eating up my life and I’d never been captivated by characters that way before. They were all I thought about. And I was also reading a lot of fanfic too. I’d always read slash and avoided anything with a whiff of sapphic in it and then I watched this show and decided to go for it, and I was hooked. It’s a miracle I got through the semester with good grades, honestly. I’d been missing Larison and Juniper so much that I needed something comforting and I guess that was what I turned to and one night I was thinking about my favorite fanfic and then I was crying. I don’t know. It all hit me at once.” She leaned against the bookshelf as if she was tired.

“That sounds rough,” I told her.

She laughed. “It was. It was really rough. I ended up calling Larison in the middle of the night and she talked me through it. She’s bi, so she got it.”

I nodded. “I’m glad she was there for you.”

Her smile was small, but it was there. “Me too. She’s the best friend I could ever ask for.”

Sophie hadn't called her sister. I didn't know if I should read anything into that or not. I decided not to think about it.

"So the books and the fanfic made you gay, huh?" I said, and that earned me a real smile that made my skin feel too tight and a little hot. Like I'd been out in the sun.

"Pretty much. What about you?"

"Uh, same? Kind of? I saw a movie and even though the two women didn't end up together, I couldn't stop thinking that they should have and that kind of led to a bunch of other things and I came out in high school." Just before I'd started going out with Kaylee. Not only was she my most intense relationship, she'd been my first. First everything.

"You know, I really think we should start going door-to-door with sapphic books and try and convert people to lesbianism," she said, her eyes lit up.

I threw my head back and laughed. "Have you heard of our lady and savior Sappho?"

We both lost it at that, and I discovered something terrible. I liked her. I enjoyed spending time with Sophie. Being with her wasn't awful.

It would've been so much easier if I could hate her.

## Chapter Twelve

Sophie

Even though the "lesson" had pretty much ended, Reid was still here. I wondered if I should ask her if she wanted something to eat or watch something, but I didn't want to make her feel like she had to.

Before I could figure out what I should do, she stepped away from my bookshelves. I'd brought her over here to tell her about the books I liked and see if she could give me some specific recommendations, but I'd gotten completely sidetracked. As usual. My plans always went awry.

"I should probably get going. I need to have an actual dinner and not more cupcakes." She still snagged another cupcake and the empty glasses she'd brought over that I'd rinsed out in the sink.

"Thanks for agreeing to do this. Maybe next time you could help me with like, dressing? Maybe? Or like, giving the signal."

"The signal?" she asked, licking the cupcake in her hand. At the appearance of her tongue, I completely forgot what I'd just asked her and had to backtrack.

"Yeah, the signal you give when you're in public to let people know you're sapphic and that you know they're sapphic too."

"Ohhh, that signal. I got you. Well, it's kind of look and kind of an upnod sometimes? It's also kind of a vibe. You really should just come to Sapph some night and observe." That sounded like a good idea but thinking about it made me start to sweat.

"Maybe," I said.

"You're gonna have to dive in the deep end sometime, Soph," she said, and my ears caught on the nickname. She hadn't called me that before.

"I know. But I think I need to go a little bit slower, if that's okay?" I hoped she didn't think I was being a baby. I knew I was, but that was the thing with anxiety. It made mountains out of mole hills every day. Made monsters appear under your bed.



Reid studied me for a second and then nodded once. “Okay. We’ll have another session here, young padawan. It’s really too bad that these lessons don’t involve lightsabers because that would give me an excuse to spend money on one and I haven’t been able to justify it.”

I giggled. “You don’t need my permission to buy a lightsaber, Reid. Go ahead and buy a lightsaber if you want.”

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She smiled and it made her face light up. “Maybe I will. I’ll find some way to write it off on my taxes.”

Both of us laughed again as she lingered by the door.

“Seriously, though, thank you. I didn’t have anyone else to ask for help and you’ve already done me a huge favor.”

“Don’t worry about it. It’s my responsibility to teach the younger sapphics about our cultural practices.” She was ridiculous sometimes, but I liked it. Reid was different than I expected, but in good ways.

“I’m so glad I have you to lead me, oh wise one.”

She snorted. “Have a good night, Sophie.”

“You too, Reid.”

I was at work in the school library the next day reading a book when Reid sent me a message. I knew she worked Wednesday nights, but I didn’t think she went in until five or six.

I meant to ask you more about fanfic last night, so I don’t know if you’ve seen these yet, but here are some of my favorites that are super sapphic. There was a list of ten links, and I wasted no time in looking through them. Two I had already read, three I had flagged to read later, and most of the others were new to me. A few were from fandoms that I didn’t follow, so I’d have to do a little bit of homework first to get into

them. That meant I had three new shows I needed to watch immediately, which would take up a good amount of time. Thank you, Reid.

That's quite a list and now I know what I'm doing for the next few weeks. These are my absolute favorites that changed my life and made me cry and ripped my heart out of my chest. You've been warned. I almost told her to make sure she looked up the tags, but Reid knew what she was doing. This woman wasn't new to fanfic, I could tell.

Ohhh, thanks. These look great. I've read two of them and agree that I was emotionally destroyed for at least a week. I decided to send you some of the fluffier ones but once I know you better I'll send you the really twisted stuff.

I burst out laughing and a few people stared at me as I wished I could crawl under the desk and disappear.

It wasn't a shocker that Reid would be willing to read some of the wilder fanfic. She and I both had some unusual books on our shelves in common. I had no shame about what I read and enjoyed, which didn't square with my anxiety, but if no one else knew what I was reading, then why did I care? No one could judge me if they didn't know. There was a reason that Larison had promised to delete my fanfic account if anything ever happened to me. My parents couldn't know about my favorite tags and tropes.

I would bet that Reid had a similar deal with her friends too.

Someone came up to the desk to check out a book and I scanned it and went back to sending messages with Reid.

She really opened up once you got her talking about fanfic, I discovered, and she had strong opinions.

I wished we were talking in person, but she had to head off to work before my shift ended and I headed home, so we were going to miss each other.

If you start reading, send me updates and reactions She sent.

Don't worry, I will I responded.

Talking with Reid was so nice. Since Larison was gone, I hadn't really made any new friends, but I guess I could count Reid as a friend now? Maybe? She was a neighbor at the very least.

I got home from work and made myself a quick dinner before opening one of the fanfics that Reid had sent me on my ereader. It was a fluffier slice-of-life kind of story, which was perfect for my mood. Some of the others she'd sent were a little bit sexier, but I'd get to those ones later.

An hour later, I got up to get some water and a cupcake, not wanting to set my ereader down and having some issues with not wanting to stop reading.

This fanfic was so cute I wanted to cry. The author had also commissioned some fanart that was in between the chapters that was so gorgeous I thought about seeing if I could buy prints or something from the artist. I only stopped to go find them online and follow their social accounts so I could go back later.

Before I knew it, I was barely keeping my eyes open and if I didn't get off the couch, I was not going to make it to my bed.

I unclenched my hand from my tablet and set it down, stretching out my fingers. I really needed to get one of those pillow holders or a stand or something so I wasn't stuck holding it for hours on end.

Rubbing my gritty eyes, I stumbled to the bathroom to wash my face and brush my teeth and put my pajamas on before I fell into bed and let myself read a little bit more. I added a pillow holder for my ereader to my cart before I completely passed out.

## Chapter Thirteen

Reid

Sending Sophie some of my favorite fanfics was kind of like rolling on my back and exposing my underbelly to a predator. Even my closest friends didn't know my true relationship with fanfic because I didn't want them to. It was too personal. Too sensitive. They would never mock me or make fun of it, but I couldn't take the chance.

It was different with Sophie. She was doing something so vulnerable by asking me for help and it was almost a way to pay her back. To share something together. Plus, we had really similar taste in books, so it would follow that our fanfic tastes would be similar too. And since she'd just started discovering sapphic fanfic? It was my duty to show her the best the internet had to offer. I couldn't let her just stumble around reading mediocre fanfic if I had already vetted and could tell her about the good ones.

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Her list was interesting and there were a few hidden gems on it that I didn't know about, which was surprising, given how much time I spent on the main fanfic site looking for something new to read or asking other people online for recs.

For a half a second, I'd thought about sending her one of my fics, but then I'd changed my mind. What if she read it and hated it? Her opinion wouldn't destroy me, but it would still hurt if she read something I'd poured myself into and she thought it was awful. There was only so much vulnerability I could take and that was going too far.

There was a chance that she'd run into it on her own, depending on her fandoms. The fics she'd sent me weren't in any of my fandoms, thankfully. She might run across it, though. I'd written for some very popular fandoms, but I was a small fish in a big pond, so I wasn't one of the top authors, but I'd also written for smaller fandoms too.

More than a few readers had asked if I would ever pursue a career as an author and I'd never taken it seriously. Professional authors weren't people like me. They went to college and got degrees and took their writing seriously. Yes, I took my fanfiction seriously, but only because I didn't have to. If I made it a job? That would make me hate it. Make me resent it. Would make me not want to do it anymore.

It was like dance that way. When I'd just been taking dance classes as a kid for fun, it had been my favorite thing in the entire world. You couldn't get me out of the studio. And then my mom had pushed me into more advanced classes and had taken me on auditions and before I knew it, I was in college and dreading waking up every day and standing at the barre for hours. I'd even stopped smiling. Couldn't remember the last time I'd laughed.

When I went back to my hometown during the holidays, people would try to be nice to me, but I could see the horror on their faces when they saw me. Pale skin, hollow cheeks, no energy. I'd been a ghost. Of course my mom had said I looked wonderful and made sure that I was sticking to my diet when the truth was that I'd barely been eating enough to get through my classes.

Things had come to a head when one of my teachers had pulled me aside and asked me if I was okay. I'd broken down and cried for three hours on the floor of the studio. She'd taken me out to a diner and forced me to eat a full breakfast plate while she listened to me tell her how miserable I was. How I had come to hate dance. How I didn't want to do it anymore, but I didn't know how to stop. I was less than two years away from a dance degree. So close.

My teacher had given me some hard questions to think about and that night I had officially withdrawn from school.

That was nearly six years ago, and I had no regrets except wishing I had done it sooner. But maybe I wouldn't have reached my breaking point if I hadn't gone to school for dance. If I'd quit before I was truly ready, I might have always wondered if I should have followed through. Now I knew that dance was not my future. At least not as a professional performer.

For years I hadn't had any fun, so now I tried to do as many things that brought me joy as I liked. Hiking, reading, writing fanfic, spending time with my friends, resting. Just letting myself take naps and be lazy was a huge revelation. The idea that I could just be and didn't have to be grinding and hustling and pushing and striving all the time. There were millions of people on the planet who were just regular humans with no dreams of fame or the spotlight. Who just went to work and came home and had hobbies and enjoyed themselves.

I didn't want to give up everything to be on the stage. For me, it wasn't worth it.

I still had no idea what I was going to do with my life, but I was much better at being okay with that. The first few months after I'd quit school had been rough, not to mention the epic fights I'd had with my mother.

She hadn't attempted to contact me in three months, which was the longest time I'd been able to breathe. I hoped it would continue, but she had a way of popping up just when I was especially vulnerable.

Are you free around noon tomorrow? I'll make you lunch. Sophie's message couldn't have come at a better time. I had about an hour until I needed to leave for my shift at Sapph and I didn't need to spend it obsessing and worrying about the past. Sophie was a welcome distraction.

Deal. Your place?

Yup.

Now I had something to look forward to before work tomorrow. I'd have to get up a little earlier than I normally would, but that was okay. I'd just have lunch for breakfast.

Do you have any requests? I was just going to make some sandwiches or a salad or something. Sophie asked.

Whatever you make is fine. I'm not picky. When it came to free food, I'd take what I could get without complaining. As long as she didn't feed me chicken salad with raisins in it, but I didn't think Sophie would do that.

You got it! She responded. Even her messages were bright and cheerful. Sophie really was a little ray of sunshine when she wasn't a ball of anxiety.



Biting back a smile, I made myself some dinner and puttered around until it was time to go to Sapph. It wasn't going to be a bad night because Hunter and Stace said they'd come by. As much as I complained about my friends showing up when I was working, I did actually love it. Made the time go faster.

Tonight was Thirsty Thursday and there were a number of events going on at the bar. We had trivia nights, karaoke (which I tried not to be on the schedule for), theme nights, and anything else our owners could dream up to get people in the door and buying drinks.

Being at Sapph was sometimes no different than performing on a stage. I just didn't have to wear pointe shoes while I bartended, which was a plus.

There was a bachelorette party in full costume waiting outside for the doors to open as I sliced limes and I tried not to groan when they cheered and walked in.

"It's gonna be one of those nights," my coworker Maddie said.

"That's every night," I said, bumping my hip against hers before we headed to the customers clamoring at the bar for drinks.

"Make me your most complicated drink," a voice yelled at me a few hours later. One of these days I was going to get my hearing tested and find out that working here had damaged it. The music was always too loud, but there was nothing I could do about it.

I turned and found Hunter leaning over the bar with Stace standing next to her and grinning.

"Shut the fuck up," I told her, but I couldn't help but smile. "I'll get you anything you want as long as it's not a pain in the ass to make."

Stace asked for whatever beer was on tap and Hunter got one of our house mixed drinks. They opened a tab and I told them that if they hung out for another ten minutes, I could take a break and hang with them for a few.

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They waved and went to find a quieter corner so they could drink and stare into each other's eyes. They were truly disgusting in the cutest way.

I liked Stace for Hunter; I really did. She was boisterous in a fun way, and she got Hunter out of her rich-girl country club prissy bubble. Hunter needed to get shaken up a bit. She also needed to do something about her toxic relationship with her parents, and Stace had helped her there too.

Stace's family was like the stock image family in the picture frames that they sold at Target. When Hunter first told me what they were like, I didn't really believe her until I experienced the family for myself. Sure, I knew there were people with happy families, but I'd never really seen one quite like the Stacey/Hamilton blended brood.

It had made me a little nauseated and angry and jealous at the same time, but I'd kept that to myself.

Not everyone got dealt a good hand when it came to families and I'd gotten nothing but bad luck from my dad being a no-show to my mom being controlling and narcissistic.

It didn't matter now. I was an adult and I was my own family and I had my friends. I didn't need anyone else.

I slid into a seat next to Hunter on my break and sucked down a glass of water.

"You good?" she asked.

“Yeah,” I said. “I am.” It really wasn’t that terrible tonight. I was just tired and ready to go home, but I still had another few hours and then cash out and cleanup and all that.

“We had multiple motives in coming tonight,” Stace said, her voice booming. She leaned her elbows on the table and her biceps bulged. Stace had to stay in shape for her job as a firefighter, but it shocked me every time I saw her at just how ripped she was. Hunter stared at her girlfriend, practically drooling.

“Uh huhhhh,” I said, wondering where this was going.

“My parents are having a big party at their house in three weeks. Kind of a summer, just because we want to kind of thing. Really lowkey. Cade and Eloise are going to come, and we wanted to know if you would.”

It sounded like exactly the kind of thing I wouldn’t normally want to go to. I’d have to talk to people I didn’t know and pretend to care about them and socialize. Not my most favorite thing after all my work hours.

But I knew that Stace’s parents put on a good party. The food would be great and as long as I had at least Cade and Eloise to hang around with, I’d probably be okay. I’d just have to make sure I drove myself so I could leave whenever I wanted.

“Yeah, okay. When is it?” The party was on a Sunday afternoon, so it wouldn’t conflict with my work schedule.

“We’re going to invite Jo too,” Hunter said. That would make it even better if she could come. I’d just attach myself to Jo and I’d be fine.

“I’ll be there. Probably,” I said, and Hunter glared at me. Tonight, her hair was twisted and wrapped into some complicated updo that was probably a lot easier to do

than it looked and her dress was blue and sparkling under the lights. She truly looked like a modern princess and I bet Stace had lost her mind when she saw her. People always stared at Hunter because she was so gorgeous. It was kind of a relief to let her take the attention so I could lurk in the back and be a grump.

I had to go back to work, but just as I was ready to say goodnight to Hunter and Stace, my phone buzzed.

I know I need to go to bed, but I can't stop. HELP The message was from Sophie and there was a screenshot of the fanfic website.

I zoomed in and read the title of the fanfic. Shit, I should have warned her that one was the kind you had to cancel everything for three days and read in one sleep-deprived session. That was exactly what I'd done, and it had wrecked me in the best way.

It was one of those fics that seemed sweet and light on the outside, but all of that was window dressing for one of the most emotionally devastating relationship arcs that I'd ever read. It was brilliant in its subtlety.

I'd say I'm sorry, but I also suffered. So I'm just passing on the suffering, like a good friend.

I didn't even think about what I'd said until a while later, when I got a few seconds to check my phone.

A friend, huh. Is that what I am? Shit. I hadn't meant to call her a friend, but I guess she was? I mean, she was literally in my phone as my padawan so was referring to her as my friend out of line? Not really.

It wasn't a big deal.

I don't share my favorite fanfics with just anybody, Sophie I responded, which was true, but she didn't know just how much I'd revealed of myself by sharing those with her.

## Chapter Fourteen

Sophie

I couldn't stay up all night reading this fanfic and waiting for her to come home so I could yell at her about it, but I saved a document with my reactions that I could share with her during normal hours.

What was I going to do, wait outside her door and attack her the moment she came home from her exhausting job to yammer about fanfic? No. I definitely wouldn't be her friend for very long if I did that.

So I kept all of it to myself and went to bed at a somewhat reasonable hour.

My alarm blared too soon the next day and I groaned as I slapped at my phone to shut it off. Reid was coming over for lunch and I had to get my shit together and make something. I still had a few things from the farmers' market that I thought I could toss in a salad with some homemade dressing, but I needed something else. There was some thawed chicken in the fridge that I could throw on top of the salad, but it wasn't very exciting. It would have to do, since I didn't have anything else.

Oh well. I'd make it work.

I mixed up a quick marinade and let the chicken sit in that before tossing the strips in a pan and grilling them. I chopped and assembled the salad and set it in the fridge until we were ready. Since I was doing lunch, I hadn't made cupcakes, but I did have some cookies in the pantry that I hoped would be good enough. They were chocolate with peanut butter frosting.

Reid knocked on my door at the right time again and I opened the door to find her holding a pitcher this time.

"Thirsty?"

"Yeah, come in." I smiled and ignored the little flutters that erupted in my stomach when she walked inside and closed the door.

Reid yawned and set the pitcher down on the counter.

“Sorry. Worked late last night.”

“I know,” I said, and then wanted to bite my tongue. “I mean, I was aware that you worked nights. Is that hard?”

She shrugged. “It’s a job and I don’t completely hate it. Pay is good and I work four nights a week.”

Reid went to my cabinets and searched for some glasses. I liked that she was comfortable enough in my apartment to grab something.

I got the salad out of the fridge along with some plates.

“Ohhh, you have the bowl plates,” she said as I set everything out on the counter.

“Yeah, I love them,” I said as we filled out plates and added dressing and then carried everything to the couch. There was room enough for a table and chairs in my apartment, but I hadn’t gotten one. I’d rather spend my money on books.

Reid yawned again, her jaw cracking.

“Do you want some coffee or something?”

“No, the iced tea should do it,” she said. “It’s half and half.”

That was one of my favorites.

Reid poured me a glass and gulped one down before filing the glass again.

“How was work?” I had a bite of my salad and it was good, which was a relief.



She had a bite of salad and nodded in appreciation. “It was fine. Hunter and Stace showed up.”

I had yet to meet any of her friends, but she talked about them all the time.

“Stace’s parents are having this party and they invited me.” She made a face. “I don’t necessarily want to go, but they really want me to, and Cade and Eloise will be there so I don’t really have a good reason not to go.”

The salad must be good because she kept shoving forkfuls of it into her mouth.

“When is it?”

“Not for three weeks.”

I nodded and had a bite of chicken. “How about I go with you? Then, if you want to leave, you can blame it on me. I’m your get out of party free card.”

Reid set her fork down and raised both eyebrows. “You want to come with me? To my friend’s girlfriend’s parent’s party?”

“Well, yeah. I mean, sure.” Shit. I shouldn’t have said anything. This was one of those situations where I’d spoken before I thought about my words. Too much. It had been too much.

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“Oh,” she said. “I mean, you don’t have to. But I guess it would be fine if you did. Stace would be happy. It is a very ‘the more, the merrier’ kind of thing.”

“I don’t have to go.” I was backtracking now and wishing my face wasn’t so damn red.

“No, actually that works. I won’t feel like a fourth wheel and I’m pretty sure Jo is going to say that she can’t come anyway. But if she does, you can meet her too.”

Her friend Jo was also a grad student and I was looking forward to meeting her so we could swap academic war stories.

“If you’re sure...”

Reid nodded. “Hell yeah, you should come. You can meet my friends and everything. The food will be good and Stace’s family is beyond nice.”

That didn’t sound too bad. I was surprised at myself for so readily agreeing to go into a situation where there would be so many unknowns. Right now, it was okay because it was in the future. A hypothetical. The closer the party got, though, my anxiety would seize its moment and force me to imagine every single worst-case scenario as if all of them were inevitable.

“You okay over there?” Reid leaned closer, staring at my face. She must have seen my spike in anxiety. Crap. I was so bad at hiding my emotions.

“Yeah. I’m good.” I nodded and swallowed before having some more of the half and

half.

“You don’t have to come. If you decide you need to bail at the last minute, I’m good. Okay?”

“I know,” I said. “I’m not... You don’t need to baby me.”

Why was my brain so embarrassing?

“I’m not babying you, Soph. I don’t want you to do something if it’s going to make you miserable. I like it when you’re happy.”

Oh. Why did her saying that make me feel like I was going to cry?

“Uh, thank you?”

A beat of silence passed between us and Reid abruptly cleared her throat and then smiled at me. “Tell me how far you got in the fanfic. I’ve read it like three times.”

The subject change was more than welcome. I tried not to gush too much as I pulled up the notes I’d taken.

Reid didn’t seem to mind as I rambled on and on with increasing enthusiasm. I knew I was taking things too far, but I couldn’t stop. Once I got started, it was hard to reel it in. I usually had to trust someone to let them see this side of me. Without filters. Without holding back.

Reid listened and laughed, and she watched me with a somewhat dazed look on her face, but she didn’t tell me to stop. Or be quieter. Or look away and then make an excuse to leave. She let me ramble until I’d gotten it all out.

When I finally finished, Reid just smiled and then laughed.

“I’m glad you liked it.”

My stomach curdled in the way it did when I prepared myself for someone to reject me, but she didn’t. Instead she got out her phone and started searching for more fics to send me.

A little bit of tension left my body as we talked more, and I completely forgot about the reason she’d come over until she brought it up.

“Let’s say you’ve approached someone and you’re sitting together to talk. You’ve done the hardest part, which is getting her attention. What do you say next?”

There was my anxiety again. Right on time.

“Have you, um, been here before?” I asked, my voice tentative.

“No, this is my first time to Sapph. How about you?” She leaned toward me and for a moment I didn’t know what to say.

“I have a friend who works here so I’ve been once before. Sometimes she gives me free drinks.” I had no idea where that had come from, but I was going with it. Reid smirked.

“She sounds like a good friend to have. Is she hot?” Her question took me off guard.

“She’s gorgeous. Has these incredible brown eyes and she doesn’t smile a lot, but when she does? You know you’re seeing something special.”

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The flirty look on Reid's face faded and she went a little pale.

She stared at me as if she'd never seen me before.

Tilting her head to the side a fraction, she kept looking at me. "Is that how you see me?"

We weren't pretending to be on a date anymore.

"It's all true, Reid. You have gorgeous eyes and an amazing smile."

Then she did something completely unexpected. She blushed.

Reid Hayward blushed.

Her face didn't go as violently red as mine did. Instead, her cheeks took on a soft pink color and she ducked her head and I was hit with an intense desire to kiss her. I couldn't stop looking at her mouth as I nibbled on my own bottom lip.

"You can't say things like that, Sophie," she finally said.

"Why not?" I asked.

She looked up at me and cleared her throat before she leaned back.

"I mean, you can say things like that to a woman and I have no doubt you'll get her asking for a second date." We were back to pretending again.

I tried not to be disappointed.

The rest of my lesson with Reid was fine, but she had pulled back and wouldn't meet my eyes again.

"Do you want to come to Sapph? I don't really want to go there when I'm not working, but I think I could suck it up." She made a face and I could tell it wasn't something she wanted to do, and I couldn't blame her at all.

