



Her Touch

Author: *Alexa Riley*

Category: Romance

Description: Eli Strong got out of the military and all he wanted to do was get better. He never expected that the officer he was living with would have a daughter who tested his honor.

Maggie Drummond has been moved around more times than she can count, and starting at a new high school sucks. But when a wounded Marine comes to live with her and her dad, suddenly Maggie figures out what home is.

She's forbidden fruit, and he's trying to not to taste... But desire can only be denied for so long. Circumstances keep pulling them back together, and something truly unforeseen happens. Overnight, Eli becomes a guardian and Maggie his ward.

Will Eli keep his hands off Maggie? Will Maggie like it if he doesn't? Will the two of them break the law because it feels so good? Only one way to find out!

Warning: This book will make you ache in the best way possible! It's so sweet it's disgusting, and yet we just can't stop. It's a coming-of-age story that's just what the author ordered. So eat up and enjoy!

Total Pages (Source): 41

Page 1

Source Creation Date: June 30, 2025, 7:04 am

Prologue

Eli

I sit outside in my truck and wait, my cock hard and thick, throbbing with need. Today's the day, but we have to keep up appearances. There are already too many eyes on us. One step out of line and it could be bad.

She's the most important thing in my life, and I will do everything to protect her. Even if it means ignoring the steel length resting along the inside of my thigh.

Squeezing my eyes shut, I try not to think about it. I try not to picture her soft curves under me and the places my tongue is going to go. How her sweetness will taste and what sounds she'll make when we're alone.

"Fuck," I grunt, and lean back on the headrest.

One touch from her and I knew that my life had been changed. One moment a year ago and my world was forever hers. From that moment on, everything I did, every motion in my life, every beat of my heart, was for her. When her lips met mine, it sealed her fate. She didn't know it that day, but it happened.

The minutes tick by, and though it feels like an eternity, she appears. Her blue eyes find mine, and like every time before, I'm home.

She's walking toward me, and every step brings her closer to my grasp. To the moment when I'll never let her go.

Chapter 1

Maggie

“It’s just a kiss,” Nick tells me as he steps closer. His blond shaggy hair falls a little into his eyes as he looms over me. His dark brown eyes are focused on my lips as he licks his own. “I think I deserve a kiss, Mags. We’ve been boyfriend and girlfriend for two weeks now.”

I want to correct him and tell him we aren’t boyfriend and girlfriend and that it’s only been days, but what’s the point? I’ve already learned he isn’t the brightest. You think if we’d been boyfriend and girlfriend he’d stop calling me Mags like I asked the first three times. My name is Maggie. Is that so hard? Apparently it is, because now the whole school is calling me that because Nick does.

I swallow, wondering if it’s really just a kiss he wants. Maybe I’m making a bigger deal out of it than I should be. I’ve probably read too many books, because excitement isn’t coursing through me like I thought it would. I’m about to have my first kiss, and none of the things I’ve read about are happening. I’m overthinking this. All I have to do is place my lips against his. Easy. It will be over, and then I won’t have to worry about it anymore. Or maybe I will.

The other girls at school do more than kiss. I hear them talk. I’ve been at my new school for over a week, and it’s all they talk about. My first few days, I blended in, which didn’t bother me. I got used to moving around a lot because my dad’s in the military. It’s sometimes better to not make friends because I know I won’t be around for long. But my dad told me we were settling in here, so I tried to make an effort. Then Nick blew that wide open.

After only a couple more days in my new high school, Nick noticed me. It was all a little overwhelming to say the least. I went from having no friends to everyone

wanting to know me once Nick set his sights on me. He's the star of the football team, and people seem to pay attention to his every move.

Nick is exactly what you picture when you think of the popular boy in school. But for some reason, I don't find myself attracted to him. All the girls talk about is how wonderful he is, but I'm not getting it, even though I keep trying. Maybe kissing him would make me understand why all the girls at school are so enamored with him.

"Okay," I whisper, closing my eyes and tilting my head back. When I feel Nick's hand grip my hip, my eyes fly open and I watch his mouth descend toward mine.

Unable to stop myself, I try to take a step back to pull away, changing my mind. I don't want him this close. I don't like the heat of his body pressing against mine or the feel of him digging into me. But his grip on my hip only tightens.