"No, I'm a big girl. I might just go and see the lay of the land. Maybe... Maybe you could help me pick out what I might wear? In order to send signals that I'm available."

Reid snorted. "Yeah, I can do that." We had talked about style a little bit and she'd given me a rundown of celebrities and explained butch, soft butch, femme, high femme, and all the other varieties in between.

"A lot of people get stuck on labels and that works for some people, but I prefer a little more flexibility, you know? I feel more like a lazebian. Like, my style is as chill and whatever as possible. Not super femme, not super masc, just kind of in between and comfortable, you know?"

That made sense. Most of the time I saw her she was just wearing distressed jeans and a T-shirt that had seen better days. She looked good, though. It was a look that worked for her.

When I'd first come out, I'd kind of panicked about my wardrobe for at least a week. I'd wondered if I'd have to give up some of my favorite things. Then Larison had talked with me and told me I didn't need to do any of that, and I calmed down.

"Do you have time for that?" I asked. She'd been here a lot longer than I thought she

would be.

“Yeah, I’ve got enough time. Show me what you got.” I’d put out the cookies and she’d eaten most of them.

“Okay,” I said and went to my bedroom. I pulled out a cute skirt and a top that went together. It was more of a casual look, but it was one of my favorites. Mostly because the skirt was super twirly and had shorts underneath so I didn’t have to worry about flashing my underwear.

I came out and did a little spin because that was what happened when I wore this outfit.

“Cute? Not cute?”

Reid leaned, her arms on her knees and stared at me.

“Reid?” She hadn’t said anything yet.

She blinked and looked up at me. “Uh yeah, it’s cute.” There was hesitation there.

“But?” I asked.

“I don’t know if it’s what you want to wear to Sapph. Do you have something that’s maybe more of an evening look? Something darker?”

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That made sense. This was more an afternoon kind of fit.

“Hold on. Let me try again.” I ran back to my bedroom and shoved a bunch of hangers aside to find the dress I was looking for. It was a dress that had dark blue flowers, short sleeves, a tie at the waist and was cut low enough that it gave me a little bit of cleave, but not too much. It was also twirly, but not as twirly as the skirt and super comfortable.

“How’s this?” I asked.

Reid did that silent thing again and it took her a few seconds to say anything. “No, yeah, that’s perfect.”

I looked down at my bare feet. “I have some wedges that will work with it and make me a little taller. I figure I’ll be sitting down most of the time so I won’t have to worry about my shoes being too comfortable.”

I glanced back up and found Reid gazing at me intently. Her brown eyes glowed and my breath caught for a second. She was looking at me like...like she wanted to get off the couch and touch me. Her hands clenched on her knees, her knuckles white.

Or maybe I was imagining things. I had to be imagining it. Reid wasn’t into me. No way was she into me.

“I think it’s a winner,” Reid said, her voice rough before she pushed herself to her feet. “I’ve, um, got to go get ready for work.”



“Yeah, of course. Thanks so much for helping me again. I don’t think I’ll come tonight, but maybe tomorrow?” If my anxiety didn’t act up. But knowing that Reid would be there, even if I couldn’t talk with her, made things better somehow. And I could always go over and if I wasn’t feeling it, I could leave. That was something I repeated to myself over and over. If I wasn’t comfortable, I could leave. No one was keeping me anywhere that I didn’t want to be.

“Maybe I’ll see you there,” Reid said, holding the door open.

“Have a good night at work. I hope you get lots of tips.” She rolled her eyes and shut the door.

## Chapter Fifteen

Reid

Fuckkkkkkk. Fucking fuck fuck.

I shouldn’t have let her try on outfits for me. The first one she came out in was a white skirt and pink top and she looked so sweet that I wanted to grab her and lick her all over.

No I didn’t!

Where the hell did that thought come from? I had to get myself together and focus. This was Sophie. Kaylee’s little sister. She wasn’t a person I could have licking thoughts about.

The second dress was almost worse. She looked gorgeous. If she walked into Sapph like that, she’d have to beat the lesbians off with a bat. She’d cause a riot.

I'd had to get up and leave so I didn't say or do something that we'd both regret.

Sophie had asked me to do these lessons because I was a safe and platonic person for her to go to. It would be wrong of me to have non-platonic thoughts about her. She needed me to not be a fucking ogling creep.

I had to get it together. I needed to make sure that I didn't fuck this up for her.

It was a relief to go into work and be so busy that I wasn't thinking about Sophie.

Much.

It was so easy to think about her. To remember how she'd talked about fanfic, getting so excited that her words all kind of blurred together and her voice got louder and more intense. That kind of enthusiasm was rare. She reminded me a little bit of Stace that way, but there was just something about Sophie that made me want to sit and listen to her talk for hours. About anything. She could tell me about inflation or bread mold and I'd listen.

This was terrifying information for me. If you told me a few weeks ago that I'd met a woman I'd enjoy listening to for hours, I would have said you were living in an alternate reality.

Sure, I adored my friends and I loved talking with them, but even I had my limits and liked getting back to my quiet apartment. Most days I was so talked out from the bar that I didn't want to hear another human voice.

I would want to hear hers.

Ohhhhh, this was not good. This was so, so bad.

On Saturday before work, I escaped my apartment and ran to Cade and Eloise's. I sent Cade a text asking if we could hang out and I'd hauled my ass out of bed after not getting nearly enough sleep and drove to the brick Georgian that would always intimidate me.

"It's just us," Cade said when she opened the door, grinning at me while she wore sweatpants and a T-shirt and a pair of fluffy slippers, her strawberry blonde hair pulled into a sloppy ponytail.

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I looked pretty much the same, so it was nice I didn't feel like a total slob.

"Where's Eloise?" I asked.

"She and Camile are out for the day. El and I try to make sure we do our own thing every now and then since we're literally together all the time." That seemed really healthy.

Cade was glowing as she led me through the house and into the kitchen where she'd set up some snacks for us. I hadn't even eaten breakfast, so I was starving.

"So. What's wrong?" Cade asked as she made us both lattes. She was practically a pro barista after making a bazillion for Eloise every day when they worked. I still couldn't believe that she'd originally been Eloise's assistant and now they were committed and living together.

"Nothing's wrong," I said, shoving a bite of chocolate croissant into my mouth.

"Reid. You asked to come over to my house. Not to go out for brunch. Not on a hike. You asked to come over here and I know you. Something's up. Let's talk." She leaned against the counter and crossed her freckled arms.

"Can I at least have some caffeine first?" I groaned, resting my head on the marble countertop. Probably left a forehead print.

Cade snorted. "Yeah, sure."

She let me have some caffeine and snacks before giving me an expectant look.

“Ugh, fine, okay.” I drained the dregs of my latte and reached for a handful of grapes.

“So you remember the girl who moved in next door?”

Cade rolled her eyes. “Yeah, I remember. I’m not that bad.”

“I didn’t say you were, kid. God.” Letting out a sound of frustration, I pretended I was going to pelt her with a grape. She held her hands up to protect herself, but she didn’t need to.

Cade grinned at me. “Come onnnnn, Reid. Tell me. Something has happened. I can see it on your face.”

Now I definitely did want to hide my face behind a pillow. If there was one thing I hated, it was talking about myself, and talking about things like this. Part of the reason I avoided relationships was so I wouldn’t have to be in these exact situations. Feeling breathless and nervous and unsure and unstable. I hated it. Made me want to claw off my own skin.

“She’s newly out. Baby lesbian, apparently. And she’s got a lot of anxiety about trying to date and all that, so she asked me to kind of practice with her.” It sounded so silly and juvenile when I put it like that.

“She asked you to practice dating with her? Is this real? Am I suddenly living in a romcom?” she asked and then pinched me gently.

“Ow!” I said, swatting her away and pretending it hurt. “It’s not like that. She just has a hard time talking to people sometimes. So she asked me to help her. And I see a lot of people dating and so forth at Sapph.” I’d probably seen more first dates and hookups than someone at an actual dating service. Sapph had even done multiple

speed dating events that I'd worked and those had honestly been fascinating. There was one coming up next month. Sophie should sign up. Or I should sign her up and then force her to go. She'd hate me, but it would be a good thing for her to do. She'd get a whole lot of conversational practice.

"Uh huhhh," Cade said, drawing the last word out. "So you're not teaching her how to kiss?" Her tone was hopeful.

"No, I'm not teaching her how to kiss because this is not a romance novel, you weirdo. I swear, living with Eloise has poisoned your brain." I said it as a joke, and she grinned at me.

"It's not so much living with a romance author, it's sleeping with one," she said, wiggling her eyebrows.

I slammed my hands over my ears. "I do not need to know about your sex life, Cade. Jesus."

Cade yanked my hands down and cackled. "Sorry. So much regular amazing sex has made me see romance everywhere." She let out a happy little sigh and I was rethinking throwing grapes at her.

"It's not like that, Cade. She picked me because I live next door and she remembers me and feels comfortable from when she was a kid. That's it."

Cade pressed her lips together as if holding back something she wanted to say.

"Stop looking at me like that! I don't like her."

Cade pointed at me. "Liar! You're such a liar. You do like her. You wouldn't be here if you didn't like her. You like her and you're alllll twisted up about it." Her face lit

up like Christmas had come early.

“I don’t like her,” I said, but Cade just kept smiling.

“Yeah, you do. You like her a lot. Come on, tell me about her.”

I set my uneaten grapes down and groaned. “Fine, shit. It’s hard, you know? Because she looks like Kaylee. My ex. Who is her sister.” I needed to remember that fact more often. It was too easy to forget the more time I spent with Sophie.

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Cade waved her hand. “Yeah, yeah, I don’t care about that. What about Sophie?”

I couldn’t just wave that off, but I also needed to talk to someone about all this crap, and Cade was available, and she was one of my best friends. Who else could I go to?

“She’s... She’s exactly the kind of person who would normally annoy the shit out of me. She’s a talker and she’s loud when she gets going and she gets so excited about things. I sent her some fanfic and she basically lost her mind and loved it so much. And she’s just kind of awkward and adorable and I don’t know. She makes cupcakes and loves to read romance and she’s got the prettiest eyes and what the hell?” I stopped talking because Cade had jumped off the couch and started going a little shimmy dance without an explanation.

“What are you doing?” I asked as she spun around with a grin on her face.

“You have a crush. Reid Hayward, you have a crush on Sophie and there’s no denying it. Woo!” There was more dancing and then I did start chucking grapes at her. She started trying to catch them, which led to me trying to throw them in her mouth.

“We’d better clean these up or Eloise is going to freak,” she said as we both laughed. “But back to much more important things. Reid. It’s not illegal to like someone. Even if that person is the younger sister of your ex. Is it complicated? Yeah, a little bit. Thanksgiving would be awkward. But if you like her, really like her, then don’t let all that other shit stand in your way. Do you know how many times I told myself that Eloise would never possibly like me, that we could never work for a bunch of bullshit reasons? She did the same thing and then we both decided to get out of our own way



and let ourselves be happy. And we are. None of that other stuff matters.”

To her. None of that mattered to her.

“You don’t know. How bad it was with Kaylee. I never really told you,” I said, my voice low.

Cade sat back down, her mood somber.

“So tell me. Explain.” She gestured for me to go ahead. Like it would be easy to just open myself up like that.

“Fuck,” I said, exhaling. “I think I’m going to need a drink for that.”

A while later, after I’d made us both old fashioned and spilled my guts about my past relationship, I was completely and totally drained. Cade sat next to me on the couch and sighed.

“That’s so fucking shitty. I’m so sorry.”

I lifted one shoulder. “It is what it is. It happened. I can’t change it, but I can prevent myself from falling for her sister.”

Cade snorted. “I hate to break it to you my dear, but you can’t stop yourself from falling for someone. Trust me, I’ve tried.”

Yeah, I knew about that. Her and Eloise.

“Well, I can. I can stop myself. Because I’m not falling for anyone again. It’s not worth the risk.” Besides, would I even be able to love someone again? I didn’t think so. And then whoever I was with would be getting less than they deserved so it would

be cruel anyway. I'd thought about this so many times already. Gone over and over and always came to the decision that not getting involved was the best course of action.

"I'm going to help her find someone else and then go back to being her neighbor."

Cade didn't know about the banging on the wall incident. No one did. It didn't feel right to share that situation with anyone else. It was private.

"Mmmhmmm," Cade said, smirking at me. "All I'm going to say is don't let your past ruin something that could be in your future." I let out a little growling noise.

"Okay, okay, I'm done. Wanna raid my library?" Her eyes lit up and she got to her feet. "Come on. Eloise just got a whole box of books she's supposed to blurb."

I followed her upstairs to the library.

"As long as you give them back within like, a month, then take anything that strikes your fancy." Cade was awfully cavalier about that, so I decided to avoid that box and went to her regular shelves instead.

I really didn't need any more books, but when you had a friend who had her own massive library, you ended up bringing more books home. It was just what happened whenever I visited.

"Okay, you browse and I'm going to grab cake. Red velvet good?" If there was one thing Cade always had on hand, it was red velvet cake. It wasn't my personal favorite, but I wouldn't say no to it when offered.

"I can't believe Eloise lets you eat up here," I called as she left the room.

“She hates it, but she loves me so it all works out,” she said as she paused in the doorway.

I went back to the shelves as she skipped down the stairs.

There were truly an astonishing amount of books in this room. I couldn’t even begin to count how many. Eloise had had a ton before she even met Cade and then Cade had gone ham when they got together and she didn’t have to spend most of her paycheck on rent and could funnel that money to books. It was kind of the ideal situation for her.

“So you like the same kind of fanfic, huh?” Cade said, appearing with two plates of cake and forks. We sat together in the comfy reading chairs with a little table between us.

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“Yeah, we do,” I said, getting wary.

Cade pointed at me with her fork. “You should let her read some of yours. I know you won’t let me read it, but you should send it to her and not say anything.”

I made a face. “Yeah, and what if she hates it?”

Cade cringed. “That would be awkward. But isn’t the kind of fanfic you write the same as what you like to read? Similar tropes and everything?” I nodded slowly.

“It stands to reason that she would like what you’re writing.” I’d thought about that, but the fear that she’d dislike one of my stories was too great to take a risk.

“No. I can’t. It’s fine for strangers to read my work, but I don’t want anyone I know in real life to.” I knew that didn’t make much sense, but that was how I’d always felt about it.

“One of these days I’m going to find it. I feel like I’ll know your voice if I read it.”

I completely disagreed with her. My work was so different than my personality. Fanfic was a place for me to explore things that were unsafe to think about in my real life.

Love. Romance. Sex. Vulnerability. Flirtation. Happily Ever Afters.

I could do all of those things in the safety of those little worlds that someone else had created, but in which I could play and let my imagination explore without limits.

Nowhere else had made me feel that free before. When I'd started dance, it had been like that. And then it wasn't anymore.

"Sure you would," I said, having a bite of cake. Cade curled her feet up on the chair and got comfortable.

"You know if you ever wanted to publish, I know people."

"I know you know people, kid. It's not going to happen." Cade especially had been on me to make the switch from publishing fanfic to pursuing being an author in a more traditional sense but I'd told her exactly why I didn't want to add money to the equation.

"I know, I know. But if you wanted to do something in publishing, even something part time, I could give you a crash course in being an author assistant. Once you know the ropes, it can be a good job." She'd told me that before.

I wouldn't lie, thinking about working remotely and not having to talk to a bunch of people and smile constantly sounded pretty great. But I wasn't professional. I was a college dropout bartender. No one legit was going to hire me, not even with Cade vouching for my character. That kind of job was for someone else. Not for people like me.

It was sweet of her to offer, though.

"Maybe," I said, and she dropped it, devouring the last of her cake.

I stayed for longer than I meant to with Cade.

"I missed you," she said when I was getting ready to go. "I know it's harder to see each other now, but I need to come to you. I feel like you're always driving out here."

I do miss the city, even if I don't miss my old apartment."

"Hunter's place is better," I said, because it was the truth.

"Yours isn't bad. And I'd like to meet Sophie."

Right. Sophie.

"She's coming with me to Stace's thing," I admitted.

Cade squealed. "You have it so baddddd."

"Shut up, Cade," I said, pointing at her. "Shut up right now."

She giggled and gave me another hug.

"We'll see each other before then, though. Let me know when would be good next week for me to come and hang. I can fiddle with my work schedule."

That sounded good to me. She agreed that we'd work it out in the group chat and maybe Hunter could join us too.

I got in my car and realized I had barely enough time to get home and get ready for work, but that was okay. Seeing Cade had been worth it. Even if she'd been a pain in my ass about Sophie.

### Chapter Sixteen

Sophie

My hands sweated and shook as I approached the entrance of Sapph. I had my cute dress on under a jacket, I'd put my hair up, and I'd worn my favorite gold jewelry.

I thought I looked pretty cute. Or as cute as I could get without professional help.

There were a few people hanging around outside smoking and vaping and talking. I stood on the sidewalk looking up at the sign for a few minutes.

I could do this. And if I decided I didn't like it, I could leave.

Reid was here. She wouldn't let anything bad happen to me.

My decision made, I paid the cover and stepped inside.

I'd prepared myself for it to be crowded, but the reality was a little scarier. Bodies packed together in a small space while loud music pounded through speakers and everyone shouted so they could hear each other.

Oh shit. What the hell had I gotten myself into?

Fighting the urge to bolt, I moved further into the bar. I could leave if I needed to. I could leave if I needed to.

Once I had adjusted a little bit to all the noise and the darkness, I looked to the right where the bar took up a huge portion of the wall with people packed together and trying to get the attention of at least one of the bartenders.

I didn't care about the others. I had to get the notice of one bartender in particular.

There she was. A little hard to spot, but I found her. She walked the length of the bar balancing several glasses with poise as she set them down and then swiped a credit card. Reid still moved like a dancer. I knew she had quit, but I didn't know when and I didn't know why. As far as I knew, she'd been a hardcore badass ballerina and on her way to becoming a professional dancer. I imagined one day I would buy a ticket to see her on stage in New York City under the sparkling lights. She'd been talented. I remembered her spending summers getting invited to special dance camps and programs all over the US.

Reid didn't talk about dance anymore. Something must have happened, but I didn't want to ask in case it was painful. She also didn't talk about her mom. I knew it had been just the two of them and that things had always been rocky.

One of these days I was going to find out what made Reid tick.

Using a little bit of force, I pushed my way through the crowd and found a place at the bar to stand. Reid was on the other end and a different bartender spotted me. She had silver septum piercing in her nose that winked in the light and full sleeves of tattoos on both arms.

"What can I get you, sweetheart?" I blushed at the endearment.

"Um, I'm actually hoping to say hi to Reid. We're friends." I'd told her that I might show up tonight, but I hadn't sent her a message or anything warning her ahead of time in case I changed my mind.



“Friend of Reid’s? Sure,” she said, but I could tell she didn’t believe me. She went to tap Reid on the shoulder and gestured to me. I waved to Reid and saw her lips twitch with a suppressed smile. She said something in the ear of the other bartender and came over to me.

“Hey Soph. You made it,” she said, her voice quiet, but I could still hear it over everything else. I could probably hear her voice anywhere.

“I did!” I said way too loudly. “Sorry.”

She smiled and my heart did a slow little roll in my chest. She looked so good her under the purple neon lights. Sexy as hell, her dark hair lit up and her eyes hooded and mysterious.

She looked like a fantasy, and I bet she got hit on all the time. Reid could have anyone she wanted. I couldn’t believe she’d agreed to help me.

“What do you think?” she asked, completely ignoring everyone else trying to get her attention. I leaned forward, flattered and also desperate to get closer to her. Being near her somehow made everything seem less intense. The noise and colors and people didn’t press on me so hard now that she was here in front of me.

“It’s a lot,” I said. “But I’m glad I pushed myself and came. And I think I should have a drink.” There. I’d decided to stay.

Reid winked at me and I wished I was sitting down. That wink was devastating. Good thing she hadn’t unleashed it on me before.

She was fully in her zone as a bartender. Playing her role like she’d once played a dying swan on the stage in a white costume.

“What can I get you?” she asked. Oh shit, I hadn’t studied the menu. Panic gripped the back of my neck as my skin went hot and cold with anxiety. I always looked up menus before going anywhere so I could decide ahead of time, but I hadn’t done that tonight. Shit.

“Hey,” Reid said, her tone sharp. I’d frantically been trying to read the menu hung high above her head. “I’ll make you something you’ll like.”

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I nodded, wiping my palms on the skirt of my dress. “Okay.”

Now I had to get my heart to slow the hell down and remind my body that it didn’t need to be doing all of that. So much drama.

Using my calming techniques, I slowed my breathing and counted in my head while Reid buzzed around the bar making my drink, ducking around the other bartenders to get what she needed. You could see how her dance training had actually prepared her to pivot behind a crowded bar. All of that balancing on her pointe shoes translated to her balancing shots and carrying them to thirsty customers.

Reid returned with my drink and it had cherries in it and was pink under the lights.

“It’s kind of like what I made the other night, but this one is alcoholic,” she explained, pushing it toward me. “If you hate it, I’ll make you something else.”

I took a cautious sip and closed my eyes as the flavors burst on my tongue. Ohhhh, it was delicious. Just what I wanted.

“Good?” Reid asked as I sucked on the straw.

“So good,” I said with a nod. I pulled my card out of my coat pocket, but she waved me off. “You get the friends and family discount. First drink is free.”

She winked again and then waved before she headed off to serve someone else. I stood there for a few more minutes, carefully sipping my drink and watching Reid. Even though she was smiling, there was a tightness to it that I hadn’t seen before.

Anyone else wouldn't have noticed it unless they'd spent some time with her outside of Sapph.

She was putting on a show and it had to take a toll on her. No wonder she was so tired. Reid raced around the bar with a smile plastered on her face and had to listen while everyone talked at her and demanded things. I had no doubt that later in the night things could get rowdy and people could get ruder as the alcohol flowed.

This Reid was so at odds with the person I knew. The one who loved chocolate and books and reading and fanfic and seemed happy to lounge with me and let me jabber about anything. There was a confidence to her here. A sureness that she'd been doing this for a while, and she was comfortable with it to an extent. But I saw the strain.

I didn't want to poke at any touchy subjects, but this didn't seem like the right job for her. Or at least it didn't seem like it should be her primary job. Maybe if she cut back, it wouldn't drain her so much.

Someone jostled me and I nearly dumped my drink down someone else's back. Everyone apologized and laughed, and it was very cordial. The person I'd almost spilled the drink on gave me a slow once over. Oh. This dress was working some magic.

"You're new," she said, giving me a slow smile. Her hair was cut short and she wore jeans and a tight T-shirt that showed off toned arms.

Larison and I had spent a significant portion of time trying to figure out what my "type" was, and as much as we'd talked about it, I had decided "I don't know." Attraction was still so new for me that it was almost like my brain just ignored it or categorized it as something else. Looking back, I discovered that I'd told myself that any attraction was admiration. Or jealousy. Or some other emotion.

Now that I knew what it was, I was still figuring it out. But this stranger was cute, I'd give her that. She had a sharp jaw and a crooked smile that made my blood rush in my head.

"Uh yeah, this is my first time here," I said, hating how squeaky my voice sounded.

"And what do you think?" she asked, tilting her head to the side.

"I've never been to a queer bar before. I, um, just came out a few months ago. I'm a lesbian." I said and then almost choked on my straw as I tried to sip and cover my babbling.

That was too much, but I couldn't take it back.

Instead of giving me a weird look, she smiled.

"You're cute as hell. I'm Jamie."

"Sophie," I said.

"Well, Sophie, do you think I could buy you a second drink? Or maybe we could have a dance?" There was an area of the bar where people were dancing and moving together. I definitely wasn't ready for that yet.

"Um, I think I'm good for tonight. But maybe another night?" I didn't want her to feel bad.

"Aw, you're breaking my heart," she said, holding one hand up to her chest.

"I'm sorry," I said immediately, but she laughed.

“Don’t worry about it, gorgeous. Hopefully we’ll meet again.”

She stepped around me and melted into the crowd.

I’d done it! I’d talked to another queer woman in a queer bar and I hadn’t embarrassed myself too badly. That hadn’t even been in my plan for tonight, but I went with it and survived.

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I couldn't stop smiling as I sipped my drink and bopped to the music. They did have a good playlist going and if I was feeling a bit more adventurous, I might hit the dance floor. There was a group of women all dressed in similar outfits with one woman wearing a crown and a sash that looked like they were having the time of their lives.