I turn my head, and his lips land on my cheek, but he doesn't seem to care. He pulls me closer to him, and then I feel his fingers wandering all over my body as his mouth moves to my neck. He grinds against me, and bile rises in my throat. I don't want this. I try to push him away, panic setting in, but no matter how I try, he doesn't move. For some reason all the self-defense tactics my father had taught me aren't kicking in. It feels like he's getting closer and closer, and the breath is leaving my lungs.

"Stop," I tell him, but the word is softer than I mean it to be. My throat feels like it's starting to close.

"Don't be a prude, Mags. You want this," he says against my neck, and I squeeze my eyes closed.

"No, stop," I say with as much force as I can manage. His size is overwhelming, but any size would be, compared to me.

Pure fear shoots through me as I close my eyes and take a breath to scream. As I feel tears start to build, he's miraculously gone. A loud crack sounds, and then I hear a thud as something heavy hits the ground.

My eyes fly open, and I see a man, his back to me. He's breathing heavy and standing over Nick. Nick's on the ground, holding his face as blood gushes from between his fingers.

"I think you broke my fucking nose!" Nick yells the blood runs down his shirt. He starts to get up, but the man steps toward him and Nick changes his mind. He scurries away on the ground, trying to get away from the man standing over him.

"You okay?" The deep voice has me pulling my eyes away from Nick, up to look at the broad back protecting me. When I don't answer him, he turns his head a little, and dark green eyes meet mine. I breathe in a soft gasp when I see a dark scar running down the side of his face. "Are you okay?"

<p>(adsbygoogle=window.adsbygoogle||[]).push({ });<p>

Page 2

Source Creation Date: June 30, 2025, 7:04 am

I nod, unable to form words.

The man turns away at the sound of Nick coming to his feet. Nick looks like he's ready to murder someone. His normally laid-back expression long gone. He goes to open his mouth, but the scarred man cuts him off.

"Don't say a goddamn word," he growls, and I swear I can feel the chill run across my skin. "Get the fuck out of here, and don't you so much as fucking look at her again."

Nick hesitates for a fraction of a second before he decides this is a no-win situation and takes off running. The scarred man stands there for a moment before he finally turns around fully to look at me. His face is hard, and I can see the anger written all over it.

I take a step back, needing to get my bearings. This guy's size is even more intimidating than Nick's. I've always thought my father was big, but this man is much larger. He might be the biggest man I've ever seen, and that's saying a lot having grown up around Marines. The scar on his face looks angry and red, making me think it's new. His dark brown hair is cut military short, and I can see the dark shadow of stubble on his chin. His scar makes him look menacing, and his broad chest and arms do nothing to help ease that.

He takes a step toward me, then another. I notice a slight limp in his left leg as he walks closer to me. I take another small step back, and he stops, holding his palms out in front of him.

“Maggie?” His dark eyebrows rise in question as he says my name.

“How do you know my name?” That’s probably not the first question I should be asking, but at least words are coming out of my mouth now.

“We’re standing in your backyard. I assume you’re Maggie.” He tilts his head to the side, a small smile pulling at his lips. Some of his angry features soften, and a little of my fear washes away.

I look around us, remembering where I am. Nick was walking me to my door after he drove me home from school. I always go in the rear door, and we’d walked around to the backyard. It all hits me at once, and I inwardly groan. Oh God, I’m going to have to face him at school.

Then I try to put together why this stranger is here in front of me.

“Why are you standing in my backyard? Don’t get me wrong, I’m thankful, I just—”

“I’m Eli.” His hands drop to his sides, and one goes to his pocket and pulls out a key. He turns and walks over to the back door and unlocks it. The alarm sounds, and he walks into the house and deactivates it. Then he steps back into the doorway, filling up the space.

“I’m sorry, I completely forgot,” I admit.

My dad said someone from his platoon was coming to stay with us. That a Marine had been honorably discharged due to injury and needed a place to stay for a while. But with everything that happened in the last few minutes, it had all slipped my mind.

“You going to come in?” he asks, stepping out of the way of the door.

“Of course.” I feel myself blush, heat hitting my cheeks. He probably thinks I’m a complete idiot. I’m outside getting mauled by some guy, whom he then punches, and I stand here like a statue. I move to walk past him, but his voice stops me.

“You sure you’re okay?”

“I’m fine,” I lie. I’m not okay, but I don’t need this stranger my dad is helping out to know all that I’m feeling.