I wished I could just dive in and join them. So many times in my life I was the one standing on the outside looking in at everyone else having a good time.

I didn't want to be that person anymore.

I finished my first drink and felt warm and silly as the alcohol sloshed through my veins. A few more people randomly spoke to me, but I kept my interactions short. One thing I did want to do was leave while I was still having a good time. I didn't want to stay too long and then have a negative experience.

It seemed like time to go after I visited the bathroom and heard at least one couple hooking up in a stall. Not that I judged them. I was a little envious that they felt free enough to do something so intimate in a place like this where they could get caught.

As I blushed and washed my hands, I thought, again, of that night when Reid had heard me. Ever since then, I'd tried to be as quiet as possible when I masturbated if I knew she was home. My loudest vibrators were confined to the nights that she worked at Sapph. Just a few times I'd wondered what she would do if I used my wand again when she was home. If I wasn't quiet and let myself go. Would she bang on the wall again? Would she try to ignore it?

Reid had told me we could forget it, but I hadn't. I couldn't. There was still some

embarrassment, absolutely. But there was something else that was even stronger: excitement. I'd liked that she heard me. That she knew what I sounded like when I came. What did that say about me? I for sure knew I wasn't an exhibitionist. None of that appealed to me. But Reid knowing and hearing me? That was different.

Shit. I'd been standing at the sink with my hands under the water for too long. I dried off my hands and left the bathroom, scanning the bar to find Reid. She stood at one end sipping what looked like a glass of ice water through a straw.

I approached her and tried not to smile too much. Seeing her made me giddy and I couldn't let her know. Reid had made it so clear that we could be friends, but anything else was never ever going to happen. I didn't blame her at all. Her history with my sister was rough. These growing feelings I had for her were all on me and mine to deal with alone. This was my first crush on a woman now that I knew myself and I couldn't let it get out of hand.

I couldn't ruin things with Reid.

"You're still here," she said, giving me a tired smile. Her skin glistened with perspiration. It was warm in here and she'd also been hustling back and forth for hours.

"Don't you get to sit down?" I asked.

She shrugged. "If I sit down, then it's harder to get back up. I sit when I get home at the end of the night."

That made sense, I supposed.

"I think I'm going to head out." Now I felt foolish for coming over here and announcing that. As if she cared or would notice if I was gone.



“Saw you talking to Jamie,” she said, an odd look on her face.

“Oh, you know Jamie?” I asked.

“She’s a regular. And I wouldn’t, if I were you. She’s the lesbian equivalent of a fuckboy, and that’s not what you need when you’re freshly out. Trust me.”

Oh. I didn’t pick up on that at all.

“See? This is why I need you to teach me,” I said, slapping my hand down on the bar.

Reid chuckled. “I’ll do my best to steer you in the right direction, padawan Sophie.” She was so cute when she called me that.

I giggled and wished that she could jump over the bar and hang out with me. Tonight would have been more fun if I could have spent it with Reid.

“Thanks. I guess I’ll see you when I see you?” Reid finished her water and set the glass down.

“Did you maybe want to do something on Sunday? The weather is supposed to be nice, so I thought I might drive out to one of the nature trails in the suburbs.”

Oh. She was inviting me to do an activity with her. That was new.

“Yeah, that sounds fun. I’ll just be hanging around the house so knock on my door when you’re ready to go. If you drive, I’ll buy us coffee.”

That earned me one of her genuine smiles. “That’s a deal.”

Chapter Seventeen

Reid

Sophie had done well on her own at the bar. I'd been a little worried about her, so I'd kept one eye tracking her as she moved around, but she'd held her own. She wasn't nearly as awkward socially as she worried she was. I'd wanted to intervene when she spoke to Jamie, but then I'd seen Jamie walk away so she hadn't completely charmed Sophie, which was satisfying. Jamie would fuck anyone and everyone and she didn't care who she hurt. She was a menace and one of these days she wouldn't be able to talk her way out of trouble. I just hoped I'd be around to see her get some consequences for her shitty behavior.

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The urge to protect sweet Sophie from people like that was strong, and I didn't know where it came from. I was absolutely taking this mentor situation way too seriously. Sophie was a grown adult. She didn't need me to babysit her. Sophie was smart. She could get herself out of a situation if she needed to.

That night when I arrived home there was something hanging from my doorknob. Wary, I pulled the bag off and looked inside, hoping it wasn't something awful.

It was a single cupcake with a sticky note on it.

So you can have something sweet at the end of your shift.

-Sophie

She must have hung it out here a long time ago.

I couldn't help but smile, even though my face ached from keeping one on during my shift.

I wanted to send her a message and thank her, but she was asleep like a normal person and I didn't want to wake her up. Besides, I was going to see her tomorrow. I could thank her then.

After my shower, I got in bed with a new chapter of my current favorite fanfic and the cupcake. Not a bad way to end my shift at all.

Usually when I asked my friends to go on a walk or a hike with me, they always

agreed, but reluctantly. When Sophie opened up her door, she flashed me a bright smile as I took in her leggings, tank and spring jacket along with her crossbody bag. She had a cap on her head with her ponytail pulled through the back of it.

In short, she was ready.

“Do I look like a hiker?” she asked, posing.

“You do,” I said. “I’m impressed.”

She was so adorable.

I’d worn my favorite hiking boots and had a small backpack with supplies just in case. Even on an easy walk, you never knew what could happen. I always wanted to be prepared for emergencies when I went out in nature.

“Do you have water and snacks and your phone and your keys?” I asked as she started to pull her door shut.

She paused and thought for a second. “Yup. I have everything.”

Sophie jingled her keys and shut the door before zipping them into her bag.

“Shall we?”

She skipped down the stairs next to me, all bouncy energy. It was so strange that she didn’t annoy the shit out of me. People like her usually did.

“My car is this way,” I told her when we left the building. She swung her arms and looked up at the cloudless sky.

“This is the perfect day for it. I’ve been telling myself to get outside more often, so thank you for inviting me. How was the rest of your shift?”

We reached my car and I unlocked it and, at the last moment, opened the door for her. She grinned and slid into the passenger seat, settling in.

My car wasn’t anything to write home about and I kind of wished I’d cleaned it a little more before letting Sophie inside. Oh well. Couldn’t do anything about it now.

“It was fine, thankfully. I did witness a drunken breakup though. It was a disaster.” That had happened just after she’d left, and I’d almost wanted to send her a message to tell her to come back so she could watch.

“Ohhh, tell me,” she said, buckling her seatbelt.

I checked my mirrors and pulled out of my space while I told her about the couple I’d seen. One had taken a phone call and must have stepped outside and the girlfriend had stayed on the dance floor. Something had happened that I’d missed, but the other woman stormed back in and things got heated. There was screaming and everyone was watching, including us at the bar.

It was a whole scene.

“I wish I had popcorn,” Maddie had said in my ear.

“Ditto,” I’d agreed.

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Sophie was enthralled by the story as I took us through the drive-thru coffee shop.

“What do you want?” I asked her, but she just leaned over me and yelled into the speaker. She was almost in my lap and I could smell her hair. I tried not to inhale too deeply, but it was difficult. She always smelled so good, and her warm weight was scrambling my brain. Fuck.

Sophie said something to me as she moved back to her seat, but there was roaring in my ears and I didn’t hear her.

Someone behind me honked and I pulled forward to the window as Sophie handed me her card and I passed it over to pay.

Once we had everything in the car, Sophie handed me my coffee and pulled out the chocolate croissant I’d ordered.

I reached to take it from her, but she pulled it back.

“Both hands on the wheel. I’ll feed you,” she said.

Was she serious? A quick glance while we were at a red light told me that she was serious.

“I take my duties as a co-pilot seriously. Your job is to get us there in one piece. My job is to make sure that you can do that.”

“Wow. You don’t mess around,” I said.

“My mother taught me right,” she said.

“I know,” I said before I could stop myself. Kaylee had been the same way anytime I’d driven us somewhere, and I’d done the same for her.

Shit.

“Right,” Sophie whispered.

I swallowed hard. “How is your mom?”

Sophie’s breath caught in surprise.

“She’s good. She finally retired.”

That was a shocker. “Really? I thought she’d never leave the school.”

Tina Love had been a school guidance counselor for decades and she’d absolutely adored her job. She claimed that she’d never retire, they’d just have to wheel her corpse into her office and she’d still see her students.

“Yeah, but she’s back to substitute teaching a few days a week,” Sophie said with a laugh. “She couldn’t handle being home all the time.”

“And your dad?”

“He’s still at the gas company, but he’s working in the office instead of doing deliveries. He hurt his back a few years ago and we all made him slow down so he didn’t do more damage. He’s happy though. He gets all the good gossip.”

I laughed. That was true. That man did love a good dish session. Whenever I’d seen

him, he'd always wanted to know anything and everything I was doing.

I rubbed my hand over my chest where an old ache had flared up.

"How is... I mean. Never mind." Sophie sipped her coffee and I reached for mine as I made it onto the highway.

"I'm guessing you were going to ask about my mom," I said, my teeth grinding together at the mention of her. It wasn't Sophie's fault. She didn't know what had happened in the years since I'd been with Kaylee.

"I finally went no-contact with her. She tried to get in touch with me via my aunt a little over three months ago. That was the last time."

"Oh," Sophie said on an exhale. "I'm so sorry it got to that point. That you needed to do that. But I'm guessing it was a good thing."

Her words surprised me. A lot of people judged me for cutting off my mom. They said that she gave birth to me, so I owed her for that. Owed her for all the years she fed and clothed and housed me and took me to ballet and paid for my classes and costumes. As if I had a say in any of that. As if that somehow made up for the way that she'd treated me.

"It was a good thing," I said, sounding defensive. I couldn't help it, though. Hated having to justify putting myself first.



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“If you ever want to talk about it, let me know. I can be a good listener.” She laughed a little.

“Thanks. I don’t like to talk or think about it. But I’ll let you know.”

We reached the exit for the trail and I took it, glad that Sophie hadn’t asked for more details.

Ten minutes later we were getting out of the car and I was checking to make sure I had everything I needed in my bag.

“You good?” I asked Sophie after she’d tossed our trash in a nearby can.

“Yup. Let’s go.”

She set off at a brisk pace and I joined her.

“This is so nice. It’s such a relief to not be in school right now. I mean, I have one class, but it doesn’t start until next week.” She made a face.

“What made you want to go to grad school?” I asked.

“Honestly? I don’t even know. Going out into the world sounded terrifying and I didn’t know what jobs I could get anyway with just a regular English degree so it seemed like the best option. I, um, still don’t really know what I want to do.” I glanced over at her as she cringed. “Is that bad?”

I stepped over a root in the middle of the path. “No, that’s not bad at all. Do you think I know what the hell I’m doing?”

“You seem like you do,” Sophie said.

I burst out laughing. “Soph, I have no fucking idea. I feel like my entire life was all planned for me. All set. It was so nice knowing exactly what I needed to do. Who I needed to be. And then I figured out I didn’t want to be that person and now I don’t know who the fuck I am.” The words burst out of me and I couldn’t stop them.

“I dropped out of school years ago and now I tend bar and I try not to plan anything except for maybe my fanfic and that’s only because I have to. Everything else is completely fucked.”

Sophie stopped walking. “Wait. What do you mean you plan your fanfic?” Shit. This is why I couldn’t just let myself talk. Then I said things that I couldn’t take back.

I didn’t stop. “Nothing. I meant planning my fanfic reading!” I was practically running as Sophie caught up with me.

“That’s not what you said, Reid. Slow down!”

Reluctantly, I did, but I couldn’t look at her.

“You write fanfic, don’t you?” she asked.

“No.”

I could hear the smile in Sophie’s voice. “You do and you don’t want anyone to know. Wait, have you sent me any of your fanfic and didn’t tell me?” Her voice was so excited. I stopped moving and Sophie turned toward me, her face all lit up and her

eyes bright.

“Yes, I write fanfic. No, I haven’t sent you any of it. No, I won’t tell you my author name.”

Her mouth dropped open and she gasped. “Why not? Oh please, Reid. I bet it’s so good. I won’t tell you if I hate it. I promise. I mean, I won’t hate it so you don’t have to worry about that.”

Fuck. This was why I didn’t want her to know.

I groaned and looked up at the sky. A couple walking their dog came up behind us so we moved to the side so they could pass.

“Reid?” Sophie asked. “Are you okay?”

Not really. My secret was out, and I didn’t like it.

She touched my arm moving her fingers up and down in a soothing motion. The heat of her finger seeped through my jacket.

“Hey. I won’t bug you about it. I just got excited. I’ve never known someone in real life who wrote fanfic. I think it’s pretty amazing. I mean, I only write shit for school.” Her face turned scarlet, and I seized on that.

“Why not?” I asked.

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She ducked her head and the heat wasn't on me anymore. Thank the stars.

"I just...I don't know. I never know what to write about if I don't have someone telling me what to write. I know how that sounds. Like I need permission or something but it's really that I'm not creative. I always think I've got this great idea and then I start writing it and it feels like something I already read, or I hit a part and don't know how to continue and I just... stall out. I've never written more than a few chapters of anything. People who manage to finish writing whole books are like magic to me. I don't know how they do it." She shook her head.

I looked around and saw a rock that we could both sit on, so I walked toward it and sat. Sophie joined me.

"It's...it's one of the only things that I really like doing. I know how that sounds, but it's true. My mind wanders a lot during work, so I have a lot of time to just kind of drift. And I guess it just kind of happened that I'd be imagining scenarios from some of my favorite shows. I mean, I'd read fanfic for years, but I didn't have the confidence to actually write any of my own for a while. I'm not even sure if I'm good, or if I just happen to pick the right tropes and give my readers exactly what they're expecting. Like, it wouldn't matter if the writing was trash as long as one of them got injured and the other one said, 'who did this to you?' and then there was only one bed while they tended to their wounds."

She giggled. "I would definitely read that fic, I don't even care. I love all of that."

I pointed at her. "Exactly! It doesn't matter if the mechanics of the sentences are good as long as the vibes and tropes are there. Which can be a good thing, I guess. And I'm

not getting paid, so it doesn't matter in the long run if my grammar fucking sucks."

A few more people passed us as we sat on the rock together.

"You know, I have a pretty good eye for grammar and typos. In case you need help with that. I would be happy to offer my services."

I turned, raising my eyebrows. "Is that just a ploy to get a look at my fanfic?"

She grinned and the sunlight sparkled on the blonde strands of her hair. Her eyes really were spectacular. I bet she got complimented on them all the time. If I wasn't careful, I'd dive headfirst into them and not come up for air.

"Maybe. But for real, Reid. I want to get a job in publishing, and it would be a good chance to get some practice working with a writer to see if editing might be something I'd want to do. It could be payment for giving me sapphic dating lessons."

I did want to improve my fanfic. Readers were kind, but there were always a few who would get salty about typos. Like I wasn't just a human with a keyboard who was writing all this shit FOR FREE. But Sophie's offer was tempting. I knew she was smart as hell, so she could definitely whip my commas and sentences into shape.

She'd have to read my work to do that, though.

"Can I think about it?" I asked her. I wasn't ready to hand over my work yet.

Technically, I had known Sophie since we were both teenagers, but trusting her with this was a big ask.

"Yeah, of course. It was just an idea. Don't worry about it. I mean, I know I worry about everything, but you shouldn't." She bumped her shoulder with mine and then

stood up, holding her hands out to me.

“Come on, let’s keep going.”

Setting my hands in hers, I let her pull me to my feet. Our touch lingered for a few seconds before I dropped her hands and started walking again.

The trail led through the woods to the top of a hill and a little lookout where people took pictures and rested before heading back to the trailhead.

Sophie and I sat down on the waterproof blanket I had stashed in my pack and pulled out snacks we’d brought.

“You come prepared,” Sophie said when I had to dig through my pack to find the bag of trail mix I’d packed.

“I try to. Anything can happen on a hike. I refuse to be that person on the news that got lost and then was found a few feet from the trail a day later. I couldn’t handle the embarrassment.” I opened the bag and held it out to her. She reached her hand in and grabbed some.

“Oh my god, yeah. I get that. Well, if you ever need a hiking buddy, I’m game. I’m not experienced or anything, but I’m absolutely up for it.” She munched on a chocolate candy and lay back on the blanket, closing her eyes. I had to stop myself from watching her too intently. It was hard, though. She was so gorgeous.

When I looked at her now, I didn’t see another version of Kaylee. I only saw Sophie. She was her own person and she was beautiful.

Her lips curved in a smile. “I can feel you staring.” She didn’t open her eyes though.

“You had a bug on your face,” I said, and that made her scream and sit up, swiping at her face.

I threw my head back and laughed.

Sophie realized I’d been kidding and sat back down. “Asshole.”

She shoved me, but she was laughing along with me.

Sophie sat next to me and bit her bottom lip. Shit, it was hard to look at her when she did that. Made me want to bite that lip for her.

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“I am an asshole. You know that.”

Sophie pulled her legs up and set her chin on her knees. “I don’t think you’re as much of an asshole as you want people to think you are. And you’re not an asshole at Sapph.”

I made a face. “Don’t remind me. I swear I have to unscrew my smile every night when I’m done. Makes me not want to make a facial expression again for at least a week.”

“So why do you do it? If you hate it. Because it kind of seems like you hate it.”

My response was instant. “I don’t hate it. It’s just...hard sometimes. But I make decent money. And I’m good at it. Mixing drinks isn’t the bad part. It’s the customers.”

Sophie snorted. “Yeah, a bar that made drinks without customers to drink them probably wouldn’t be very successful.”

“No, it wouldn’t be.”

Voices made me turn and look over my shoulder. A family joined us on the top of the hill, the parents ordering the kids to get together so they could take pictures. It was sweet. I couldn’t remember the last picture I’d taken with my mother. It had probably been one of the posed shots they took at the dance studio when I’d been wearing one of my dozens of costumes. No idea what my mother had done with them.



“But if you really want to do something else, you could,” Sophie said, bringing me back to the conversation at hand.

Normally I’d snap at her and tell her to leave me alone. That I knew that I could do something else. That I was fine working at Sapph.

“I’m not qualified to do anything,” I said instead.

“You were a dancer for a long time,” she pointed out, her voice so gentle.

“I’ve thought about that a million times. And it all comes back to the fact that I’d have to see kids going through the same thing I did. With parents that forced them and made them miserable. And I couldn’t do it. I teach one baby ballet class sometimes and that’s all I can do. Because they’re so young that there isn’t as much pressure. There’s some, but you can’t really make a four-year-old into a professional dancer no matter what you do. But if I had to teach older kids? No. I couldn’t handle it.”

Sophie seemed to think about that for a long time.

“That makes complete sense.”

I nodded. “Thank you. I can’t seem to make other people see it that way. I never did anything else, Soph. Never had any ambitions. I just... I danced. That was my life. And now I have nothing.”

Sophie moved closer and put her arm around me, resting her head gently on my shoulder.

That was the second time she’d touched me today and I should be pushing her away. People touching me nearly always felt like an invasion.

Except I wasn't pushing her away. I was sitting here and letting her lean on me and smelling her scent and feeling her warmth light up the right side of my body and her arm across my back.

Having her this close was a bad idea. I liked it far too much. I liked her far too much.

"You have so much, Reid," she said, settling even closer. Her fingers squeezed my shoulder. "If you ever want to sit down and brainstorm, I'm at your disposal. If you want to sit around the apartment and get totally wasted and complain about life and how we don't know what we're doing, I'm up for that too. I just...you're my friend, Reid. I want us to be able to talk to each other. You've done a lot for me. I only want to be a good friend to you in return."

Fuck, she was going to kill me. I hadn't met anyone quite like her.

"You are a good friend, Sophie. You're an incredibly good friend." I almost felt spoiled having her to myself. She had Larison, but I knew her anxiety sometimes held her back from making more friends.

"Thanks. That's one of the nicest things anyone has ever said to me."

I snorted. "Then I should compliment you more often."

Her smile curved against my shoulder. "I like that idea."

The two of us stayed like that for a while. Until the sun had moved higher in the sky and it was time to go back to the car. Plus, I had to pee, and I was not squatting in the woods even if I had supplies. Not if I could avoid it.

Sophie and I made it back to the car and she sighed happily when she sat down in the passenger seat.

“It’s wild how walking so much can make you tired.” She hid a yawn behind her hand. “I’m sorry.”

I waited for another car to leave before I backed out. “What would you say if I ordered some pizza and we sat on my couch and ate it while we watched something?” I was being reckless, spending this much time with her, but I couldn’t help it. I craved her. Being around Sophie was just...good. Things were better when she was there. When I could talk to her and ask her opinion.

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“I would say that sounds like an amazing idea, as long as the pizza has all the toppings on it.”

I made a disgusted face. “Even olives?”

“Just give all your olives to me,” she said, turning her head and grinning. She was so pretty in that moment with the late afternoon sun streaming through the windows and gilding her in golden light. She could have anything she wanted in that moment.

“You can have all my olives in perpetuity. I can’t stand them.”

“Sounds like a plan,” she said, bracing her elbow on the door and leaning her head against her hand.

### Chapter Eighteen

Sophie

True to her word, Reid did pick off all the olives from her slices of pizza and piled them on my plate.

“My pizza is now tainted with olive essence,” she grumbled.

“You could have gotten half without olives,” I said.

Reid sighed. “That will be one of my regrets in life.”

I laughed and popped an olive into my mouth.

“What did you want to watch?” Reid asked me.

“How about that one with the people coming down from the space station to colonize Earth again, but they find out there are still humans who have been there the whole time. You sent me a few fanfics from that show. I’ve never seen it.”

Reid let out a long breath. “Okay, the first thing you need to know is that the sapphic relationship does not end happily. Have you looked up any spoilers or anything?”

I shook my head. The show had come out a while ago and I’d just never gotten into it.

“That was one of my very first ships. What happened on the show is one of the reasons I discovered fanfic in the first place. It was really brutal.”

She pulled up the show and I saw that she’d watched it already.

“I mean, as long as I know ahead of time, I think I’ll be good. But that still sucks.”

Reid sighed again. “The first time I watched it, I cried so hard. My mom wouldn’t believe me when I said I was sad about a character on a show dying. She wasn’t very sympathetic about me having any sort of emotions.”

Her jaw clenched and she shook her head. “Anyway. I’m over it now. I’ve rewatched it a bunch of times just to see my favorite parts. And to get the worldbuilding right.”

She froze, realizing what she’d said.

“Oh, so you’ve written for this fandom too. Now I’ll really have to pay attention.”

Reid let out a sound that was basically a growl as she covered her face with a pillow.

Yanking the pillow away from her face, I leaned close.

“You have got to stop being embarrassed about your fanfic. I think it’s amazing.”

She let me take the pillow away from her. “You haven’t even read it.”

“Don’t need to. I know you. I know it’s good.”

She just reached for the remote, turned the show on, and loaded up her plate with more pizza.

“So who am I supposed to be shipping with who?” I asked after we finished the second episode. “It’s not her with that guy’s little sister, is it?”

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Reid ran her fingers through her hair. “Nope. She doesn’t actually show up for a while. I’ll let you know, but I’d like to see if you figure it out on your own.”

Well now I really had to pay attention.

I narrowed my eyes at her. “You’re enjoying this too much.”

She held up two fingers about an inch apart. “Maybe a little bit. It’s fun to watch someone else experience it in real time.”

“You haven’t made your friends watch this?”

“Nope. They don’t really know about any of my fandoms. Or my fanfic.” That didn’t make sense and she must have seen the confused look on my face.

“I like to keep things separate. I don’t know. It’s something I’ve always done. Kept my private shit private. And my fanfic is private.” Now that did make sense. The more time I spent with her, the more I put the pieces together that explained who she was.

It didn’t take a psychologist to understand that Reid’s relationship with her mother, her main caretaker, had affected her in both big and small ways. As had her relationship with Kaylee.

I still hadn’t told my sister that I was living next to Reid. I didn’t know how to broach the subject, especially given my changing emotions about Reid.

The crush I had on her could no longer be denied. It was here and it was kicking my ass. Sitting next to her on the couch was almost more than I could take. I wanted to get up and sit right in her lap and let her pet my hair. I wanted to shock the hell out of her by kissing her. Making Reid the first woman I'd ever kissed was my new life goal. It wasn't going to happen, but that didn't mean I couldn't imagine it in a hundred different ways.

We'd spent the day together and it kept getting later and later and I knew I was overstaying my welcome, but I didn't want to get up from her couch. Not only was it comfortable, but my apartment was lacking one major thing that made everything better: her.

Reid wasn't acting like she wanted to kick me out, though. I'd been watching her for signs that she was getting tired or disengaged with me, but she was still laughing and listening and pressing Play on another episode.

I had a few hours of work tomorrow and my class started on Tuesday, so I wanted to prepare for that, but being wrapped in this cocoon of Reid was far more pleasurable.

"Shit, I didn't realize how late it was. With my work schedule I'm basically part vampire and I don't know what normal waking hours are like anymore. If you want to go, you don't have to stay here and keep me company," she said after she'd glanced at her phone.

"No, it's fine. I don't have to go to work until ten tomorrow. Thanks for inviting me to hike. And for the pizza and showing me your secret fandom. I'll keep watching and let you know when I see the ship appear." It wouldn't be as fun watching it alone, but I couldn't sit around and wait for her to be free and force her to watch six plus seasons of a show with me.

"No problem. It's been a good day." Reid followed me to the door, and I wanted to



say something else. Something witty that would make her laugh.

Of course, now that she was standing so close to me, my brain had absolutely shut down and I barely knew my own name, let alone anything clever to say.

“So, uh, let me know if you have any more questions about the show. I have way too much lore in my brain that’s just rattling around in there.” Was she babbling? Surely not. Reid didn’t babble. That was all me.

But her words had tumbled over one another when they came out of her mouth.

“Yeah, I definitely will.” I studied her face and tried not to get lost in her brown eyes. They were dark in this light. Rich, like chocolate, but then there were those golden flecks.

“You’ve got to stop doing that,” Reid said.

“What?”

“Biting your lip,” she said slowly. I’d been doing exactly that. It was a habit that I’d never been able to break. When I was younger it was so bad that it bled almost constantly. That was when I first started seeing a therapist. I’d gone to see one off and on since then. Sometimes I needed to go more often and then there were other times that I could go months managing fine using my coping skills. I hadn’t been for almost a year, which I was pretty proud of.

“I’m sorry,” I said automatically.

Reid leaned closer, her voice low and soft. “You don’t have to be sorry.”

Oh.

If I didn't know better, I'd say she was about to kiss me. But she definitely wasn't. Women like Reid didn't kiss women like me.

Reid closed her eyes and let out a frustrated sound.

"I'll see you later, Soph."

Before I could think of what to say, she'd shut the door in my face. Again.

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It was like being doused with a bucket of ice water. I stood there in shock before I turned and walked the short distance to my door. Maybe I should go back and knock until she let me in and explained what the hell that was.

I was probably reading into it. Seeing things that weren't there. Feeling things that only went one way.

It was best to leave things where they were and to drop it. Reid was never going to want me the way I wanted her.

My mind spun in circles after I left Reid's and it wasn't going to calm down anytime soon. I found the show we'd been watching and put it on, curling up on the couch with my comfort blanket.

I turned up the volume so I couldn't hear any sounds coming from next door. Reid was probably still awake, but I had no idea what she might be doing. Putting away the pizza boxes? Watching more episodes like me? Laying in bed with her laptop and cranking out some fanfiction? I really did want to know her pen name. Now that I knew at least one of her fandoms, I could narrow down the potential fanfics, but there were still thousands of authors she could be.

I was going to figure it out, though. I was determined to know.

The next morning, I woke up on the couch with my TV flashing the ARE YOU STILL THERE? message. I'd fallen asleep on the couch watching the show and never made it to bed. Oops.

I groaned and lay there, my back aching. This sucked.

At least I still had a few hours before I had to be at work to get my spine back into alignment.

I got up, wincing, and went to make breakfast and coffee. I had no doubt that Reid was sleeping in. What would she do if I knocked on her door with a plate of chocolate chip pancakes? I wouldn't, but imagine if I had the guts to?

Taking the scenario further, what if I made breakfast for her every day? Brought it to her in bed on a tray. Forced her to get up as she grumbled and said she was tired, but would wake up pretty quick when I kissed her or got into bed naked.

Crap. Now I was horny while I was making breakfast and that wasn't a good combination. Could lead to burns.

Inhaling through my nose, I did my best to shove away those friskier fantasies. I didn't need them right now. They were best reserved for late at night.

Desire didn't work that way though, and eventually I had to turn off the burners and just give in because if I didn't, my breakfast was going to be ruined.

Normally I wasn't the kind of person who would just go for it wherever, but this was an emergency.

While I leaned up against the counter, I shoved my hand down my shorts and found that I was already soaked and so sensitive that I flinched at the gentlest touch.

"Oh god," I said as I arched into my own touch and stroked around my clit as it throbbed angrily. With just a few quick touches, my legs quaked and I came, nearly collapsing onto the floor.

Holy hell. That was unexpected. I pulled my hand out and went to wash it before I went back to making breakfast, my entire body tingling.

## Chapter Nineteen

Reid

I almost kissed her last night. If only she hadn't been biting that lip and drawing my attention to her mouth. It was only reasonable that I'd be looking constantly at her mouth and that my thoughts would move toward kissing. The fact that I'd been able to resist was incredible. Sophie's eyes had been wide, and she'd stood there, frozen. So damn pretty.

I'd been so close to kissing her and I'd had to basically shut the door in her face so I wouldn't and ruin everything between us.

Sophie had asked me for help and now all I could do was think about her. In a carnal way. In other ways too, but my desire for her kept growing and it was getting out of hand.

After she'd left, I'd showered and had to masturbate before I went to bed where I'd had more than a few lurid dreams and woke up grinding against my mattress.

I'd never been so horny in my life. Like Sophie had ignited all these dormant fires inside me that now burned completely out of control.

I tried to fill my time on Monday with all the things I didn't do the rest of the week, but I couldn't really focus on anything. Jo finally sent me a message that she had a few free hours and wanted to squeeze in some friend time, so I went over to her place.

“Oh my god, you’re alive,” I said when she opened the door.

She answered by giving me her middle finger. “Don’t you dare say a word about how messy the place is or else I’m going to stab you with one of my fancy pens.”

I’d brought food with me, so I pushed some papers on the counter aside and set down the bags.

“You should open a window at least. Get some fresh air in here.” Jo’s apartment was dark, as if she’d been hibernating in a cave or something. The place was a mess, but it wasn’t disgusting. Just a lot of things out of place that she hadn’t had time to organize and put away. She also had her schoolwork absolutely everywhere.

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Jo pushed the curtains aside to let in some sunlight and opened the windows. Instantly the mood improved.

Jo yawned and took down her messy bun before putting her hair back up again. There were dark circles etched under her eyes and her sweatpants and wrinkled T-shirt had seen better days.

“Sit down,” I said, pointing at her couch that was covered in textbooks and printed out articles. Jo sighed, shoving everything aside before sitting down. I set her burrito on a plate and added some rice and beans, taking it over to her before I made up my own plate.

“You need to hire a cleaner,” I said.

Jo snorted. “Yeah, with what money?”

“That’s what credit cards are for. You’re working so hard and you need some help. Need to outsource some of this.” I’d clean her house if she’d let me. Jo was fiercely independent like I was, and she’d never allow me to do that though.

Jo took a massive bite of her burrito and thought about that. “Maybe. It would be nice to remember what living in a clean space feels like. I just ordered more underwear because I’m out.”

She must really be tired because normally she wouldn’t have admitted something like that to me.

“Jesus, Jo. You have a washer and dryer.” I was jealous beyond words that she had a laundry closet in unit.

“I know,” she said, frowning. “I just...” she trailed off.

“Okay. That’s it. Once we’re done eating, I’m going to start your laundry and you’re going to lay there like a lady of leisure.” I wasn’t going to leave here until she had some clean clothes.

“I know I should fight you, but I can’t,” Jo said. She devoured everything on her plate, so I got her seconds while I gathered and sorted her laundry and got the first load going and did a little bit of tidying. Nothing major, just putting papers in a stack, tossing old protein bar wrappers, and bringing empty glasses and coffee mugs to the kitchen so I could start loading the dishwasher.

“I didn’t invite you over to be my maid,” Jo said.

“Shut up. You would do this for me.”

Jo did shut up because she knew it was the truth. We’d met years ago when we had a gen ed college class together in undergrad and had become friends from the very first day. She’d fully supported me when I’d dropped out of school and had been there for those terrible days before I’d gotten my feet under me. Jo had been the one to encourage me to apply for the job at Sapph. I hadn’t had a bartending certificate, but I’d spent summers working at a restaurant and knew how to mix drinks. The owners had taken a risk on me and I’d always be grateful for that.

The least I could do for Jo was some laundry and picking up.

“Please tell me bar stories so I can stop thinking about school,” she demanded, and I was more than happy to do that while we ate some ice cream I’d found in the back of



her freezer that she'd forgotten she bought.

So I told her all my best bar stories that I'd been saving up for her.

"Hold on," she said, sitting up. "Something is different." She pointed at my face and made a slow circle with her finger.

Her eyes were a little brighter now that she'd eaten, and her energy had perked up too. Jo's mind was sharp, and she knew me well.

Shit.

"Don't know what you're talking about," I said, looking away from her face.

Jo's eyes went wide. "Oh, there is something you're not telling me. Reid Elizabeth, you tell me what's going on right now."

Fucking hell.

I gave Jo the rundown of the whole Sophie situation and she thought it was hilarious.

"I'm glad you're enjoying all this. I'm so glad my inevitable doom is amusing to you." I got up to put the laundry in the dryer and start a second load of washing.

"Wait, why inevitable doom?" she asked, propping herself up on some of the couch pillows.

"Because this whole thing with Sophie was supposed to be platonic. And then I had to ruin it by developing very inconvenient feelings. She's Kaylee's sister, Jo. Kaylee, who completely fucked up my entire life."

Jo held her hand up before I could get going. “Listen. I will not discount that what Kaylee did was super shitty. It was. But she didn’t fuck up your entire life, Reid.”

I opened my mouth to argue with her, but she gave me that stern look I couldn’t wait to see her unleash on her students instead of on me.

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“She didn’t ruin you, Reid. Just like quitting ballet didn’t ruin you. Your life isn’t worthless just because some bad things have happened to you.”

Every fiber of my being wanted to fight with her about this. To lay out all the reasons she was wrong. But Jo had been through some shit in her life. She’d given me broad strokes of it all but hadn’t filled in the details. I hadn’t needed to know, and she’d wanted to move past it.

“You are not the sum total of your worst days. No one is. Except for like, war criminals and men’s rights activists.”

She reached out and squeezed both my hands. “Okay?”

This was a battle I wasn’t going to win. “Okay.”

Jo grinned. “Now. Tell me about the girl.”

I left Jo’s a few hours later feeling much better. She now had clean clothes and a tidier apartment, and I’d refilled my friendship cup with her. Jo was one of the only people in the world who could hug me whenever she wanted to. She could read me so well and knew when it was fine and when it wasn’t.

Music came from Sophie’s when I stepped inside my place and shut the door. It wasn’t that loud, but I pressed my ear to the wall to hear exactly what she was listening to.

Chappell Roan. That tracked. We played her all the time at Sapph and everyone

always lost their minds. It was a testament to how good she was that I wasn't sick of hearing her songs yet.

I made a quick dinner and put on the show that Sophie and I had watched last night. I hoped she got to the ship that had launched my little fanfic heart, even though it ended with a stray bullet on the show. It would sail on in my heart. Always.

Sighing, I grabbed my laptop and started working on my outline for the next three chapters of my current fanfic. I couldn't let myself get behind and I was very close to my next upload deadline, so I had to get my act together.

While I struggled to get back into the story, I couldn't help but be distracted by the music. It really wasn't that bad, but my mind was searching and desperate for a reason to not work on this outline. I did as much as I could and then checked my comments and kudos and likes. It was easy to get caught up in all of that, so I limited myself to ten minutes at a time and once my time was up, I stopped. Strangers liking or not liking my fanfic had never really bothered me. At least when I'd started. Now a negative comment did give me a little bit of a twinge, but it always passed quickly.

Frustrated, but unable to pin down why, I turned up the volume on the show and did my best to focus on it.

All I could do, though, was wish that Sophie was sitting on the couch next to me so she could ask me questions and I could tell her way too much backstory and about cast interviews and so forth.

I was in some serious trouble. I needed a Sophie detox. Stay away from her until she left my system. I could do that again. I'd avoided her pretty successfully when she first moved in and I realized who she was.

No more lessons. No more hanging out.

I'd just tell her that I was busy with work or something. Whatever. I'd think of something.

I was flipping through potential excuses when there was a knock at my door.

I knew who it was going to be, and I considered not answering. Pretend I wasn't home. But she'd know I was home and that I was avoiding her, and she'd be sad and confused.

Fuck. I didn't want her to be sad and confused because of me.

I opened the door to find a smiling Sophie holding out a plate.

"There was a birthday at work and there was cake so I took leftovers and I'm hoping you can help me eat it." There were two very large slabs of cake on the plate. Sophie held up two forks.

How could I say no?

"Come on in."

The cake was just a standard grocery store sheet cake, but it was still good, even if slightly stale.

"How was work?" I asked her.

"Eh. Boring. That's the reason I took the job. I can sit and read and scroll my phone and get paid. I mean, the pay isn't great, but still."

We'd set our empty plates on the coffee table and Sophie eyed the remote.

“I kept watching the show last night. And maybe a little today. I don’t think I’ve seen the ship yet.”

I asked her which episode she was on.

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“Ah, interesting,” I said. She was so close to the big reveal and I was trying to tamp down my excitement so it didn’t show on my face.

“You know I could absolutely look all of this up if I wanted to,” she said.

“I know. But you won’t. It’s more fun this way.”

She laughed. “Yeah, I guess it is.”

Only a short time ago I’d decided that I couldn’t see her anymore and now here she was, next to me on the couch and I didn’t want her to leave.

This was a serious problem that I was going to solve. Tomorrow.

“I have a question for you,” Sophie said, her eyes locked on the screen and her face a brilliant shade of red.

“Go ahead,” I said, wary. If she was blushing this hard, there was no telling what it could be.

“I was, um, I was thinking. I did pretty well at Sapph. Better than I thought I would and so I’m going to need some more...practical advice.”

Where was she going with this?

“Practical advice?” She still couldn’t look at me. “I’m going to need you to be more specific.”

“Well, um,” she squeaked. “I was hoping you’d be willing to maybe, um, kiss me. And tell me if I’m doing it right.”

There was no way that Sophie could hear the sirens that were blaring in my head, but I could. So many sirens and warning bells and flashing red signs that said DANGER on them.

This was the exact opposite of what I’d decided before she’d knocked on my door.

“Reid?” she asked after I couldn’t speak for a long time. I literally couldn’t decide what to say.

“Yeah, I’m, yeah,” I said, shaking my head. “Sorry, you want me to kiss you and tell you how it is?”

“Uh, yes? I’ve only ever kissed guys and I have no idea if I’m good at it or not. I don’t want to be a bad kisser. That would be even more humiliating than asking you to take pity on me.”

She risked a glance at me, and she was so cute and so red, and I didn’t know how to say no to this outrageous request.

I had to say no, right?

Obviously I had to say no.

The only right answer was no.

“Crap. I shouldn’t have asked. I was just thinking about it today and I know it would be safe with you because you don’t think about me that way. It would be really quick, I swear.”



I closed my eyes and wished I was someone else. Anyone else who wasn't in this predicament.

Sophie kept talking, and I could see she was stressed about asking me, so I reached for one of her hands where she'd been cracking each one of her knuckles in succession.

“Hey, it's okay. I'll do it.”

Her eyes went wide with shock.

I would? This was news to me. My mouth had a mind of its own, apparently. And it wanted to introduce itself to Sophie's mouth. As soon as possible.

“Wait, are you sure?” she asked, looking so adorable and nervous that I knew that I was going to give in.

“Yes.”

Chapter Twenty

Sophie

I couldn't even believe that I'd gotten up the courage to ask, and she had actually agreed? At first, I thought she was going to tell me to get out and never speak to her again, but she only paused and then I'd babbled, and she agreed.

She was going to kiss me.

I hadn't been entirely honest with my reasoning for wanting to kiss her. I should probably feel bad about that, but I didn't know any other way to do it. Reid had to be my first sapphic kiss. She just had to be.

"Are we doing this or not?" Reid asked while I internally flipped out.

"Wait, now?" I asked.

She nodded. "No time like the present."

My hope when I came over was to get her to agree to the kiss and then we'd do it later. After I'd brushed my teeth for at least an hour and had time to do a lip scrub to make sure my mouth was as kissable as possible. One needed to prep for this kind of thing.

But now Reid was looking at me and I couldn't find the words to say any of that. I couldn't say no to her right now if I tried.

Reid stood up and stepped around the couch.

“Oh, uh, right,” I said, getting up and facing Reid. She moved closer to me until we were almost touching. Reid was just about two or three inches taller than me, so we were pretty well matched as far as height. That was another point in her favor. I don’t know if I’d want to kiss someone who was so tall they had to bend in half to reach my mouth. At least not for my first one.

“Soph?” she asked as my mind went off on a bunch of tangents.

“Yeah, okay.” Impulsively I licked my lips and looked into her eyes. She was gorgeous. She was so gorgeous, and she was going to be my first kiss as a lesbian. How had I gotten so lucky?

“Are you ready?” she asked.

“Uh huh,” I said, and started to lean in.

“Wait,” she said, and I froze.

Reid tucked some hair behind my ear and stroked my cheek. “Just thought we should take a second.”

“Of course. Should I do something?” Kissing had never made me this freaked out before. Kissing guys had always just kind of happened and I’d expected it. When those kisses didn’t send me over the moon, I kind of forgot about them.

Kissing Reid wasn’t like that. Kissing Reid was monumental, at least for me.

Trying to find some sort of natural instinct, I put my hands on her shoulders, like we were slow dancing or something.

Her T-shirt was so soft from being washed so many times.

“Ready?” Reid asked me.

I nodded and kept my eyes open as she leaned closer. I should probably be leaning too, but suddenly I couldn’t move.

The world stopped spinning as Reid’s lips touched mine.

Ohhhhhhh my god. Oh. My. God.

Her mouth was warm and firm and nothing like those other kisses I’d had.

If I hadn’t known I was a lesbian before this kiss, I did now.

Very gently Reid kept pressing her closed mouth to mine. Somehow, I was able to get myself to move. To kiss her back. To angle my face so I could get closer to her. To clutch her shoulders in desperation because holy fuck, this was it.

One of us let loose a moan (Her? Me? Both of us?) and then she opened her mouth and took complete control of the kiss as if she’d asked and I’d said yes without even having a conversation about it. She’d just known what to do.

Reid kissed me deeply and slowly, as if she wanted to savor every single moment. My mind was a complete blank. No anxious thoughts or worries or fears. Only her. Only this.

It had never been so quiet in my head.

Reid's tongue stroked my bottom lip and I heard another moan. That one was definitely me.

At the sound, Reid wrenched away from me, gasping.

"I'm sorry!" I said as my eyes flew open to see Reid standing a few feet away from me with a dazed look on her face and reddened lips.

"Don't be sorry," she said, her voice soft. "I'm... I didn't intend for it to be, uh, like that."

She licked her lips and I had to close my eyes to get a hold of myself. I hid my shaking hands behind my back. Every inch of my skin felt sensitized and raw. As if the kiss had affected my entire body. I didn't know kisses could do that.

"Are you okay?" she asked.

"Yeah, I'm fine. How was it? For you?" I wasn't sure if I could put into words how it was for me. Had words been invented yet for a kiss like that?

"Oh, uh, yeah. No, you're good. I mean, if you kiss someone else, you definitely know what you're doing. You'll be fine."

She didn't seem so steady herself, and I couldn't help but feel a little smug about that. I guess I'd affected her too.

“Anything I need to work on? Or change?” I asked to see her reaction.

Reid blinked once at me. “No, I wouldn’t, um, I wouldn’t change a thing.”

That was quite a compliment. “Thank you.”

Reid chuckled. “You’re welcome, I guess.”

Silence fell between us for a few moments.

“There was one thing that we didn’t do that I wanted to check.”

Reid’s eyebrows shot all the way up her forehead.

“And what’s that?” she asked.

“French kissing. It can go so wrong, you know. I want to make sure I’m doing it right.” This was both a truth and a lie. I did want to make sure that I wasn’t doing anything bad with my tongue, but I also wanted to get her tongue in my mouth. Immediately. I wasn’t above begging if I had to.

“Oh. That makes sense,” Reid said slowly. “I wouldn’t want to be derelict in my duty as your tutor.”

Was she making a joke? I stared at her and she chuckled.

“Come here, Soph.” Her tone was just a little stern and it was like she’d tugged a string inside my body and pulled me closer.

That was new and interesting.

Since I hadn't really been with anyone, sex was still so much of a mystery. I'd been able to figure out some things on my own, but there was only so much you could do unless you had a partner to try things with.

"Ready?" she asked me again. This time I decided to hold onto her waist, curling my fingers into the fabric of her T-shirt.

One of her hands went to the back of my neck and the other to my side.

"I'm ready," I said in a trembling voice and then we both moved toward each other in a rush, nearly colliding.

Reid managed to hit the brakes enough at the last second so there wasn't a clash of teeth as she captured my mouth again. This time she didn't start with being soft. No. She went right for the most intense, dizzying, deepest kiss I'd ever experienced.

And then she slicked her tongue along my bottom lip again and I opened my mouth to her. Come in, I'm so glad you're here. Welcome.

I'd had a tongue in my mouth before, but it had all been very wet and weird and unpleasant.

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Nothing like this. Reid was so gentle with me. Starting slowly with little teasing touches before moving on to deeper strokes that had me reeling. I was so overwhelmed at first that I couldn't even respond to her, but then I couldn't stop. Her tongue didn't get to be the only one who got to play.

Reid seemed to sense that I wanted to explore, so she pulled back, as if giving me permission. Now it was my chance to do as I pleased, and I did. All of it.

She tasted so good and her breath was warm against my face as her fingers dug into me and yanked me closer.

If there was an award for the perfect kiss, we would have won in a landslide, at least from my perspective.

That nasty voice that ruined everything whispered that I was kissing her too much and I should probably stop.

Crap.

Reid leaned back and my eyes flew open.

"What happened, Soph? Where did you go?" Her fingers brushed the side of my face and she stayed close to me.

"I'm sorry," I said, because that was my kneejerk impulse. "I didn't want to kiss you too much. You're being so nice to me, letting me do this and I didn't want to push you."



Reid studied my face and then gave me one of those real smiles that I treasured.

“Sophie,” she said, her voice so gentle. “I’m not kissing you to be nice to you.”

“You’re not?” I asked.

Reid chuckled. “No. If I was a better person, I wouldn’t have kissed you at all.”

“What?” I didn’t understand what she was saying to me. “I don’t get it.”

Reid let out a groan and then pressed her forehead to mine.

“You’re really gonna make me say it?”

This was getting out of hand. “Say what? Reid, what’s going on?”

Reid took a step away from me and looked up at the ceiling as if the answers would be written up there.

“You came to me asking for help. A sapphic dating mentorship situation. For me to be your lesbian jedi master. And I didn’t think it would be a problem. You’re the younger sister of the woman who wrecked my life. There was no way I would feel any way but platonically about you.”

She finally met my eyes.

There was definitely something she wasn’t saying, and I was trying not to get my hopes up about it.

“But?” I finally asked, hoping to prod her into an admission.

Reid let out a little laugh. “But... I think, I mean, I do, maybe, kind of have a teeny tiny sort of crush. Very small.”

She held up her hand, her fingers about an inch apart. “It’s so small. Barely measurable.”

I suppressed a laugh. “Let me get this straight. You have a crush on me?”

“First of all, I’m not straight, and second, I don’t even think I’d classify it as a crush. It’s more...an interest?”

That did make me laugh. I’d never seen her like this, and it was absolutely hilarious. And adorable.

“Reid, are you trying to say that you like me?” I asked, mentally crossing my fingers that the answer was yes. Because if Reid liked me and I liked her, then all that kissing hadn’t been one-sided. She had felt something too.

“Aw, fuck,” Reid said, throwing her head back. “I knew this was going to be a disaster. I knew it. Why do I make terrible decisions?”