He studies my face for a second before nodding, but I can tell he doesn’t believe me and debates pushing for more but he doesn’t. I walk into the kitchen, dropping my backpack on the floor and sitting at the breakfast bar. “My dad should be home soon,” I tell him. I turn to see him closing the back door and flipping the lock.

“Yeah, I know. I talked to him a few minutes ago.”

“Are you going to tell him what happened?” I twist my hands in my lap, feeling nervous.

Eli leans against the door his eyes still on me. He looks relaxed. Not like he just punched someone in the face. His black shirt is stretched tight against his chest, the word Marines in red on the front. He’s wearing jeans that are tight on his thighs, and they lead down to black boots. He might look casual, but I have a feeling he’s anything but.

“You don’t want me to?” He pushes off the door and walks to the other side of the breakfast bar.

I shake my head. “He’ll worry, and I’m not supposed to be dating anyway.”

No dating until I’m seventeen is Dad’s rule. And to make matters worse, Nick is

eighteen. A senior. Dad would probably lose it, but I was just trying to make friends. I thought it would be easier, but I have a feeling when I go back to school tomorrow things are going to be hell.

“How old was he?”

“Eighteen.”

“A little old for you, don’t you think?” He looks down at me, and my cheeks warm again. “Just tell me you’ll stay away from him. Stay away from boys in general and your secret is safe with me.”

“Okay,” I say quickly, seeing that maybe we can keep this between us.

“Promise me,” Eli says, and crosses his arms. The stern look he’s giving me reminds me so much of my dad and leaves no room for negotiation.

“I promise.” I have no problems staying away from Nick, or from any other boys. After that experience, there is not one feeling I had before and during that kiss that I want to relive.

Chapter 2

Eli

“You sleep okay, son?”

“Yes, sir,” I say, answering Major Drummond while I hide the pride I feel when he calls me son. <p>(adsbygoogle=window.adsbygoogle||[]).push({});<p>

Page 3

Source Creation Date: June 30, 2025, 7:04 am

“You can call me Red when we’re at home,” he says, and gives me a kind smile. “Or Major, if you can’t shake the title. Hell, that’s what Maggie calls me most of the time anyway.”

He shrugs as he talks about his daughter, but I can see the soft look in his eyes. He grabs the pot of coffee off the counter and fills my mug up before his own, then takes a seat beside me.

“You’ve got your PT scheduled?”

“Yes, Major. I go in at oh-eight-hundred.”

I’ve come to live with Major and his daughter because I was wounded in combat and need extensive physical therapy for the next year. He knew my history and was there for me when it happened. If he hadn’t, I’m not sure where I might have ended up after being discharged from the Marines.

I was brought up in the system, bouncing around from foster home to foster home my entire life. I was one of those kids who was given up as a baby but never adopted. My life was always in transition. I never stayed in one home for more than six months, and I got into all kinds of shit. When I was fourteen I was sent to juvenile detention because I kept getting into fights at school. I spent a year there before I got out and was popped for trying to steal a car. After that the judge gave me a choice of going back to juvie until I was eighteen or going into a military school. The idea of getting out of the foster system and being in a stable place for at least three years was like hitting the lottery. I knew what being in jail was like, and I didn’t want to go back to it. I didn’t give a fuck if I had to scrub a toilet with a toothbrush. Having a steady bed

and not being behind bars until I was eighteen sounded like heaven. I jumped at the chance and was sent to a military academy in South Carolina.

It turned out that a military school was exactly what I needed. It was absolute hell for the majority of the time, but I applied myself to the work, and to my surprise did really well at it. I excelled in all of my classes and even graduated early with honors. After that I enrolled in the Citadel and went to a military college, and I graduated a year early there, too. I was at the top of my class and was thinking of my next move when Major Drummond came to visit me to talk about my future.

I'd known that going into the military was the next logical step, but my high scores kept my options open. The Major was different than everyone I'd met with before. Right away I felt like we had a connection and he saw something in me that reminded him of himself. I trusted him, and he helped me see that my abilities could be used for something special.

I was twenty-one when I graduated and was commissioned. Then I spent a year training before I was deployed on missions. Secret ones I could only talk to the Major about. He was my contact for the small unit I led. We went all over the world, running ops for the United States government. I was four years in when the shit hit the fan.

On my last mission we received bad intel and it nearly killed my men. I was injured, but some of them were worse than me. We were all given honorable discharges, but I knew the road to recovery was going to be hard. When we made it back stateside, families were there to welcome everyone home. Everyone except me. I'd started to feel sorry for myself all over again, but then the Major had shown up and told me everything was going to be okay.

We'd grown close over the four years of working together, and he was like a father to me. I never knew if he felt the same or if I was just harboring some sort of hero

worship. But I'm not ashamed to admit that on that day on the airstrip when he walked over to me and pulled me in for a hug, I may have shed a tear. I was back in America, but it finally felt like I was coming home.

"What happened there?" Major asks, shaking me out of my thoughts.

I look down at my hands and see the bloody knuckles adorning them. "That's a need to know, Major."

"Do I need to know?" He raises an eyebrow, and I smile.

"Absolutely not."

"Does it have anything to do with you going out late last night?" he pushes.

"Yes, Major." I won't lie to him, but I don't have to tell him all of the details of where I went.

He shakes his head, seeing that he doesn't want to know the whole story. Just then we both turn to hear Maggie coming down the stairs.

"Morning, bug," her dad says, and walks over to kiss the top of her head.

"Morning, Major," she replies, hugging him and then going to the fridge.

I watch their dynamic as they move around the kitchen. She makes breakfast and they talk a little about their day, and it's so normal. I smile because I find it funny that it's so normal.

"Are you taking the bus today, or do you need a lift?" Major asks.

For a moment Maggie looks nervous and bites her lip. I wonder if it's because she was planning on riding to school with that asshole from yesterday. I clench my fists and feel the burn in them, the pain reminding me of what happened last night.

"I can give you a ride if you want. I'm heading out that way, and I'll be there until this afternoon," I offer. I want to try to be as much help as I can while I'm staying in their home. Even though the Major keeps telling me to think of it as mine, too.

"That would be nice. I've got to head into work now, but it's in the opposite direction. That okay with you, bug?" Major says, and Maggie nods.

She gives me a look of relief, and I nod. I'd have to imagine being driven around by your dad in high school has to feel lame.

Major leaves for work, and we finish eating and cleaning up before we head out to my truck. Luckily my damaged leg is the left one, so I'm still able to drive. I took some shrapnel to the face, but by the grace of all that is holy, it didn't get my eye. I've been left with a nasty scar, but the doctors say it will lessen over time. It's not really my concern at the moment. Walking like normal again is my goal, then eventually being able to run.

<p>(adsbygoogle=window.adsbygoogle||[]).push({ });<p>

Page 4

Source Creation Date: June 30, 2025, 7:04 am

We climb in my truck, and I turn the music on low as I drive. It's quiet, but I'm okay with that. Maggie is a good kid, and from what I've learned she doesn't give her dad too much of a hard time. After a mile or so, I hear her clear her throat, and I look over.

"You okay?" I ask.

"Yeah. I, um, wanted to thank you again for yesterday. And then not telling my dad. That was really cool of you."

I clench the steering wheel and let out a breath. "I'll be honest. I thought about it last night. I lay in bed for a while contemplating what I'd do if I had a daughter who was treated that way."

"It's not what you think—"

"It doesn't matter what I think," I say, cutting her off. "It's what I saw. And what I saw was a young girl being assaulted. A young girl who is the daughter of a man who has been like a father to me. So when I went to bed last night and thought about what the Major would do, I got up and did that."

There is a beat of silence before she understands what I'm saying. "Eli, what did you do?"

Her voice is barely above a whisper, but I catch it all.

"I educated him on how to treat women. And what happens when you disrespect

them.”

“Oh God.” She puts her hands over her mouth and closes her eyes. “What am I going to do at school?”

She asks the question, but it’s more to herself than to me. But I decide she needs a dose of reality. I pull my truck over onto the side of the road, I put it in park, and turn my body to face her.

“Maggie, look at me.” After a second she turns her watery blue eyes on mine, and I feel my heart break a little for her. Jesus, she looks so innocent. How could a piece of shit like that guy put his hands on her? “You didn’t do anything wrong. You understand? Men like him deserve a lot more than the beating I gave him last night. He put his hands on you, so he doesn’t get to use them for a while. I think that’s fair.”

“I know, I know. I’m just worried about what people will say,” she says, rolling her eyes.