“Reid,” I said, stepping close and putting my hands on her shoulders to get her attention.

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“I have a crush on you too. I’m not even going to minimize it.”

She snorted. “You can’t have a crush on me.”

“Why not?”

“Because you’re Kaylee’s little sister and because I’m...mean.” She didn’t sound like she was so sure about that.

I rolled my eyes. “You’re not as mean as you want people to think you are. Reid, you’re gorgeous and you’re smart and you’re funny and yeah, you’re a little bit of a grump but I like that too. When I talk, you actually listen to me. You don’t tell me that I’m being annoying. You see me.” How could I make her believe that I could be more myself with her than with just about anyone else? That being myself with her was freedom?

“Shit, Sophie. That’s the nicest thing anyone’s ever said to me. How could I not like you? You’re beautiful, first of all, and you’re kind and you’re optimistic. You make me see things differently. I tend to be kind of negative and when you’re around, I do that a lot less. I’m so ready to see the worst in people. You’re just...you’re good, Sophie. You make me feel good too.”

God, I wanted to kiss her again. Kiss her and hold her and make her repeat what she’d just said over and over again.

“That’s the nicest thing anyone has said to me.”

“You’re easy to compliment, Soph,” she said, gripping my chin and running her thumb along my bottom lip.

“I asked you to kiss me because I didn’t want anyone else to be the first woman I’d kissed. I wanted it to be you. So I lied, a little. Forgive me?”

Reid laughed. “I mean, I lied when I acted like it would just be to test and see if you were a good kisser. I wanted to kiss you.”

Oh thank god. It hadn’t been a pity kiss.

I pretended to gasp. “You lying liar.”

Reid nodded slowly. “It’s true. I’m a lying liar who lies.”

“Like how you lied earlier about the size of your crush on me? Because it doesn’t sound so tiny.”

“Yeah, fine, okay. It’s not as small as I initially reported.” That made me giggle. She was such a dork sometimes and I loved that I got to see it. That I got to see so many different sides of her that other people didn’t.

“Is that so?” I asked, touching her sides and pulling her closer.

Reid shuffled closer to me. “You can’t look at me like that.”

“Like what?” I asked.

“Like you’re going to kiss me again. It makes me forget the things that I shouldn’t be forgetting.”

“Like what?”

She inhaled sharply through her nose and I knew I wasn't going to like what he said next.

“Like the fact that you're Kaylee's younger sister. And you look like her. And everything that happened with her.”

“Are you saying that I make you think of her?” I asked. She'd mentioned that when I'd gotten locked out of my apartment, but I'd been trying to forget about it. There wasn't anything I could do about being Kaylee's sister or looking like her. But I thought that Reid had moved past it.

“At first? Yeah. But not so much now. I know you're separate people. What she put me through, though, Sophie? She wrecked a lot of things. I know it was years ago, but that doesn't mean that I've moved on. I haven't. Maybe that's wrong, I don't really care. I think I'm allowed to feel about it however I want to feel about it.” Her tone grew defensive, as if I was attacking her.

“Hey,” I said, slightly squeezing her sides. “I'm not asking you to feel any way about my sister. I haven't told her that I've seen you. That's probably wrong, but I don't care. What's between us is between us.”

“Fuck, Sophie. This is a bad idea, ohhhh, this is a bad idea.” She put her hands up and backed away from me.

“Because of Kaylee? Or because you're scared?” I asked.

“I can't do this,” she said, gesturing back and forth between us. “I did it once and it almost killed me, and I can't do it again. I can't do it again, okay? I can't.” She was panicking.

Her voice caught and then she let out a painful sob.

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“It’s okay, Reid. It’s okay. If you don’t want to do this, we don’t have to,” I said, my stomach in knots.

Reid fell onto her couch and cried with her head in her hands.

After a few beats, I sat down next to her, leaving her a little bit of space.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I can’t believe I’m crying in front of you.”

Taking a risk, I put my hand on her back and rubbed gentle circles. Reid was going through some shit and my first instinct would always be to comfort her.

“Fuck!” Reid yelled and then stood up. “I can’t do this right now. I can’t do this right now.”

She paced in circles and I wondered if I should go. She tore her hands through her hair and then wrapped them around her belly, like she was trying to hold herself together.

“Reid?” I asked, standing up from the couch slowly. Her head snapped in my direction, tears streaming down her face. “Can I give you a hug?”

She pressed her lips together and shook her head.

“Okay. That’s fine. But I’m going to wait here with you for a little while.” I wasn’t leaving her alone like this. She could kick me out when she’d come back to herself.

This night had taken a turn that I didn't expect, and I wished I could travel back in time to when she'd had her tongue in my mouth. I should have known that was too good to be true. That my crush on Reid wasn't going to work out.

Reid paced a little more and sniffed. There was a box of tissues on her coffee table. I grabbed a few and brought them to her.

She took the tissues and wiped her face before she blew her nose.

"Um," she said, her voice choked with emotion. "Maybe you could hug me now?"

I was happy to hug her after she'd set aside the used tissues.

"Come here," I said, opening my arms and she walked into them. I folded her into my chest, and she put her head on my shoulder. Her arms encircled me after a second and she let out a long sigh.

"Your sister really fucked me up," she whispered.

"I'm so sorry. I knew it was bad, but I didn't know how bad. I wish I could have done something."

"Did you know? About her and Nora?" AKA, Kaylee and the girl she'd been cheating on Reid with. That part had floored me. Kaylee hadn't really had a good explanation for all of that, but she did say it was her biggest regret and that she'd never do something like that again. I couldn't square the cheating with the sister I knew and loved so much. It had really shaken my relationship with her for a long time.

"No, I didn't know. I had no idea. I don't know what she was thinking. She didn't tell me until much later. Nora cheated on her once they got to college. Did you know



that?” Once Kaylee had been on the other side of cheating, she really figured out what she’d done. She’d stayed single for a long time after that and had thrown herself completely into school and her career.

“No.”

“Does it make you feel any better?”

“No.” Her tone made me laugh a little. Her body had been stiff when I’d first hugged her, but she was slowly melting against me.

One of my hands moved up and down her back to soothe her.

“We don’t have to do anything else. I’ll leave you alone, Reid. I promise.”

It was going to hurt like hell, but I wouldn’t let her know. I’d pretend it was just a silly temporary crush. Like I got them all the time. She didn’t need to know that she was the first woman I’d ever felt this way about. When I’d been younger and closeted even to myself, I had never even gotten to the point of a true crush. Just vague confusing feelings and what I thought was admiration.

“Fuck, Soph. Why did it have to be you? I could have resisted anyone else.” Her voice tickled my ear.

“Are you saying I’m irresistible?” I shouldn’t be flirting with her. I should be saying goodnight and that I wouldn’t bother her anymore.

“Pretty much. I just... I don’t know what to do about you, Sophie.” She groaned and leaned her head back so she could look into my eyes.

“I keep telling myself I need to tell you to go back to your apartment and then I keep

thinking about that kiss. I can't go the rest of my life without kissing you again."

That was a bunch of mixed signals.

“So, what does that mean?”

“Fuck, I don’t know. I don’t want to be in a position where that might happen to me again. I can’t have that happen again, Sophie. I can’t.” Her nails dug into my skin and her eyes were wide with panic.

“Hey, I know. It’s scary. Trusting someone is scary. Especially when you’ve had your trust broken. And it wasn’t just Kaylee who did that.”

“What do you mean?”

I took a breath. “Your mom.”

Reid let go of me. “You don’t know anything about my mom.”

“I know enough from what you’ve told me and what you haven’t told me. I think you’ve got a lot of trauma where she’s concerned.”

Reid shook her head. “You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Maybe not. But I think you’ve been pushing a lot of shit aside and not dealing with it.” How did this go from a kissing session to a therapy session? Tonight had really gone downhill. But she needed to hear this from someone. I bet her friends had said the same things, but she should hear it from me too.

“What do you want me to say? That my mom fucked me up so bad that I can’t trust anyone? That I used to dream that I was adopted, and my real parents were going to show up any day and take me home with them and save me from her? I hate her. I fucking hate her for everything she did. She stole my life from me. And then I met Kaylee and I loved her, and she fucked me over too. What the hell am I supposed to do with that?”

She’d started pacing again, throwing her words like daggers. Reid had been holding all of this in for a long time. Maybe her whole life.

“Fuck, Sophie. I just...fuck.” Her voice broke and she faced me, her hands held out in front of her. “What the hell?”

I decided to hug her again.

## Chapter Twenty-One

Reid

This was the night from heaven and hell. Two extremes. The high of finally kissing Sophie and the low of ripping open my life and talking about all the bad shit.

Sophie was being unbelievably calm about all this and I kept waiting for her to say she was bailing. That she didn’t need this. That she was done.

But she was still here, even after I’d yelled about Kaylee and my mom. And then she hugged me, and it was like all of my energy drained at once and I was so tired that I was half asleep on my feet.

“Hey,” she said, rubbing my back in this certain way that made me want to beg her never to stop, “why don’t you sit on the couch. I’m going to draw you a bath.”

“You don’t need to do that,” I mumbled.

“I know. But I want to.” She led me over to the couch like a child and I sat down, my legs heavy.

“Just stay here,” she said, patting my shoulder. Where was I going to go?

I listened while Sophie moved around the bathroom and turned the water on. I should tell her to go.

I should, but I wasn’t going to.

Sophie came out and sat down next to me. “I think you need to talk to someone.”

I’d heard those words many, many times before and I’d always ignored them. I was fine. I had moved on with my life. I went to work, I wrote my fanfic, and I had my friends. I wasn’t lying in bed unable to function, so why did I need therapy? By nearly every metric, I was doing a hell of a lot better than some people.

I clenched my jaw so hard that it made my teeth ache.

“Just think about it.”

“I’m sorry. For tonight. That I can’t be what you deserve.” That was the worst part. Sophie should have someone who worshipped her. Who knew how special she was and showed her every day. With flowers and cupcakes and songs written about how gorgeous her eyes were.

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I wasn't good enough for her. Not even close. Sophie deserved someone who could love her with everything they had.

"It's okay, Reid," she said. So forgiving, that Sophie. Too kind.

"It's not okay. I'm sorry I unloaded on you and I'm sorry for kissing you and I'm sorry for a bunch of shit."

Sophie nodded and her eyes were bright as if she was holding back tears. "I know. I'm going to head back to my place now. Please let me know that you're okay when you go to bed. And don't be a stranger. If you ghost me, I'll come find you." She pointed at me and gave me a sad smile. "That's a promise."

Fuck.

I managed to get to my feet to walk her to the door. What else was there to say?

"Goodnight, Sophie."

"Have a good night, Reid."

I did get in the bath, but it didn't make me feel better. At this point, nothing was going to make me feel better. I soaked for a while and then got out and put on my oldest, rattiest T-shirt to sleep in. Normally when I felt terrible, I'd pull up one of my favorite fanfics or books and re-read all my favorite parts. Not even books could lift me out of this mood, though. I was lower than I'd been in a long time.

I'm in bed and trying to go to sleep. You don't have to answer I sent to Sophie.

In bed too. Reading fanfic. I'm not sure about this one. She answered, and sent me a screenshot of her ereader. Oh. That fic. It had been kind of a wild card to send to her, but something had told me she'd enjoy the unconventional alternate universe.

Just stick with it, I promise. It doesn't seem like it's going to work, but then it does and you can't explain why. That fic had taught me that there were some authors who could take a trope that I normally hated and make me love it in this one instance. That discovery had been both amazing and frustrating at the same time.

Okay, I trust you she sent, and her words made my chest ache. How had I messed up things with Sophie so badly? Because of my ex and my mom. How pathetic was that?

Sophie's words about talking to a therapist came back to me. I'd avoided it for so long but lashing out at her tonight was a wakeup call. I didn't like the person I'd been earlier. I didn't want to be her anymore. So angry and bitter. If you asked me if I was happy, I'd say yes, but it wasn't true. I put on a good face, but most days I was going through the motions. There were bright spots, yes, but there was always this darkness lurking around the corner, waiting for me.

It was a miracle my friends put up with all my shit, but they were truly good people. They deserved better too.

And here was the thing: So did I.

I'd never thought about that until tonight. That I didn't deserve to live like this. I guess I always thought that this was what I got for changing my mind about ballet. For dating the wrong girl. That life was just kind of shitty most of the time.

My friends getting into relationships and Jo going to grad school to help people learn

to read had proved that wrong. There were happy people all around me. I just told myself they were faking it most of the time, but that was a lie. I was the one who was faking.

I grabbed my phone and sent a message to my doctor asking for a referral to see a therapist.

Thank you, Sophie.

The next few days were strange. I didn't see Sophie, but we were messaging each other constantly. She kept giving me updates about her fanfic reading and I talked to her about work and she sent me videos of her goddaughter, who was absolutely adorable. I reached out to all my friends, apologizing for being such an ass and got back very heartfelt and confused messages. I explained that I wanted to see a therapist and they were all unbelievably supportive. They'd been waiting for me to take this step, but none of them rubbed that in. There was only love.

I did one other thing. I asked Sophie if she would pass along a message to Kaylee from me.

It took me hours to write several different drafts of the message. In the end, I deleted almost everything and kept it short instead. I told her that what she'd done had hurt me in deep and permanent ways. That I hoped she now understood the gravity of the hurt she had caused. That I hoped she had grown as a person and was living a good life. I wished her the best and said I wouldn't ever try and contact her again.

That last part was up in the air seeing how I was still friendly with Sophie, but I wanted to put it in there anyway.

Sophie said it was a good message and that she would pass it along. I also told her it was okay if she wanted to tell Kaylee that we'd been hanging out.



I'm probably not going to tell her about the mentor/mentee thing and the kissing thing. We'll cross that bridge if and when we get there She sent.

That made sense.

I got a message back from my doctor with a list of names for potential therapists. I looked up all their bios and felt comfortable with one woman in particular, so I booked an appointment for Friday. I'd already decided to call out of work.

Guess I was officially going to therapy. I wasn't exactly happy about it, but it couldn't hurt, could it?

Now that I'd had some time away from that night, I could see how bad my reaction had been and it was humiliating that Sophie had seen me break down like that. Nothing I could do about it now, but it would be on my mind the next time I saw her.

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I wanted to do something to make it up to her. To show her that I didn't want to be the person who flipped out after kissing her.

At first, I thought about making cupcakes or something, but that wasn't very good. Then I considered writing her something, but I'd always been truly terrible at poetry. That did give me an idea though.

This is the link to my fanfic profile. Read whatever you want. I sent the message before I could think about the consequences of opening myself up like that.

What should I start with? She asked a few minutes later.

How far did you get in the show? I asked.

Far enough to know it's them She sent, along with a picture of the two female characters from the show. I smiled.

Then you should read Falling from the Sky I responded. It wasn't my first fic, but it was still my favorite. I'd written it in a frenzy right after I dropped out of school. I'd just moved into my apartment and barely had any furniture and I'd just started working at Sapph and everything was falling apart, but I'd needed something good. That had been before I met Cade and Hunter, but Jo had been there and she'd told me if it brought me joy, then I should do it.

I'd typed in a frenzy, my hands and fingers aching. I'd stopped every few hours to ice them, but then I'd gulped down an energy drink and had gone right back to it. In only a few weeks, I'd written thousands and thousands of words and I'd put it up and

readers had responded. It was still my most-read and commented fic and I often went back and re-read some of the best parts. That story had come from a special place and I didn't think I could recreate the circumstances that had led to that story. It had been magic in the middle of madness.

Thank you for sharing this with me, Reid. I know it isn't easy.

It wasn't. There was no way that she was going to love all my fanfic, and I'd have to deal with my feelings when she didn't like something. Wasn't looking forward to it.

I really hope you don't hate it I sent.

I'm not going to hate it She responded.

## Chapter Twenty-Two

Sophie

At first, I wondered if I'd pushed Reid too far that night, but then she'd responded to my messages and said she was going to therapy. And then she'd sent me her fanfic.

That was huge. Completely unexpected and I'd been shocked when I got that message. I'd looked through her profile and saw she was prolific. She'd written so much, holy crap. That was impressive. I'd had no idea. She'd done a lot, and her stories had been read a ton of times. Especially the one she'd recommended. She wasn't the top author in that fandom, but she was up there.

I'd immediately started reading and within a few paragraphs, I was completely hooked. Absolutely riveted. I didn't want to let my eyes leave the page, not even to blink.

The story was a little rough, with typos here and there, but her words were so compelling that I didn't care. Her sentences were poetry sprinkled in with some of the best flirting dialogue and banter that I'd read in a long time. There was just something about the way she wrote that made me want to giggle and kick my feet and clutch my ereader to my chest and sigh in happiness.

There was no way I was sleeping tonight.

Reid and I hadn't talked about it, but we'd been keeping our distance from each other. It seemed like the right thing to do while she worked on herself.

But I missed her. We still got to talk, but I missed her voice and the way her face looked when she was listening to me and hearing her laugh. I missed seeing her eyes go from brown to gold and back.

"No doubt about it, you're in a pickle, my love," Larison said during one of our video chats. Juniper had passed out on the couch after watching a princess movie so we could speak freely.

"Yeah, I'm aware," I said, feeling grumpy about it.

"How long are you going to give her space?" she asked.

"I don't know. Until she says that she wants to see me."

Larison frowned and shifted Juniper off her lap slowly so she didn't wake up.

"Did you ask her about that, or are you assuming?"

"It just seems like what she'd want," I said, defensive.

“You should talk to her,” Larison sang softly. “At least check in.”

I didn’t want to. Because then she might say that she didn’t want to talk to me at all and this might all be over.

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“Whoa. Stop what you’re doing,” Larison said, pointing at me.

“I’m not doing anything,” I snapped. “Sorry.”

“Sophie. Just talk to her.”

“Ugh. Fine. I’ll talk to her. But if this goes bad, I’m blaming you. I’m going to drive there and I’m going to blame you.”

“Oohhh, I’m scared,” she said, wiggling her fingers.

“Hey, I could take you,” I said.

Larison laughed. “Oh, that’s cute. You couldn’t, but it’s adorable that you think you could.”

She was right. She would absolutely wreck me if it came to a physical fight. I’d be too scared to hurt her, and she’d be scrappy and use dirty tricks. It would be over in a few seconds.

“Now, circling back to what we were talking about, go talk to Reid. Not knowing is the worst part.”

She was right. Larison was almost always right. It was really annoying.

“Stop trying to mom me,” I told her, pretending to glare.

She snorted. “Sorry, can’t help it.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

I sent Reid a message the next day asking if we could talk in person on Friday.

I can do it in the evening. I have my first therapy session in the afternoon.

I really was proud of her for doing that. I had no idea if it would be helpful for her, but I hoped so. Having a good therapist had helped me so much. It wasn’t for everyone, but Reid seemed to have so much bottled up that she needed to get out in a safe environment. She needed someone to validate her anger and her other emotions. And maybe help her with some coping skills if she needed help handling them.

Are you nervous? I asked.

Honestly? Yes.

So I told her about my own therapy journey in the hopes that it might ease her mind.

Thanks for all that. You’re right, it’s the not knowing what to expect that’s the worst part. What if I hate it?

I’d had all the same fears. Then you leave. You don’t have to be anywhere you don’t want to be, Reid. You’re an adult. If you hate it, leave. And maybe try a different therapist.

Thanks, Soph. All of this means a lot to me. I’ll tell you all about it tomorrow.

She hadn’t told me what time her appointment was, but I kept my eye on the clock and couldn’t stop looking at my phone during my shift at the library. I didn’t have her

fanfic with me because if I did, I wouldn't be able to do my job. Everything else would fall by the wayside and I'd get fired for ignoring everyone who wanted to check out a book.

I was getting back when I got a message from Reid.

Therapy done. I survived. On the way back with cupcakes. See you in fifteen?

See you in fifteen I responded.

I ran around my place, tidying up and just generally freaking out like this was the first time Reid had ever come to my place.

Her knock on the door was crisp and prompt.

"Hi," I said, yanking the door open and wanting to hug her immediately. I held back, and not just because she had a box of cupcakes held out between us.

"Hey," she said. Reid looked wrecked. Her eyes were red and puffy, and her face was pale. She had been through the wringer today.



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“Come in, come in. Do you want some tea?” Immediately I switched into hostess mode, taking the cupcakes from her and filing the kettle and pointing her toward the couch so she could sit down.

“I was thinking about you all afternoon,” I said as I arranged the cupcakes on a plate and got out the mugs and bags of tea.

“Thanks for talking me down last night. I was so close to canceling.”

I brought everything over on a tray, praying that I didn’t drop it.

“But you didn’t.” Setting the tray down, I took a seat next to her on the couch.

Reid reached for a cupcake as if it was a life preserver and she was drowning. It was chocolate with chocolate frosting. Naturally.

I poured the tea and made us both cups.

“Do you want to tell me about it?” The suspense was killing me, but I didn’t want to push.

Reid took a massive bite of cupcake and swallowed before she answered. “Well. I cried almost the whole time. I’d specifically promised myself I wasn’t going to do that and then, waterworks. I swear there was something she pumped into the air. Anyway. It was brutal and terrible, and I hated every second of it and I have an appointment next week.”

She finished her cupcake and went for the tea.

“Yeah, that’s kind of how therapy was for me. It’s like exercise. While you’re doing it, you’re miserable, but afterward you feel so much better.”

Reid nodded. “Exactly. It wasn’t as bad as I thought it would be, I guess. I’ve got a lot of shit to deal with.”

I pressed my lips together so I wouldn’t make any comments.

“I can feel you wanting to say something over there, Soph. This is not news to me. I’ve got...some baggage.”

Didn’t everyone?

“Yeah, and I’ve got anxiety. Makes us far more interesting, in my opinion.”

Reid laughed. “Okay, I like that. And I think you’re right.”

“Of course I’m right.”

She grabbed another cupcake. “Anyway, I feel like I’ve been run over multiple times today. Please can we talk about something else.”

So I told her how much I loved her fanfic. For a long, long time.

## Chapter Twenty-Three

Reid

She didn’t like it. She loved it. She loved my story. I couldn’t get her to stop talking

about it if I'd wanted to. The story was over one hundred thousand words, so she was only a third of the way through, but she loved it.

Sophie loved something I'd written. Even if she hated every other story of mine, I would never get over this feeling while hearing her gush about her favorite parts, and there were many.

"Oh shit, I need to stop," she said before she put her hand over her mouth and giggled. "I'm fangirling all over you."

Well, fuck. That conjured up all kinds of lurid ideas.

"It's okay, Soph. I don't mind. At all. It's a huge relief. No one I've been friends with has ever read my work and told me what they thought. I don't know if I was more scared about you hating it or going to therapy to be honest." I'd freaked out about both last night switching back and forth. I was fucking exhausted.

"Aw, Reid. I would never hate your work. Even if it had been rough, I would have found something good in it. Promise. But I didn't need to look. Your work is good." She reached out and grabbed my hand, squeezing my fingers. "You're good. And you should trust my judgment because I'm literally in grad school for writing."

That made us both laugh.

"You have talent, Reid. You do. And if you ever wanted to share it in a different way, say, writing a book, I would love to be part of that. Or cheer you on. Whatever you need."

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Sincerity was one of Sophie's best qualities and she had many. I'd never thought of sincerity as so endearing, but she'd changed my mind about a lot of things.

"Well. You did offer to help edit my fanfic. So, uh, maybe you could? I'm in the middle of one right now, but maybe for the next one?"

Her smile was gorgeous. I wanted to tell her more things that would make her smile like that. She could have whatever she wanted if only she'd smile at me like that.

"I would absolutely love that, Reid," she said. "It would be my honor."

"Good."

Fuck, I wanted to kiss her. In between all the other shit I'd had buzzing around my head like angry bees, I'd been thinking about the kiss. If I ranked all the kisses I'd had in my life, that was at the top, easily. Sophie didn't need me to teach her anything in that department.

"You're staring at me," she said, her voice singing a little bit.

"Am I?" I asked, even though I knew that I had been.

"Yup. You are."

She'd leaned closer to me, enveloping me in that fruity sweet scent she had.

"Soph," I said, my voice soft.

“Yes, Reid.”

I pressed my lips together and leaned away from her. “Bad idea.”

“What is?” she asked, her eyes wide and innocent.

“You know what.”

She just gave me a mischievous look.

“I think I should go,” I said, getting up.

She gazed up at me, biting her bottom lip before letting it go. “You don’t have to.”

I did. One of us needed to do the right thing. Sophie was too good for me.

“I do,” I said, and her face fell.

“Okay.”

“Thank you, though. For the cupcakes and listening and for everything you said. It means the world to have you next door, Soph.” I couldn’t say more or else I’d cave and walk back over and kiss her.

So I left.

I felt like shit when I shut the door and leaned against it. Why did I keep hurting her?

I let out a frustrated sound and tugged my hands through my hair.

Why did this all have to be so damn complicated? Why did I have to be so

complicated? Weighed down by all this shit.

But if I reached for Sophie, I'd drag her down with me. I'd never be good enough.

Why did that hurt so fucking much? I'd cried for an hour in therapy today and yet there were tears on my cheeks. Again. Like I'd opened a dam and now I was nothing but raw emotions and tears and open wounds from the past.

I was a fucking wreck.

Sniffling and wiping my face, I got up off the floor (where I wanted to stay, to be honest) and went to take a shower. Getting in bed seemed like the wisest decision right now. Getting in bed with a book. There was a new release by one of my favorite authors that I'd been holding off on reading until I really needed it, and tonight was the night. This was a romance book emergency.

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The book turned out to be a bunch of my favorite tropes and micro tropes all stuffed in a hilarious plot. This author always delivered.

I yawned as I finished a chapter and then heard a noise. A buzzing. A loud buzzing. And then I heard a moan.

What. The. Fuck.

It was Sophie.

### Chapter Twenty-Four

Sophie

I was pissed. I understood why she left, but that didn't mean I was happy about it. She was holding back from me and I didn't like it. I wanted to kiss her. She wanted to kiss me. The only thing in our way was her and I guess I'd had enough with Reid pulling away.

Just knocking on her door wasn't enough because she could ignore me. Or yell at me to go away. It was late, too, and I didn't want to bother the neighbors, which is how I got the idea to get out my wand vibrator and make some noise that I knew she'd hear.

I wasn't actually masturbating, but I was completely turned on and ready if she decided to ignore me. Tonight I was getting off.

With one ear pressed up against the wall, I listened for her to pound on the wall.

Nothing.

I increased the speed on the vibrator and made my moans louder. Could she tell I was faking?

Silence next door. I was about to up the ante when someone knocked on my front door. Fear and excitement exploded in my stomach and I wondered if I'd gone too far.

Being bold wasn't my thing, but I'd gotten tired of doing nothing. Of not having what I wanted.

And I wanted Reid.

I turned off the vibrator but brought it with me to the door.

"Can I help you?" I asked, locking eyes with an irritated Reid. Her hair was damp, and she wore only a long T-shirt and a pair of shorts underneath. No bra.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" she asked as I backed into my apartment. She followed me, shutting the door behind her and locking it.

Oh. Shit.

Reid was mad. I'd never seen that look on her face.

"I'm sorry! I was just—" I stopped talking when she reached me.

"You were just making noise to get me to come over here?" she asked, her breaths coming in rapid pants.



“Yes?” I squeaked.

Reid took the vibrator from me. “You know they make quieter ones, right?”

I licked my suddenly dry lips. “I know. But I like this one.”

Reid had me trapped. I was utterly at her mercy in a way that I’d never been before. Blood pounded in my ears and my heart and my clit and I was so turned on that my legs started to shake.

Reid shut her eyes and inhaled.

“Fuck,” she said under her breath before she opened her eyes and kissed me.

She swallowed the little sound of surprise I tried to let out before I melted into her and gave myself over to the kiss. This one was different than the others. Aggressive and almost angry. Like she’d been holding back and now she’d had enough so she was giving me everything.

She could. Give it to me. I’d take it. I’d take it and hold it and cherish it and adore it.

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Reid thought she was damaged and mean and bitter, and she was all those things, but she wasn't only those things. She was so much more than that.

I whimpered and felt her smile in satisfaction.

"You are a tease," she said, pulling back just a little. I followed her mouth, trying to pull it back so we could keep kissing.

Reid clamped her teeth down on my bottom lip and stroked her tongue along it, making me dizzy and hot and fluttery.

The vibrator had clattered to the floor when she'd kissed me, so she leaned down to pick it up.

She held it out to me, and I took it.

"Show me," she said.

"Show you?" I asked, blinking.

"Show me how you use this," she said, and I couldn't stop the loud moan that came out of me when I understood what she was asking.

"You want me to show you?" My voice was so unsteady I was barely coherent.

"I shouldn't," Reid said, shaking her head. "I shouldn't cross this line with you."

Instead of arguing with her, I reached out to take her hand and tugged her in the direction of my bedroom. She resisted for a second and then she followed me.

What the fuck was I doing, holy shit. Reid was in my bedroom and I had my vibrator in my hand, and she was going to watch me use it.

Was I really doing this?

Reid paused in the doorway and looked around my room.

“Get on the bed,” she said, and I gasped.

Holy shit. That tone in her voice? That tone could get me to do anything.

She stepped closer as I scrambled onto my bed.

“Do you want to get under the covers?” she asked, and it took a second to process what she was saying.

If I wanted to do this, but keep covered up, that was okay.

Oh.

I’d never been naked with someone before. I definitely wasn’t ready for that, but before I could second-guess myself, I pulled my shirt over my head. I wasn’t wearing a bra underneath.

Reid’s pupils dilated as she stared at me.

“Fuck,” she said on an exhale. “You’re absolutely perfect.”

“Thank you,” I said. “I’m not... I don’t think I can take off everything.”

She met my eyes and nodded. “Whatever you’re comfortable with, Sophie.”

Those words soothed me as I got under the blankets and pulled down my shorts.

Just knowing I was naked with her in the room was making me so ready and so wet even if there were blankets between us.

Reid took another step closer until she was right beside the bed.

“Sit with me,” I said.

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“You sure?” she asked.

I nodded.

Settling on the bed, she moved until she was between my spread feet. Close, but not too close.

“Show me,” she said again when I hesitated.

Her nipples poked through her shirt and I could see that she was turned on too.

This was one of the most erotic moments of my entire life and I hadn’t even done much beyond taking off my clothes.

“Sophie,” she said. “Show me what you do with that. Show me what you do to make those sounds.”

Oh hell.

I bit my lip and started stroking my nipples with one hand as the other reached for the vibrator.

“Turn it on, Sophie.” Her voice was low and had that edge of command that hit at something deep inside me. Like I was an instrument and she’d plucked a string I’d been unaware of.

I turned the wand onto the lowest setting, the sound muffled a little bit by the

blankets.

It wasn't easy to do this with her watching. I had to remember my normal routine of teasing before I went in for more contact.

"Ohhhh," I moaned when I floated the vibrator down my stomach. It wasn't going to take much to get me there. I was already so close.

"When you get close, I want you to tell me, if you can."

I nodded even though I didn't know if that was something I could do. This was an entirely new experience for me, and I didn't know the rules.

But that made it exciting. Kicked my desire up a notch to where I was almost losing my mind.

Moving the vibrator, I had to be careful to not detonate my orgasm too quickly. It wouldn't take much.

"I'm close," I told her as I pressed the vibrator on the side of my clit with light pressure. The wand was cumbersome to maneuver, but I was doing my best. I'd had many hours of practice.

"How close?" Reid asked, her eyes never leaving my face.

"Oh god, so close," I said, making another pass on the other side of my clit, my climax sparkling just barely out of reach.

"Turn it off," she said, and my eyes flew wide. "Turn it off, Sophie."

My mouth popped open, but I complied, letting out a whimper of frustration.

“Why?” I asked.

Reid treated me to a wicked smile. “You teased me. Now I’m going to tease you back. You going to back out?”

If I wanted to, I could turn the wand back on and get myself off. Or I could tell her to get the fuck out of my bedroom.

I didn’t want to do either of those things. I wanted her to watch me. I wanted her to talk me through this. To tell me what to do.

“No. I’m not going to back out,” I said.

Reid nodded, still smiling. “Good girl.”

Another breathy noise left my mouth. Oh, that was something I liked hearing.

“I haven’t been hearing you use that thing lately,” she said to me as I shook with need and wondered if I should start begging her to let me turn the vibrator back on.

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“I’ve been using it when you were at work,” I admitted. “I didn’t want you to hear me.”

Reid closed her eyes and groaned.

“I didn’t want to ruin things between us. And I was embarrassed.”

Her eyes opened and she met my eyes. Hers were warm and golden.

“You shouldn’t have been embarrassed. And I’ve been listening for you. Couldn’t stop thinking about those sounds you’d made. I’d barely been able to hear them over the sound of that thing, but still.”

I giggled and bit my bottom lip.

“What have I told you about doing that?” she asked. I let go of my lip.

“Sorry.”

“Next time you want to bite that lip, you tell me, and I’ll do it for you.”

“That’s one of the sexiest things I’ve ever heard,” I said.

Reid chuckled. “You can turn the wand back on and use it. But put it on the next highest setting and tell me when you’re close.”

I hesitated. “Are you going to let me come this time?” How was I naked and laying in



my bed and discussing getting myself off with Reid Hayward? How was any of this happening?

“I’m going to let you come. Don’t worry about that. Just consider this another lesson.”

That sounded ominous.

“What kind of lesson?”

Reid gently stroked my foot and I felt it even though the layers of blankets and sheets.

“Giving up a little bit of control and then getting rewarded.”

Oh.

## Chapter Twenty-Five

Reid

We were fucking doing this. Sophie had pushed my buttons and I’d just lost it when I knocked on her door, pushed my way in, and demanded that she show me what she did with that thing. And then I’d completely changed tactics.

This give and take had always hovered between us in the periphery. I’d felt it and I knew she had too. Now it was time to see what we could do with it.

I liked being dominant. Just a little bit. Having a partner that gave themselves over to me and let me be in charge of their pleasure. Trusting that I knew how to give it to them. There was such heady power in that, and it turned me on in a way that few

other things did.

Somehow I knew that Sophie would enjoy this side of me. Would let me try this with her. She might be new to being with a woman, but she wasn't new to her own desire. She could easily get herself off. But getting off with a partner was new and I wanted to show her how good it could be. Even if I didn't lay a hand on her.

"Turn it on, Sophie," I said. Her name was quickly becoming my favorite word to say.

She knew that if she wanted this to stop, if she wanted to hit the brakes, that I would leave. This woman was willing to trust me, and I didn't take any of this lightly.

"Come on, baby," I said. The endearment had been sitting in the back of my throat this whole time, but I couldn't hold it back anymore.

Her eyes flared and then I heard the sound of the vibrator. That thing really was noisy.

Sophie moved the vibrator under the blankets while I watched her face. She had them pulled up above her breasts so she was mostly covered, but I wanted her to be absolutely comfortable with all of this.

Only a few moments later she gasped. "I'm close, oh please."

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“Turn it off,” I said, and she let out a sound of frustration, but then she did turn the vibrator off.

“I hate you,” she panted. “I shouldn’t have let you in.”

I laughed. “You’re not going to hate me for long, baby. I promise it will be good.”

She was so gorgeous with her cheeks flushed and her hair a mess and her eyes snapping with blue fire. Oh, she was mad, but she was horny and mad, which was one of my favorite combinations.

This had been quite a day, and I would do a thousand hours of awful therapy if it meant that I got to have this at the end of it.

“Reid, please,” she begged. Fuck, now I wanted to put my hand in my shorts that I’d already soaked a while ago. I wouldn’t do anything about myself until she got what she deserved.

“Okay. Turn it onto the first setting again. And don’t come.”

“What if I can’t stop?” she asked, worrying her lip. She had to stop doing that. I’d almost thrown myself on top of her and latched onto it with my teeth so many times tonight.

“That’s okay. I won’t punish you if you come. But it’ll be better if you don’t.”

She whimpered again. “What kind of punishment?” Oh, she liked that. I’d been

testing the waters with that word and she'd responded exactly how I'd hoped.

This girl wasn't real. She was perfect.

"Ohhh, I don't know. Maybe I'll give you options. Maybe I won't tell you unless I plan on doing it. Who knows?"

She liked that too, her legs moving under the blankets. She had to be overheated.

"How about if I turn my back? Then you don't have to be under the blankets."

She opened her mouth and then closed it. "I like seeing you."

Sophie was learning all kinds of things about herself tonight and I was more than happy to hold her hand on this journey.

"How about you put the blanket down further and cover yourself with the sheet?"

"Okay."

She did that, revealing her nipples that pressed against the white sheet with the pink flowers on it. The blanket stopped just around her hips and I wished I could see all of her, but I wouldn't push. She was more than enough just like this.

"Turn the vibrator on the first setting, baby," I said. "Don't come."

She let out a frustrated sound, but she complied, and I led her through that routine two more times until she had started cursing at me.

"So impatient," I said, enjoying every single second of this. "Do you want to come?"

“Yes! Obviously. Please, Reid.” She was so damn adorable.

“Put it on whatever setting you want and don’t stop until you come. But you have to tell me when you’re coming. I want to know the moment it happens.”

“Fuck,” she said under her breath a moment before she turned on the vibrator. That was a higher setting than she’d used, and I had the feeling she usually went for a quick orgasm over a better one. I did that myself, but she was going to learn. Tonight was a little taste of what we could do together.

“Ohhh,” she moaned as she moved the vibrator and then her entire body started shaking.

“I’m close, oh god, I’m coming,” she gasped, and I watched as her back arched and undulated and she shook in the most beautiful way. God, she was stunning. The sounds she let out? I wanted to drown myself in them.

Her climax lasted for a good long time and I considered sneakily getting myself off while she was otherwise occupied, but I couldn’t move as I watched her in the throes of pleasure.

Her body finally relaxed on to the bed and she let out a breathy little laugh.

“Oh my god. Oh my god.” Sophie trembled a little before she tilted her head up and looked at me with lust-dazed eyes.

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I'd never seen anything so beautiful.

"What the hell, Reid?" she asked. "I don't even know what that was."

I laughed under my breath. "Yeah, you haven't seen that side of me yet, have you?"

She snorted and wiped at some sweat on her collarbone. "No. I don't even know what just happened. I feel like my brain isn't working."

"Well, my dear Sophie, you had what's called an orgasm."

She kicked at me with her foot and I grabbed it so she couldn't do any damage.

"I know that, asshole. I mean the other stuff. The telling me what to do stuff."

I shrugged. "It's what I like when it comes to sex. And I had a feeling you'd like it too."

She flattened the sheet across her chest. "You know I've never..."

"I know," I said. "I figured that out. Was this okay for you? I didn't want to push too hard."

She shook her head. "No, this was... I don't even know what to call it. Amazing doesn't seem like enough. I had no idea this would happen. I'm not mad that it did, though. Not mad at all."

“Good,” I said, squeezing her ankle. This was probably time to make my exit.

“Wait!” she said, her eyes going wide. “What about you? Don’t you need to, um, come?” This woman was going to be the death of me.

“I’m fine,” I said. “This lesson was about you.”

She sat up while she held the sheet to her chest. “No, you should do whatever you need to do. I mean, can I watch? Only seems fair since you got to see me.”

Her eyes glittered and I fell completely under her spell. This woman could have whatever she wanted from me.

“Are you sure?” I asked.

She nodded. “Yes. I want to see. You can keep everything on. If you want.”

That seemed like the best course of action, so I leaned back a little and spread my legs, resting them on top of hers as I pulled my sweaty shirt away from my chest. She wasn’t the only one who was overheated.

Normally I would have drawn this out. Teased myself and made it last, but I wanted to get off. Quick and hot and dirty.

Plus, having Sophie watch me kicked things up about a hundred notches.

I slid my hand under the band of my shorts to find my dripping core and dragged my fingers through the dampness, spreading it around my clit and moaning. I didn’t hold anything back, letting her see all of it.

Sophie’s eyes roamed my face before dragging down my body and watching my hand

as I worked myself. Using two fingers, I thrust into my pussy, eliciting an indecent sound that made both of us moan. Holy fuck, this was one of the hottest moments of my life and I wasn't even naked.

With the heel of my hand, I rocked back to press on my clit while I worked my G-spot from inside.

"Coming," I announced before my own climax seized me, hitting so hard and so fast that I let out a scream and shook with every single wave that choked me and stole my breath and shocked my veins. My gaze locked on Sophie's face, holding nothing back.

One minute I was shaking and the next I had fallen over sideways on Sophie's bed, my chest heaving.

"Holy shit." I hadn't come that hard since I don't know when. A very long time.

"Wow," Sophie breathed. "That was incredible."

"Thank you," I gasped and then pushed myself upright with my noodle arms. My brain wasn't going to come back on line for a little bit.

"Would you... I mean, would it bother you if I came again? It's just that I usually go at least three rounds."



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“You’re going to kill me,” I groaned.

“How about I do it my way while you recover and then you can be all bossy again for the last one?” She wiggled her eyebrows in the cutest way and I laughed.

“Okay, Soph. Show me your way.”

So she did.

It was very late by the time that I decided to leave her. We were both sweaty and sated and boneless.

“I would walk you to the door but...” she trailed off.

We hadn’t kissed since I’d attacked her earlier, but I couldn’t leave without a goodnight kiss. I’d kept my distance while she was naked, but I couldn’t anymore.

“You were perfect, Soph. So fucking perfect.” I kissed her deeply, making lazy sweeps with my tongue that had my head spinning and wanting to climb into bed with her, but I leaned back before I could.

“Thank you, Reid,” she said. “Tonight has been unexpected, but unforgettable.”

“Goodnight, Soph,” I said, giving her one last peck before I went to the door. Before I left, I turned and said one last thing.

“Don’t come again until I tell you to.”

She gasped and I laughed as I unlocked her door and went back to my apartment.

## Chapter Twenty-Six

Sophie

If I'd had any lingering questions about my sexuality, they had been put to rest last night. Watching Reid come? Sexiest fucking thing I'd ever seen. She let herself go and it was unreal. I couldn't stop thinking about it the next day while I sat at the library desk and then watched my lecture and tried to work on an assignment that was due next week, but it was no use.

All I could think about was Reid. And when we could do that again. Immediately, I was hoping.

You're still coming with me to that party tomorrow, right? She asked the next afternoon. I knew she had work tonight and that was annoying because I wouldn't get to see her. I also didn't want to be too clingy and desperate, even though she'd told me I couldn't come again until she'd given her permission. Was she serious? Or was that just a thing from last night?

I was so new to this. I didn't know what the rules were.

Yeah, definitely. It sounds like fun. It would be fun if she was with me. I knew that if I told her I was uncomfortable and wanted to leave, she'd get me out of there.

I trusted Reid. I trusted her in a way that scared me. These feelings were big and new and terrifying and I had to process them with my best friend.

I did something last night I sent to Larison.

Good or bad? She asked. I was surprised when she got back to me immediately.

Both I sent and she video called me right away.

“You can’t just drop a bomb like that,” she said, her face filling the screen. She was in her car.

“I assumed you were busy with Juni’s dance class,” I said.

“Your timing was perfect because I dropped her off and came out to my car to grab something and talking to you is giving me the excuse to not sit with the other moms.” She made a face. I’d assumed all those stories about dance moms were just exaggerated for TV, but then Larison filled me in that they were all pretty much true, even when the kids were really young.

That was what Reid went through with her mom. It made sense that she’d go no-contact. That she would want to quit ballet. That she’d want to have her own life. Yes, she’d had talent, but what about the cost?

Reid. I couldn’t stop thinking about her. Thinking about last night. She’d been so careful with me. So gentle. I’d been supported and cherished the whole time and all I wanted was more of that. More of all of it with her.

“Sophie? Earth to Sophie,” she said, pretending to tap the screen to get my attention.

“Sorry. Drifted off there for a second.”

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“Mmmhmmm, and did you drift anywhere in particular?” She smirked.

“So, Reid and I had a little situation last night. I’m not going to give you all the details, because they’re private, but we kind of fooled around, I guess?” That was what you’d call it, right? Mutual masturbation to be specific, but I wasn’t going to get into all of that with Larison.

“Oh my god, you didn’t!” she squealed, and I told her how it had gone down and how absolutely amazing it was.

“Wow, so she changed her tune, huh?”

I nodded. “Yeah, pretty much. It was like she flipped a switch and she was all over me. It was... It was incredible, Larison.” I couldn’t let myself get going or else I’d spill all the most salacious parts of the night.

“Okay, so what does this mean now? Are you together?”

Wasn’t that the question? I didn’t have an answer for her.

“I don’t know. We’re going together to her friend’s parent’s party tomorrow, but I don’t think it’s like a date or anything.” I should have asked. Since we were meeting all her friends, I should at least know what to tell them about us.

“It kind of sounds like a date, though. You’re going as her plus one.”

“I mean, technically? But I’d originally agreed to go as friends. And it’s not a

wedding, there aren't plus ones, Larison." I rolled my eyes.

"Sure, love, whatever you say." She chuckled and shook her head, absolutely amused by this whole thing.

"You're supposed to be supporting me, not mocking me!" I said, but I was laughing.

"I'm sorry. Well. I'm not that sorry, but I am thrilled for you. I know I haven't gotten to meet her, but from what you've told me, I think she has good taste. I'll have to give my true opinion when I come to visit."

"And when will that be?" I asked. I knew it was hard for her to coordinate everything with school and Juniper.

"End of the summer? I'll have a short window before fall semester starts and the moms were planning to come to me to make it easier, but I think I'd like to come up with Juniper instead. Stay at the house and let them spoil and cook for us and just rest where I'm comfortable. Which means I would definitely have to have some Sophie time." That sounded perfect.

"Listen, I should go in so I can make sure my daughter isn't biting anyone, but I'll let you know about coming up. And you let me know all about the party and any and all updates with Reid. I'm living vicariously!"

She blew me a kiss and we hung up as I flopped back on the couch.

Reid had work in a few hours, but I hoped that I'd see her today. Just as I was considering getting up and knocking on her door, there was a knock at mine.

Grinning, I bounded over and checked to make sure it was Reid through the peephole.

“Hi,” I said, trying not to throw myself at her. She already had her work clothes on, and she looked amazing.

“Hey,” she said, smiling slowly. “I thought we should have some space but then I guess I couldn’t stay away from you.” Her cheeks were pink as she admitted it.

“Ohhh, I see. You couldn’t get enough of me.” I reached out to snag her T-shirt and used it to reel her into my apartment and then closer until her mouth was on mine.

“Mmmm,” I said. She tasted delicious, like she’d just brushed her teeth.

Reid kissed me in that unhurried way of hers that made my mind completely blank out. God, she was good at that. I almost wished she would give me kissing lessons.

“Fuck,” she groaned, pulling back, but keeping her forehead connected to mine as she held me. “You’re dangerous. If I keep kissing you, I’ll never go to work.”

“I could always come with you. I’ll sit at the end of the bar and every time you needed a kiss I’d be right there.” It was an appealing idea, even if it was impractical. There was no way I could handle being at Sapph for that many hours.

“While that is a very sweet idea, you’d be too much of a distraction and I’d be dropping glasses right and left and that would be dangerous not only for me, but for everyone else behind the bar.”

She kissed my forehead and leaned back but didn’t let go of me. Little bubbles of happiness fizzed in my stomach at having her here and so close.

“Are you sure you’re okay coming with me tomorrow?” she asked again.

“Yup. I also wanted to ask you what I should say to your friends. I mean, what do

they know about me?” Did they know about me?

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“Oh,” Reid said, blowing out a noisy breath. “I hadn’t really thought about that. Been too busy reliving other moments. Um, what did you want to tell them?”

“We can tell them that we’re friends. Because we are. Or we could tell them something else, but that’s a decision we need to make together, don’t you think?” I wasn’t going to assume anything.

“I mean, this doesn’t just feel like friendship, Soph. It feels like something else.” Her eyes fluttered closed as we breathed each other in.

“Yeah, it does.” My voice was soft. “If you had to put a definition or a label on it, what would you call it?”

She made a face. “Normally I am not a fan of labels. But I think we can say we’re seeing each other, yeah?”

I leaned back just a little bit to study her face.

“So, dating, right? That’s what we’re talking about?”

Reid nodded. “Yeah. Dating. Seeing each other. Same thing.” Were they? I wasn’t sure.

“Okay, so we’re dating.”

Reid inhaled a deep breath.



“You okay with that?” I asked, raising one eyebrow.

“Surprisingly? Yes. I thought it was going to make me want to panic and run away, but hearing you say it just makes sense. Of course we’re dating. Why wouldn’t we be?”

I grinned. “I completely agree. Can you just promise me one thing, though?”

“Sure, anything,” she said.

“Can you promise me that if it gets to be too much, or if you’re having second thoughts, or you want to bail, that you’ll talk to me first? Don’t disappear on me, please. Don’t shut the door in my face.” If things were going to end between us, I wanted us to be mature about it.

She licked her lips. “Yeah. Yeah, I can do that. I promise. I won’t... I wouldn’t treat you like that, Soph. I respect you.” I knew she did, but I had to get that out there.

“Good. Is there anything you need from me?” I asked her.

“Just to be patient with me, if you can? And talk to me. I don’t want you to be afraid to talk to me about anything. I know you’re new to all of this. We’ll go however slow you need to go. I won’t be disappointed.” Her smile was warm, and it wrapped around me like a hug.

We swayed side to side a little together, as if we were dancing. “Does that mean we can do more things like last night? Because last night was one of the best nights of my life with no exaggeration.” It was probably the best night of my life, but she didn’t need to know that.

Reid gave me one of her full smiles. I wanted to fold it up and put it in my pocket for

safekeeping.

“Me too. You really did like it?”

“Yes,” I said, kissing her. “I did. I liked it too much.”

It had been so hot, having her give me commands and following them, even when I didn't like what she told me to do. At any moment, I could have told her to fuck off and done whatever I wanted, but letting her have the control? It was so much better. Hearing her voice change and seeing her face while she'd given me those commands had taken the experience over the top to something I never expected.

I wanted more. I needed more.

“So you want to do it again?” she asked.

“And again and again and again—” She cut me off with more kisses as she laughed into my mouth.

“I wish we could do that tonight, but I have to work. But tomorrow night, I'm free. If you are.”

If I hadn't been free, I would have told her I was and canceled anything for her.

“Yeah, I can be free,” I said, going for nonchalance.

Reid dove forward and gave me another kiss. “Good. I'll come grab you tomorrow for the party.”

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“Have a good night at work. I wish you lots of tips and polite customers,” I said.

She snorted. “I’m not going to hold my breath, but I hope you’re right.”

With one last deep kiss, she left and went to Sapph.

I sighed and grabbed my ereader. If I couldn’t spend time with her, I could at least spend time with her writing.

### Chapter Twenty-Seven

Reid

“You are so out of it,” Maddie said the second time I’d dropped a glass. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d dropped something twice in one night. My head was all scrambled from endorphins. From Sophie.

“Just having an off night,” I told her. When it came to my personal life, my coworkers knew very little. I kept my work life and my home life as separate as I could. They didn’t need to know anything about me other than that I had their backs and would do my job.

“Hmm,” Maddie said, studying me. “Seems like something’s up with you.”

I rolled my eyes at her and cleaned up before heading to make a row of shots for a group of friends.

The hours trickled by and even though I knew she wasn't coming in, I kept looking for Sophie. I was a disaster.

During my breaks, I checked in on her and she gave me updates on how she was doing with reading my fanfic. I still couldn't believe how much she loved that story. She'd just gotten to the first sex scene and I was sweating about her reading it. Not that I thought I was some great erotic writer, but I hoped she didn't think it was bad. And hopefully she'd think it was hot.

By the time I got home, it was so late, but there was another bag on my door, and I smiled when I opened it and found a cupcake and a sticky note.

Something sweet for someone sweet. Missed you. See you tomorrow/today.

-Sophie

Could she be any cuter? I didn't think so. How had I gotten so lucky?

I slept well and woke up before my alarm. I smiled to myself and sent a message to Sophie.

Thank you for the cupcake. It was great. Pick you up in an hour and a half?

She responded right away. You're welcome. I'll be ready.

I'd told her that she didn't need to bring anything with her to the party, but intuition told me that she might show up with something anyway. Sophie was just that kind of person. She'd always show up with a gift, never forget a birthday, always offer to help.

I got ready and checked in with Cade, Hunter, and Jo, who was apologetic, but

couldn't come. She just had too much work to do.

That was disappointing but expected. I'd have to get her to meet Sophie another time. Having her meet Cade, Eloise, Hunter, and Stace was already a lot. Plus, Stace's family was going to want to know all about her and Sophie was going to be all sweet and polite even if she was uncomfortable. I didn't want that for her.

"Hey, you ready to go?" I asked when she answered the door. She wore the white skirt and pink top she'd tried on for me to go to Sapph and she had an off-white sweater over her arm along with her bag over her shoulder. Her hair was up in a ponytail and she looked good enough to eat.

"Wow," I said, forgetting whatever the hell I'd just asked her.

"Wow yourself," she said. "Can you do a turn for me?"

For a second, I hesitated and stepped back, executing a perfect double turn, spotting automatically. I might not have been near a barre in years, but my body still knew the steps.

Sophie gazed at me and smiled. "You're such a beautiful dancer, Reid."

I shrugged. "I'm so rusty now. If I tried to do a leap or anything I'd bust my ass, but I can still turn." If I really wanted to go wild, I could whip out a fouetté turn right here wearing my sneakers. It would be ugly, but I knew I could still do it. Turns had always been my specialty and one of my favorite parts of dance. Spinning around and letting the world flash by. It was almost like flying.

"Maybe someday you can get back to it. On your own terms. Or not. It's completely up to you." For years after I quit dance, I'd said that there was absolutely no way in hell that I'd ever go back. That I was done.

“Maybe,” I said, but my reaction wasn’t as hostile as it usually was. Whenever people would mention dance to me in the past, I’d freak out a little and get angry, but that anger had fizzled a little. Huh.

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“Anyway,” I said, shaking my head. “I meant to ask if you’re ready.”

“Yup,” she said, reaching over to grab something she’d set on the little table by her door where she kept her keys.

When I saw what it was, I laughed. “I told you that you didn’t have to bring anything.”

“I know. But this peach crumble is really good. And it’s gluten free and nut free. Just in case.”

I snapped my fingers, remembering. “You know, Stace’s little brother has Celiac, and her brother’s boyfriend has a nut allergy, so that’s actually smart.”

Sophie beamed. “I figure it’s a good call to go as allergen free as you can when there’s a group.”

“You’re so smart. And kind.” I just had to kiss her while she held the baking dish between us. It wasn’t easy, but I didn’t care.

“Thank you,” she said. “Shall we go?”

“We shall,” I said and stepped aside so she could go down the stairs first.

The party was already going when we got there with cars parked up and down the driveway.

“Oh, that’s a lot of people,” Sophie said as I turned around and then found a spot.

“Hey,” I told her, reaching over to take her hand. “Why don’t we have a safe word? A word that you can say to me and if you say it, I’ll pretend to have some kind of emergency and we’ll leave.”

“A safe word?” she asked.

“Yeah, they’re not just for sex, in my opinion.”

Sophie nodded and looked down at the pan on her lap. “Peaches.”

“Peaches?” I asked.

“Yeah, peaches.” She blushed and I couldn’t stop myself from kissing her cheek before we got out and started walking toward the backyard where the party was in full swing. There were kids running around and jumping on a trampoline and adults congregating around tables of food and a few guys standing at the smoking grill. There were coolers overflowing with ice and drinks scattered on the grass.

I spotted Stace and Hunter and waved. Stace came right over, a huge smile on her face.

“Hey, good to see you.” She didn’t hug me, and I knew that was hard for her. Stace was a tactile, huggy person.

“This is Sophie,” I said, pointing to her.

“Hi,” she said, her voice bright. “I brought peach cobbler. It’s nut and gluten free.”

Stace beamed. “Wow, thank you so much. You didn’t have to, but this is going to



make a few people happy. Let me take that for you.”

Sophie handed over the pan and Stace went to add it to one of the food tables.

“Nice to meet you, I’m Hunter.” Hunter could never shake her debutante rich-girl upbringing. She’d been taught manners from her old money family and even if she didn’t see them anymore, those habits ran deep.

Sophie shook Hunter’s hand and stared at her for a second. Hunter had that effect on people.

“There you are,” said a voice behind me and we turned to see Cade and Eloise.

“Sophie, this is my friend Cade and her girlfriend Eloise.” I’d warned Sophie ahead of time about meeting Eloise, but I could still feel her trembling beside me. I reached out and placed a hand on her lower back, making tiny circles the way she did when she was trying to calm me down. She leaned into my touch.

“So nice to meet you,” Sophie said, her voice shaky.

“Nice to meet you,” Cade said. “I’ve heard so much about you from Reid that I feel like we’ve already met.”

Cade’s smile was warm and open, and I could feel Sophie relaxing.

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“Yeah, I feel the same way,” she said. “I mean, I’ve read articles about you, but seeing you in person is different, obviously.” That comment was directed at Eloise, who had been gazing at Cade with hearts in her eyes.

“Thank you. Don’t believe everything you read.” Eloise winked and Sophie let out a little squeak as her face blushed brilliantly red.

“Hey, are you hungry? Should we get something to eat?” I asked Sophie.

She nodded and I pulled her toward the food, setting a plate in her hands.

“I know you warned me about meeting Eloise Roth, but I’m still freaking out a little bit. She’s so famous!” she hissed at me as I served her.

“How do you want your burger?” I asked her. There was something intimate about doing this for her. Sophie didn’t seem to mind that I’d taken over.

“Uh, cheeseburger with lettuce and tomato. Oh my god, I need to calm down,” she said, putting the plate down and shaking her hands out.

“Hey. You’re good. Everything’s going to be okay. I won’t let anything happen to you, Soph. And if you need to go, all you gotta do is talk about peaches and we’re gone. My friends will all understand. Okay?”

I made sure she looked into my eyes and saw how serious I was. This was going to be a good day for her. I’d do whatever I could to make that happen.

“Yeah,” she said, and I handed her the plate again. She waited with me while I made one for myself and then we snagged some drinks.

There were plenty of chairs and my friends had grabbed a few, so I headed in that direction.

Stace’s little brothers ran by, chasing their friends.

We’d just sat down when Stace’s mother, Maggie, came over to ask us if we needed anything.

“Oh, you must be Sophie, it’s lovely to meet you,” Maggie said, giving Sophie a warm smile. “Thank you for coming.”

“Thank you for having me,” Sophie said.

“Of course. We just love Reid.” She winked at me and I snorted.

“She’s exaggerating,” I said.

“Are you calling me a liar?” Maggie said, hands on her hips.

“No, ma’am,” I said, and she grinned.

“Damn straight. I’ll be around if you need anything. My husband is at the grill if you have any requests.”

She pointed at the man wearing the apron with KING OF THE GRILL printed on it who was waving a pair of tongs around as he told a story to a group of other men who were all laughing.

A moment later a tall man with absolutely massive muscles walked over with a wiry man with red hair.

“Hey, Reid, how’s it going?”

I nodded. “I’m good, Tor, how are you?”

He shrugged and had a swig of his soda. “Eh, can’t complain.”

“This is Sophie,” I said, nodding to her. “Soph, this is Stace’s brother Torrin and his boyfriend Micah.”

She said hello to both of them.

“Wait, are you the one who brought the nut-free cobbler?” Torrin asked, setting one beefy arm across Micah’s shoulders and pulling him closer.

“Um, yes,” Sophie said. “That was me.”

“Thank you,” Micah said, leaning into Torrin. “I really appreciate someone taking allergies into consideration.”

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“Oh, you’re welcome. I hope it’s okay. I can give you the recipe if you end up really like it.” Sophie clamped her mouth shut. Taking her hand, I pulled it until I was holding her fingers with both of my hands. She clutched onto me.

“I’m sure it’ll be amazing,” Torrin said, smiling.

“Tor! Tor!” a little boy ran over and yelled.

“What is it?” Torrin asked, leaning down to speak to his youngest brother, Carson.

“Can you pleaseeeee push us on the swings?” Carson asked, clasping his hands in front and begging.

Torrin laughed. “Course I can.”

He excused himself and Micah waved as they went to the swing set and started pushing some of the little boys.

“Do you think he works out a little bit?” Sophie asked.

“Uh, yeah. He and Micah actually met at the gym.”

“And I’m responsible for setting them up,” Hunter said from my other side. “They were both in my yoga class, so I had them put their mats nearby.”

“Hey, it was my idea to get them together,” Stace said, indignant.

“Of course, babe, but I did the work.”

Stace glared and then turned to us again.

“I really think I was the mastermind in this situation.”

Sophie and I watched as Hunter and Stace bickered adorably.

“So, Sophie, Cade told me you’re getting your MFA in creative writing?” Eloise said. Sophie froze beside me.

“Um, yes. I am. I’m not sure what I want to do with it yet, though. There are so many options and I’m just not sure. Editing, agenting, all of it sounds interesting.”

Eloise nodded. “Let me know if you ever want to sit down and talk about it. I’d be happy to put you in touch with my agent or my editor and they can give you more of an idea of what it’s actually like. It’s a tough industry, but I believe in bringing in and fostering new talent. I’m happy to lend a hand.”

Sophie’s mouth dropped open. “Oh, wow, that’s so generous. I mean, you don’t even know me.”

Eloise didn’t seem fazed by that. “Well how about we get to know each other?”

Sophie let out a little squeak and I wanted to know if this was too much for her. If she was overloaded yet.

“Oh, sure.” Eloise squeezed Cade’s shoulder and stood up, bringing her chair over to sit on Sophie’s other side.

Cade sat for a minute as she talked with Stace and Hunter but then she frowned and

moved over to sit with Eloise.

“I’m not a clinger, I swear,” she said as we all watched her move closer to Eloise.

“Uh huh,” I said, but I still had Sophie’s hand in mine and Hunter was practically sitting in Stace’s lap.

Sophie turned to speak to Eloise but kept her hand in mine at the same time. I stroked her skin and felt her slowly unclenching the longer she talked.

I listened, but mostly kept out of it, satisfied to watch Sophie talk shop with Eloise. She was so animated and waved her free hand around as she rambled about her dreams and aspirations and she was so passionate and so beautiful and it made something ache in my chest. I just wanted to hold her and listen to her and kiss her and be with her all the time. I’d never been addicted to anyone before, but this felt like it might be something like that. I wanted to stand up and tell everyone how great she was. How gorgeous and smart and funny and wonderful. Everyone needed to know.

I had to squeeze Sophie’s hand so she’d pause and take a breath and eat something.

Stace’s middle brother, Eli, wandered over and hovered next to Hunter. They put their heads together and from what I could pick up they were talking about art. Eli ran into the house and came out with a stack of manga that he proceeded to flip through and show Hunter. Stace listened with a smile on her face.

It was really cute.

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This was the first time I'd been at an event like this when I'd been truly comfortable. Not desperate to leave. Not trapped in small talk with some random person I didn't care about. Not listening to my friends being happy and living their lives while I sat there and simmered in my own grumpiness.

I found myself smiling much more than I would have and even getting up on the trampoline when Carson dared me.

I jumped and did some leaps that the kids thought were pretty cool. I thought about doing a flip, but I didn't want to end up in the hospital even though Torrin was an EMT. The potential embarrassment wasn't worth it.

"Come on, Soph. Jump with me," I called, and she scrambled up on the trampoline with me.

"I can't remember the last time I've done this." She giggled and took my hands as we bounced together, getting higher and higher with each jump. She let loose a laugh and I couldn't help but laugh with her.

"Who are you and what have you done with Reid?" Cade asked as Sophie and I bounced in a circle, laughing our asses off.

"Shut up," I told Cade.

"Leave her alone. She's happy," Stace said, putting her arms around Hunter and kissing her head. My friends hadn't pulled me aside and interrogated me about what I was doing with Sophie, but I knew I was going to hear it in the group chat later. I



appreciated them holding off and not making Sophie uncomfortable today.

Sophie and I jumped until we couldn't breathe and then got off the trampoline, collapsing into our chairs.

"Do you want dessert? I'll grab it for you," Stace said. She got her hosting skills from her mother.

I requested a plate with anything chocolate and Sophie said that she wanted a little bit of everything.

Stace saluted us and went to fetch our desserts.

Cade had taken the seat next to Sophie and I could hear them talking together, their voices getting progressively louder. Eloise sat on Cade's other side and shared a knowing look. It wasn't a shock that Eloise and Sophie would get along. Add Stace in the mix and the volume would really go up.

Sophie and Cade got going about books and then they were off to the races. I added a comment here and there, but I was happy to sit back and watch my girl go.

My girl?

Sophie wasn't my girl. We had literally just started dating. I hadn't called her my girlfriend or anything. We were seeing each other. That was it. This thing between us was new and fragile. So fragile.

I didn't want to do anything to break it.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Sophie

Reid's friends were wonderful. I'd known they would be, but I'd needed to see for myself. To shut up the mean anxiety voice in my head.

Cade and I had especially bonded over books and I had a whole list of new titles to read, and I'd given her some too.

Then there was Eloise. Eloise freaking Roth. The famous author. Famous by anyone's standards. She'd published dozens of bestsellers and traveled all around the world promoting them. She rubbed elbows with so many other famous people, not just authors. Just talking to her was a privilege.

"I can't believe Eloise said she'd help me out," I said for the tenth time. I couldn't stop gushing to Reid on the way back, but she didn't seem annoyed or anything. She just smiled at me from the passenger seat.

"She's cool like that. I should have hooked the two of you up sooner. She could definitely help open doors for you with your career."

That was something beyond my wildest dreams.

"So, you had a good time?" Reid asked.

"Yeah, I really did. Honest."

"You didn't have to use your safe word," she said, reaching across the console to set her hand in my lap. I laced our fingers together.

"I didn't." But I'd had it in my back pocket. Just in case. That meant more than I could express to her. That she'd known this would be hard for me and had given me

the support I needed.

“You’re a good person, Reid,” I said, and she scoffed. “You are. But don’t worry. I’ll keep it a secret.” I whispered the last part.

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Reid laughed. She'd been smiling and laughing a lot today. She'd been comfortable in a way I hadn't seen her be, outside of our time together.

"Did you have a good day?" I asked her.

"Mmmm, I did. Surprisingly. If you would have told me I'd go and bounce on the trampoline before we got there, I would have said you were high, but it was fun. I had fun."

I pretended to gasp. "Reid Hayward had fun? Shocking."

"Shut up," she said through a laugh before raising our joined hands to kiss the back of mine.

"Never," I said.

I didn't ask her if she wanted to come into my apartment with me after the party. She just followed me in, setting down the empty pan that had once held the cobbler. It had been devoured and my baking skills had been complemented. Both Maggie and Torrin had asked for the recipe.

Reid sunk down onto my couch with a sigh after she'd kicked her shoes off. I did the same, sitting next to her. She put her arm around me, pulling me closer.

"I love my friends but listen to that." She paused and I stayed silent.

"What is it?" I asked.

“Quiet,” she said.

“Oh.”

Her eyes went wide. “I didn’t mean you had to be quiet. I mean now I don’t have to hear anyone else but you. You’re my favorite person to listen to, Soph.”

Well.

“That’s a nice thing to say.”

Reid ran one finger down my nose, over my lips, and down my chin.

“It’s the truth.” Her finger drew me closer until our lips met.

“Wait,” I said, and she instantly pulled back. “No, I mean, I just wanted to say that I know this is all still new and you’ve been so careful and sweet with me, but you don’t have to. I mean, I’m still nervous, but I feel safe with you. I want...I want to do more.” Not sure what that more was yet.

“What kind of more, baby?” she asked, voice going low in that way that made tingles go up and down my spine.

“I don’t know. But I’d like to see?”

Reid nodded. “We can absolutely do that. Want me in charge again?”

I nodded eagerly and she chuckled. “You ready now?”

Absolutely.

I led Reid to my bedroom again and this time, I was ready for her to see more of me. No more hiding under blankets and sheets. I wanted to see her too.

“Can you take off your shirt?” I asked her and she put her finger up to silence me. It should have been irritating, but it wasn’t. Not when we were like this together.

“You said I could be in charge, remember?”

I nodded against her finger.

“So I think you should take your shirt off first.”

Oh. Warmth pooled and settled in various parts of my body as the air grew thick between us.

I reached down and pulled my shirt over my head. I had a bra on underneath. It was simple but pretty and pink. I’d worn it in the hopes that she would see it and enjoy it.

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“Fuck, you’re gorgeous,” Reid said, reaching for me and stroking her hands up and down my sides, causing goosebumps.

“Let me see what’s under that skirt, baby,” she asked softly.

I pulled down the zipper on the side and shimmied out of the skirt. The bottoms I had on matched my bra. Reid didn’t need to know that most days I didn’t bother to match.

“Damn, Sophie,” Reid said. “You’re killing me here and you’re not even naked. Get that cute ass on the bed.”

I laughed as I launched myself onto the bed with a flying leap.

“That’s one way to do it,” Reid said, laughing as she crawled up next to me.

“I know you’re being all bossy and everything, but can you please take your clothes off?” I asked. “Please?”

Reid closed her eyes. “Fuck, you could get anything you wanted when you say that, and you look at me like that.” She stripped off her shirt, revealing a classic black cotton bra. That wasn’t a surprise.

“More?” I asked.

Reid sighed. “You know you’re not being very good at letting me top you, baby.”

“Sorry,” I said, but I wasn’t.

Once Reid had stripped out of her jeans, I got to see her in just her underwear.

“Scared?” she asked, stretching out next to me on the bed, laying on her side.

“No,” I said. I wasn’t scared right now. A little apprehensive. But there was no fear.

“You ready to get naked?” Reid asked.

I took a shaky breath. “Yeah.”

I sat up and watched her as I slid my bra off and let it fall to the floor, pausing while I hooked my fingers in my bottoms.

“All of it,” Reid said, that low command back.

Now or never.

I shimmied out of my bottoms and lay back on the bed, completely and totally naked with another human for the first time.

“Look at you,” Reid said, leaning closer. “You’re absolutely fucking gorgeous, Sophie.”

In that moment, I wasn’t thinking about scars or flaws or stretch marks or any of my other insecurities. I was only thinking about the way that Reid was looking at me.

“You’re utterly perfect,” she said, her voice soft and reverent. “Can I touch you?”

“Yes,” I said. “Please.”

Reid’s fingers were light as she traced them from my cheek down my neck and the



top of my chest, fluttering along my collarbone. Those touches were so light that I could barely feel them.

I grabbed her hand and used it to cup my breast, moaning at the contact.

“Oh is that how it’s going to be?” Reid said through a laugh. “You’re a little bit of a brat, you know that?”

“I’m not,” I said as she started stroking me, circling my nipple. Oh, that felt so good. Much better than when I touched myself.

“I have to kiss you, baby,” Reid said, her voice sounding a little desperate.

I reached up to put my hand on the back of her neck to pull her closer until our lips met, causing both of us to moan.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 4:18 pm*

Before I knew it, Reid had straddled me, her entire body pressing me into the mattress. Her weight was warm and heavy in the best way. Oh god, I could come just from kissing her like this.

Reid systematically took me apart with her lips and her tongue and her hands that roamed and touched and teased as her hips just barely thrust against me.

“Fuck,” I gasped, and Reid chuckled into my mouth.

“You’ve been wanting this, haven’t you, baby? Been craving it?”

I whimpered an answer.

“Do you want me to touch your pussy? See how wet you are for me?”

Another desperate sound. She’d robbed me of the ability to speak.

“Or maybe I should make you check first? Touch yourself, Sophie. Show me.”

Holy hell. With a shaking hand, I slipped my fingers between us and touched my throbbing clit and moved lower to my entrance which was dripping.

“Show me, Sophie.”

I raised my hand between us, presenting Reid with the evidence of my arousal.

She smiled. “That’s what I thought.”

Before I could gasp, she'd sucked my fingers into her mouth, her tongue circling and licking and sucking in an obscene way that made my clit pulse with need and my pussy ache to grip onto something.

My wand vibrator was great, but it could never top this. Never in a million years.

"Mmmm. You taste sweeter than I imagined," she said. "Can I touch you now?"

I could only nod my agreement.

Reid pushed up on her forearms and scooted further down my body, dropping sweet little kisses on my skin as she went. She knew what she was doing and everything she did was right.

"You still with me, baby?" she asked.

My hands had been gripping onto the blankets beneath me, but I let go and stroked a hand through her hair, pushing it back from her face. Reid never wore her hair up, not even when she was bartending. It was always messy in a sexy way.

"Yes," I said as she looked up into my eyes, hers like pools of melting chocolate and flecks of gold leaf.

"If I do anything that isn't working for you, I want you to say something. This doesn't work unless we're both enjoying it. And if there's something you want me to do, you need to tell me. Understood?" Her tone was stern again and it made my breath stutter in my lungs.

"Y-yes," I said.

"Good girl," she said, and I gasped. She gave me a devious smile before she pushed

my legs wider. “Lift your hips up for me, baby.”

I did and she shoved a pillow underneath that she pulled from the head of the bed.

“Look at you. Pink and pretty and perfect,” she said. There was only a small flash of embarrassment about being so open in front of her, but it went away as she gazed at me.

“God, you’re gorgeous everywhere.”

I shifted on the pillow and she noticed. Reid always noticed.

“Here’s what’s going to happen. I’m going to lick you and touch you and fuck you with my fingers until you come. I’m not giving up until that happens. I don’t care what it takes. I’m going to take care of you, Sophie. Know that.”

I dug my fingers into her scalp. “I know.”

“Good,” she said. “Let’s find out what you like.”

### Chapter Twenty-Nine

Reid

Being with a new partner could be frustrating. There was always some fumbling and crossing your fingers and hoping you were doing the right thing and they were truly enjoying themselves.

Not with Sophie. She was fresh and new and wide-eyed, and every single touch seemed to set her off. I'd never been with anyone this responsive and it was doing wonders for my ego. I was going to follow through on my promise. Even if we discovered that she needed the wand to get there, I'd do whatever it took.

Sophie sat up so she could watch me as I touched her gently with the lightest of touches. It was best to start slow.

"Ohhhh," she moaned. "Yes."

I'd barely done anything, and she was already moving against my hand and asking for more.

Beautiful.

After a few more touches, I decided it was time to taste her. Just licking her essence from her fingers wasn't enough. I needed more.

Spreading her open with one hand, I drew my tongue up and down before venturing

around her clit in a slow circle. Sophie's nails dug into my scalp and her other hand ripped at the blankets.

Incoherent sounds fell from her mouth as she arched her head back against the pillow.

"You like that?" I asked.

She moaned and panted and subtly pushed my head closer so I could lick her again. I did, and kept going, measuring each one of her responses to see what she liked best. Once I'd figured out a good routine with her clit, I started to slide one finger inside her. She was pretty tight, but I could work with that.

Her moan when I got one finger fully inside her was intense.

"Mmmm," she said, bucking her hips against my face, needing more. I added a second finger, pumping slowly in and out of her as I teased her clit with my tongue.

"Reid, please," she begged. For someone who hadn't done this before, she knew that I was holding back.

"You want more, baby?" I asked, blowing a breath against her clit.

"Yes!" She sounded so horny and so indignant at the same time that I chuckled.

"You ready to come for me?"

"I'm so close, Reid, please."

I could feel her pussy clenching at my fingers. I gave her G-spot a stroke and watched her arch and cry out.

“Sophie?” I asked, making sure I had her complete attention. Our eyes locked, her pupils blown out.

“You can come whenever you’re ready,” I said before I pressed against her G-spot and sucked on her clit at the exact same time.

She screamed and came all over my face.

“I’m sorry,” she said, reaching down to clumsily wipe at my face in the aftermath. She was all over me and I’d never been happier.

Grabbing her fingers, I brought them into my mouth and licked them, using my teeth to nip gently.

She shivered.

“Never apologize for that,” I said, licking my lips. Holy hell she tasted amazing.

“Can I kiss you?” she asked, which surprised me.

“Of course you can,” I said, sitting up and sliding up the bed so we were face to face.

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Sophie studied me before softly pressing her lips to mine. I let her lead, holding myself back. She whimpered and then her tongue was in my mouth and she was kissing me so hard that I thought she was going to bite my tongue. I wouldn't have minded a bit.

Sophie pulled back with a grin. "Is it bad that I liked that?"

I nuzzled my nose against hers. "Not at all. I want to know everything you like. None of your desires are strange with me. There's no shame in anything when we're together."

Sophie nodded. "I like it when you tell me what to do. When you decide when I get to come. I guess I like you being a little mean to me." Her giggle was just a little breath of sound.

"I like it when you let me do that. Turns me on hard."

I was a breath away from coming right now.

"Can I make you come? Or at least give it a shot?" Sophie asked and she was so cute I had to kiss her again.

"You are definitely going to make me come, Sophie. I want you so much."

She sat up abruptly, her eyes bright with a new determination.

"Show me what to do."



This woman. So eager and gorgeous and I was in her bed and I couldn't believe it.

I rolled onto my back.

"Do you want me to tell you what to do?" I asked.

Sophie nodded. "Yeah, I think that will be better."

So I did. With my words and my hands, I directed her, giving her minute instructions on what to do. How to pleasure me. Her enthusiasm was an aphrodisiac, heightening everything and making me so wet and horny that I didn't let her tease me for long.

"I want to taste you. Can I taste you?" Sophie said and I almost climaxed from the desperation in her voice.

"Yeah, baby, you can taste me. Why don't you go ahead and explore and I'll give you direction if you need it."

Something told me she'd have good natural instincts and I was right.

Sophie practically hauled my legs onto her shoulders and went right in, licking and sucking and using her tongue and her fingers to absolutely destroy me in only a few seconds flat. What she lacked in skill, she made up for in determination. Like she was racing to see how fast she could get me to completely lose it. Didn't take long at all.

"Oh fuck, baby, right there," I said when she coordinated her hand and her mouth as my orgasm ripped through me. Rush after rush of unimaginable pleasure crashed over me, rocking me to my very foundation and erasing any other climax that came before. Bright lights and fireworks and lighting.

This. This was the one. The most stunning climax of my entire life and it lasted so

long I worried that my heart was going to stop.

It didn't, and I finally crashed back to earth with liquid limbs, oversensitive nerves, and tingling skin.

"Oh my fuck," I panted, barely able to form the words.

"Beginner's luck?" Sophie said from her position between my legs. I unclenched my hand from her hair and tipped my chin against my chest so I could look at her.

I'd never seen anyone so beautiful. All messed up with her chin wet and her eyes bright.

Sophie set my legs down and rested her cheek on my thigh.

"Was it good, really?"

I let out a laugh. "You couldn't tell? I'm pretty sure I've never come that hard in my life."

"Really?"

"God, you are too precious. Come here." I reached for her and she snuggled into me. I never would have pegged myself as a cuddler, but damn, Sophie felt incredible in my arms. I wanted to hold her and not let go.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 4:18 pm*

“I was always so scared about sex. It seemed like this big, terrifying thing and I couldn’t imagine doing it with anyone for so long. I mean, I’d seen porn or whatever and it never... I was always so confused about it. And then I came out and a lot of things made sense, but I was still worried that this part wasn’t going to work.”

I kissed her temple and squeezed her. “It worked, Soph. Oh, it worked.”

She laughed. “I didn’t think I’d find someone I could feel so safe with. I feel safe with you, Reid. And that’s something I never thought I would have.”

“I feel safe with you too,” I admitted. Those words weren’t easy to say, but I knew in my bones they were true. I’d only trusted a few people in my life and several of those people had broken it in a substantial way.

I wasn’t going to think about them right now. Not when I had a naked Sophie in my arms. That was something to deal with in therapy. I wouldn’t ruin this moment by looking backward.

My fingers stroked up and down her back as she lay against me and rested her head on my heart.

### Chapter Thirty

Sophie

Sex with Reid was more than I could have imagined. All my uncertainty vanished as I did everything I could to make her come. Then she did and I was hit with a rush of

power so intense that I thought I was going to orgasm myself. We held each other for a while and then she showed me how we could get each other off at the same time with our hands while we kissed each other and that was another earth-shattering experience.

“Do you want to take a shower with me?” I asked her in the sweaty aftermath.

“Yeah, I’d love to,” she said, and followed me into the bathroom.

Giggling, we soaped each other up and washed each other’s hair and talked about random things. This part was almost as good as the sex. Just being naked and comfortable with her made me all fluttery and giddy. I couldn’t stop smiling.

“Stop looking at me like that,” she kept saying and then she’d kiss me until my head spun and I wanted to drag her back into bed with me again.

Our growling stomachs put pause on that idea, so I dragged Reid to the kitchen with me. She’d put on a pair of my shorts and a T-shirt that were a little small on her, but I liked that.

“What do you want?” I asked her, fully intending to cook.

She put her hands around me and pulled me until my back was pressed up against her front, her arms circling me and her chin going to my shoulder.

“I want you,” she said in my ear, nipping my earlobe. I whimpered and pushed back against her.

“To eat, what do you want to eat?”

She laughed, the sound vibrating against my back. “Same answer. You.”

“Reid!”

She licked my neck and I couldn’t focus, gripping the counter in front of me.

“But since you’re asking about food, how about a grilled cheese? I can make it.”

Reid licked me one more time and went to the fridge.

“You don’t have to make it for me. I can do it.” Reid waved me off.

“I’ve got this.”

My instincts were to argue and tell her this was my kitchen, but then I decided to let go and sit on the counter to watch her.

Reid got out my bread, butter, cheese and olive oil.

Her movements were graceful as she assembled two sandwiches, added some olive oil to the pan, and then spread butter on the bread.

She hummed softly to herself and held out a little piece of cheese for me to eat from her fingers.

“I don’t let just anyone cook in my kitchen.”

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 4:18 pm*

Reid turned and smiled at me. “Then I’ll do my best not to mess it up.”

We decided to take our sandwiches to the couch and piled on top of each other. Instead of eating our own sandwiches, we swapped bites back and forth, feeding each other.

Reid also made us drinks and then played with my hair while we cuddled.

“You know, I’ve never been a touchy person, but I can’t get enough of you,” Reid said.

“I love touching you,” I said, burrowing my head into her chest.

“I can tell,” she said, laughing and leaning down to kiss my head.

“Will you stay the rest of the night with me?” I asked. I’d been thinking about it for a while. If she wanted to sleep at her place, that was fine, but I was hoping she’d stay. Or she’d invite me into her bed. After everything we’d shared, it seemed right for us to spend the night together.

“Yeah, I will. I’m not used to sleeping with anyone in the same bed. I have no idea if I’m going to kick you or drool in my sleep or something.” I looked up and found that her cheeks were pink. Aw, how cute.

“That’s okay. I don’t have to work until the afternoon, so if you keep me up, I’ll just take a nap or something. I’m not scared of sleeping with you, Reid Hayward.”

She snorted. “Okay. If you’re sure.”

“Do you want to go back to your place tonight? I’m going to have to change the sheets on my bed anyway.” They were drenched in sex and sweat.

“Yeah, are you okay with that?”

I nodded. “Yeah, just let me grab a few things.” It was so nice that we were so close to each other. Even if I needed something, I could just come over and get it. The ideal situation for a new couple, really.

Throwing my blankets into my laundry basket to wash tomorrow, I did a quick scan of my bedroom and grabbed whatever I might need. It was late and we were exhausted so most likely we’d crash soon, but I didn’t want to forget anything.

Reid unlocked her door and we went right for the bedroom.

“You ready to go to sleep, or did you want to stay up?” Reid asked. “I’ve kind of trained myself to sleep whenever, so I’ll follow your lead.” Yeah, she didn’t have regular sleeping hours so that made sense.

“How about we read a little bit and then go to sleep?” That sounded like a good compromise.

Reid and I brushed our teeth in the bathroom, grinning at each other in the mirror.

“What side do you normally sleep on?” I asked when we got back to the bedroom.

Reid gave me a sheepish look. “I normally sprawl in the middle.”

Her bed was a queen, so there was plenty of room for both of us.

I snorted and moved to the right side, which was where I usually ended up in my own bed.

We got in and she pulled me into her arms. I held my ereader in one hand and she read over my shoulder.

“Want me to pick something new so we can both read it?” I asked.

“Sure. Maybe you could read it to me.” There was an idea.

Reid and I scanned through my digital shelves and picked a book that we’d both had on our TBR piles that had just come out.

“God, I love a dark sapphic romance,” she said as I settled against her.

“Me too,” I said and started reading. Whenever I’d had to do this in school, I’d panicked, and it had been completely embarrassing. I’d skipped words and stumbled, and the other kids had laughed at me.

This was different. I could take my time and there was no pressure. No judgment. Just Reid listening to me. The woman I felt absolutely safe with.

There were few perfect days, but this had been one. Perfect day, perfect night. What more could you ask for?



### Chapter Thirty-One

Reid

I awoke with Sophie's hair in my mouth and her body on top of mine.

I didn't remember kicking her or hogging the covers or anything else happening during the night.

When I opened my eyes, I found that she was stirring out of sleep as well.

"Good morning," she said, her voice rough in the sexiest way. She smiled up at me and my heart squeezed in my chest.

Fuck, I had absolutely fallen for her. I'd been trying to deny it to myself, but it was only a matter of time. I'd told Cade that I could stop myself, and she'd been right—the only way to not fall for Sophie would have been to never have met her again in the first place. If she hadn't moved in here, I never would have given her a thought. Strange how someone renting an apartment could change your entire life.

"Good morning," I said, kissing her adorable nose. "How did you sleep?"

"Fine, I think. I don't remember anything. I was dead to the world." She laughed softly and I tightened my arms around her.

"I just want to stay all day like this with you," I said.

She sighed softly. “Me too. I would absolutely call out of work, but I’m only there a few hours a week anyway so I’d feel bad.”

She sat up and looked down at me, the blankets falling away from her amazing body and I forgot what we were discussing.

“What?” I asked as my eyes locked on her breasts. If you asked me to create a perfect pair, these would be them.

Sophie put her hand under my chin and lifted my head so I was looking at her face instead. “Hey, since you have the day off, maybe you could come to the library for a little while? You could bring your computer and work on your fanfic if you wanted.”

Now that was an idea. A good one. I had a tendency to get distracted when I was at my apartment and writing in cafes and other places was annoying. A college library was a great place to have some peace and get some words done.

“Okay. Yeah. I’ll come with you.”

“You don’t have to stay my whole shift, but maybe you could drive me and drop me off?” She was only there for a few hours. I could handle that. And if I got bored, I’d just sneak out and get some coffee and bring it to her.

“It’s a plan,” I said, pulling her back down so I could suck one of her nipples into my mouth.

“Reid!” Her indignation quickly morphed into something else. “Ohhh, you’re too good at that.”

“Mmm,” I said as I tongued her nipple and then bit it gently with my teeth. She gasped and I stroked my hand down her belly to stroke her between her legs. She was

already wet and ready for me.

An orgasm before breakfast was the right way to start the day.

Sophie and I lazed in bed after we both came, and I told her I was ordering breakfast. She'd brought a change of clothes with her, so we reluctantly got dressed and had breakfast on the couch together, eating bites from each other's fingers. I guess I was the kind of person who shared food now. Or, I was the kind of person who shared food with Sophie at least.

I drove her to the college and parked in the visitor lot and followed her into the library. She got set up behind the desk and I found an empty table nearby and set up my laptop. If I could get ahead on my fanfic today, that would be fantastic. Then I could spend the rest of my time that I wasn't at Sapph with Sophie.

Yesterday and last night had changed everything between us. I'd thought about her as my girl before now, but she truly was now. Sophie was my girlfriend and I wasn't letting her go without a fight. I wasn't naive enough to think that everything between us was solved by sex, but we'd shared something special last night. A foundation of trust had been laid.

I wanted her in my life, and I'd do anything possible to keep her there. If that meant going to therapy and doing the hard work to deal with my past, then so be it. I'd do it for her. If she told me that she thought I should cut back my hours at Sapph because it wasn't making me happy, I'd listen.

She'd been right about that. Working at Sapph wasn't the worst, but it wasn't filling me up, and sometimes it dragged me down.

Now that I had Sophie in my life, I wanted more good things. I didn't know what that might look like but exploring options couldn't hurt. Not at all.

Every now and then I looked up at Sophie and she'd glance over and smile at me. I'd give her a wink that made her blush furiously. The urge to walk over and kiss the daylights out of her was strong, but I kept my hands and my lips to myself and let her work.

By the time she clocked out, I had gotten so much work done and I was ready to eat again.

“Have you had enough of people, or did you want to go out somewhere?” she asked as I dropped my stuff in the backseat.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 4:18 pm*

“We can go somewhere. Stace raves about this diner she and Hunter are always going to. I guess they have great pie or something.” Cake was better, but I wasn’t going to argue with Hunter or Stace about it. Stace could absolutely and unequivocally kick my ass.

“Oh, that sounds good.”

Sophie hummed along with the radio as I drove us to the diner. It was kitschy, but fun with a ’50s feel to the decor.

We ordered and talked about books and college and random shit. It didn’t really matter. We just liked being with each other.

She fought me for the bill, but I ended up paying. I knew I had more disposable income right now, seeing as how she was only working part time, and she’d just spent all her money on moving and rent.

The two of us had just gotten back and were hanging out at Sophie’s while her laundry was in the washer when she got a message.

“Oh,” she said, a little exhale of sound.

“What is it?” I asked from my position on her couch.

“Kaylee read the message I sent her.”

A boulder dropped into my stomach at the mention of her name. I’d been doing my

best to avoid spoiling everything by not thinking about her.

“Do you want to hear the response?” Sophie asked and I felt sick that I’d made her the middleman in this. I shouldn’t have done that. It was my responsibility to find a way to get closure with Kaylee without her involvement.

“What did she say?” I asked.

“Just thank you for the message and that’s she’s sorry for everything. Here, you can read it.” The message was short and to the point, like mine had been.

“I’m sorry,” I said, giving Sophie the phone again. “I shouldn’t have used you to get in touch with her. That wasn’t fair to you.”

She leaned her forearms along the back of the couch and gazed down at me.

“It’s okay. I don’t mind, seriously. I wish I could change it, but I can’t. All I can promise you is that I’m not Kaylee.” I knew she wasn’t. I’d known pretty much from the first few minutes I’d actually spent with her instead of being angry.

“I know you’re not. I know, Sophie. This is complicated, but I don’t care. I want to be with you.”

Her smile was bright as the sun. “Really? Even with everything?”

I nodded. “You’re worth it.”

She leaned down and kissed me. “You know you’re pretty much my favorite person. Don’t tell Larison or Juniper. I will deny it if they ask.”

She was absolutely my favorite person. I grabbed the back of her neck to make her

stay close so I could keep kissing her.

“I’m so happy you moved here, Sophie.”

“No regrets?” she asked.

I shook my head slowly. “No regrets, baby.”

She liked it when I called her that. I’d have to do it more often.

“Me neither. No regrets.”

She kissed me again and then crawled over the back of the couch so she could lay on top of me.

“Wanna make out?” I asked her.

“Hell yeah,” she said. “I feel like I missed so many of those classic teenage relationship experiences. Making out. Fooling around in a car. Hooking up where you could get caught.”

Her eyes sparkled with interest.

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“Are you just giving me a list of things you want to try? Because I’m absolutely up for that.” I ran my fingers through her hair, pushing it back from her face.

“Maybe,” she said. That meant yes.

“You got it.”

### Chapter Thirty-Two

Sophie

I called Kaylee the next night while Reid was at Sapph and told her everything. It felt like the right thing to do. She was surprised, but she seemed generally okay with my relationship. She had moved on and was happy in her relationship. It was water under the bridge, basically.

It was still going to be awkward for a while, and I’d have to deal with that. If Reid could go to therapy and handle her shit, then I could handle mine. Was it fair that we had to deal with this in our new relationship? No. But that was life. It was hard and it was messy and it was complicated. Sometimes you fell for your sister’s ex. We were moving on.

I had fallen for Reid. Hard. I knew I was in love with her during that night after the party when we’d given ourselves to each other completely. There had been one moment when she’d looked up at me and I’d known.

It had all hit me in an overwhelming rush that stole the air from my lungs.



I loved this woman. I loved Reid Hayward. A wild, enormous, unbelievable amount.

Now I just had to figure out if and when to tell her. This was so soon, and I didn't want to scare Reid with my feelings.

The rest of the week we spent with each other. We'd trade off nights at our places, switching back and forth because we could. Our things migrated back and forth with her stuff showing up at my place and vice versa. It was almost like having two apartments. We traded spare keys like it was no big deal and I'd lay in her bed and sleep while I waited for her to come back from Sapph. I tried to stay up, but it didn't happen.

On Sunday we slept in and I was the first one to wake up since she'd gotten back from Sapph in the middle of the night.

Not wanting to disturb her, I managed to get out of bed and sneak to the kitchen. We were at Reid's so it took a little looking before I found everything I wanted to make her chocolate chip pancakes for breakfast. I threw some bacon on a tray in the oven and some frozen hash browns in her air fryer.

"Are you making me breakfast, baby?" a sleepy voice asked, and I turned to find Reid leaning against the wall and watching me. She called me baby all the time now and I loved it. Almost as much as I loved her.

"Yes, I am," I said, flipping a pancake and exclaiming when it stayed together.

"Mmm, it smells amazing." She hugged me and kissed my neck.

"I used both kinds of chocolate chips for you," I said.

"You take such good care of me," she said, swaying us gently back and forth.

“Yeah, it’s almost like I love you or something,” I said before thinking.

Oh. Crap.

Reid froze for a moment.

“What did you say?” she asked, her voice barely a whisper.

Well. Might as well go for it.

“I love you.” Reid’s hands were rough as she turned me around so she could look at me.

“Say it again,” she demanded, fingers digging into my skin.

“I love you.”

“Fuck,” she said, closing her eyes. “I love hearing that.”

“You do?”

Her eyes opened and she gave me that smile I adored so much. “I do. And I love you too.”

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“Oh my god,” I whispered. “Are you serious?”

“Yeah, I’m serious. Shocked the hell out of me too, but I do, Sophie. I love you so much.” She hugged me hard and I grabbed onto her like I was drowning.

“I love you,” I repeated just for the joy of it.

“I love you,” she echoed and we both started giggling. A second later, the smoke detector went off.

“The pancakes!” I yelled as Reid waved a dish towel to clear the air.

“The only good thing if you burn this apartment is that we can just move into yours.”

I tossed the burned pancake in the sink and sighed.

“Well, I ruined breakfast.”

Reid reached for me again. “You didn’t ruin anything. Burned pancakes with you are better than perfect pancakes with anyone else.”

“Agreed,” I said, and she captured my mouth.

Epilogue

Reid

“What was wrong with that place?” Sophie asked me as we left the third apartment we’d seen today.

“I can’t explain it. I don’t like it,” I said. “There was an off vibe.”

Sophie snorted and squeezed my hand. “Okay. Then we’ll look somewhere else.”

Both of our leases were up soon, so we’d been trying to look for a place together, but I was having a hard time seeing us in any of the apartments we’d looked at. None of them felt right to me and I couldn’t explain it.

“Sorry I don’t have a trust fund or else we could get a place in Hunter’s building.” Although, Hunter and Stace had been talking about maybe getting a house, so that apartment might be available at some point.

“Hey,” Sophie said, pulling me to a stop on the sidewalk. “It’s you and me. Good or bad. Thick and thin. Rain or shine. We’ll find the right place. I have faith.” She kissed me and started to pull away, but I dragged her back.

“You have enough optimism for both of us,” I said, and she laughed.

“That’s the truth.”

She was graduating school soon and already had an internship with Eloise Roth’s literary agent. At first, she hadn’t wanted to take it, but I’d told her that she’d regret it if she didn’t. So far, she was absolutely killing it and I was so proud.

I was still working at Sapph for the time being, but I was looking at my options for jobs. I wasn’t in a rush. Knowing that I didn’t have to make a decision right away gave me the space I needed to figure things out.

My therapist and I saw each other once a week and digging through my past trauma

and issues hadn't been a good time, but I was glad that I'd done it. I still working on forgiving myself and dealing with my childhood. That was going to be a lifelong process. Thankfully, my mom hadn't tried to contact me again, but if she did, I had the tools and scripts ready to deal with her if she violated my boundaries.

Kaylee and I hadn't talked again, but we would eventually. Sophie and I decided we'd cross that bridge when we came to it. Right now, we were enjoying being together and not letting anything get in the way of that.

"Hey," Sophie said, grounding me in the present with her voice. "Wanna go get chocolate cupcakes?"

I clasped both her hands and kissed her again, sweeping my tongue into her mouth.

"Always. I will always want to get chocolate cupcakes with you. I'd do anything with you, Soph."

"Right back at you," she said, tugging me down the street toward the closest bakery.