“Fuck what they say. Fuck what they think. You did the right thing, and so did I. If anybody gives you any shit, you let me know. I’ll take care of it.” Suddenly I’m like a big brother protecting his little sis, and it feels nice. Like I’ve got someone to look out for.

“What are you gonna do? Come to school and break everyone’s nose?” She smiles, even though I can see unshed tears in her eyes.

“If I have to. But I think taking you to school and letting everyone see you’ve got backup will probably keep the loudmouths quiet.”

I nudge her with my elbow, and she nods. I can see her take a deep breath and smile. The cloud has passed, and I put the truck in drive and take her to school.

When we get there, I park the truck and go around to open the door for her.

“Eli, what are you doing?” she says, looking around to see if anyone is watching. They are.

“Just flexing a little muscle. Need to let the baby bitches know they can’t mess with you.” I give her a wink, and she rolls her eyes, stomping away from my truck. “I’ll pick you up at three!” I shout, and Maggie throws a quick hand up to tell me to shut my mouth.

I wait until I see her make it inside safely and then hop back in my truck. For someone who never had any family, I’m feeling pretty protective of her. Something about Maggie makes me want to walk around with her all day and make sure she’s smiling. Maybe this is what Major feels like with her.

I put my truck in drive and pull away from the school, trying not to examine my feelings too much. I’m not sure how long my therapy will take, and getting attached to a family that’s not mine is a bad idea. I need to get along with them and have a good time. But one day I’ll have to leave their house, and I need to stop these warm feelings growing in my chest.

No matter how much I like them.

Chapter 3

Maggie

I can’t help but glance back at the truck, feeling butterflies in my stomach. They push away the dread I had about going to school and facing Nick today. I can still feel the warmth on my cheeks from how sweet Eli was to me.

This was what I was wondering about. This is the one sensation I never got with Nick. Where it felt like my stomach did a little flip. I bite my lip and turn around. I've been caught looking back at him, but he's still looking at me, too, making sure I make it into school safe.

When I enter the busy hall, I head straight for my locker, getting a few hellos from people. I'm wondering if word about Nick has gotten out and what he might have told people. What had he said about yesterday and what happened with Eli?

It doesn't matter, I tell myself. Nick and all of his friends will be long gone after graduation at the end of the year. I won't have to be in their social circle, a place I didn't care to be in to begin with. I didn't fit with them, but maybe that was more because of me. Who knows? I've moved so much through the years that I've been somewhat content not making friends, knowing that I was most likely going to move once again.

I always stuck to getting good grades and losing myself in books. It's easier to do that. I'd take care of whatever home Dad and I had together. I enjoyed making dinner every night and helping out. We're a team. Always have been. Maybe that's why the moving never bothered me. As long as we were together, I didn't care, and I knew it was for his job. I knew if he thought for a second it bothered me, it would eat away at him. But the truth is, it doesn't bother me at all.

<p>(adsbygoogle=window.adsbygoogle||[]).push({});<p>

Page 5

Source Creation Date: June 30, 2025, 7:04 am

I open my locker and put away some of the books I won't need until the end of the day. I don't want to lug them around if I don't have to. Checking my phone, I see I have a little time before class starts, so I make my way to the bathroom. I wash my hands and pull my hair into a ponytail.

I hear sniffing behind me, and I turn around and glance under the stall. I see a pair of flats that have a Harry Potter design on them. I take a step toward the door of the stall. Unsure what to do, I decide to go for it and I tap on the door.

"Are you okay?" I ask. The sniffing stops, but she doesn't respond. I push on the door a little, but it's locked. "Unlock it," I say as softly as I can. I hear the latch move, and I push the door open.

"Alice?" I recognize the crying girl from my Advanced Algebra II class. She's hard to miss with her curly red hair. She doesn't look happy to see me.

"It's not true," she blurts out suddenly, more tears spilling down her cheeks. I can't stop myself from grabbing her and pulling her into my arms, wrapping her in a hug. I still have no idea what could be wrong with her, but she's making my heart hurt.

She hugs me back, and I can feel some of the tension leave her body.

"I swear I wasn't with your boyfriend," she says through a sob.

"I don't have a boyfriend, so I agree," I say teasingly, trying to get her to calm down a little. I can't help the flash of Eli's face in my mind when I think of having a boyfriend.

“You’re not with Nick?” she asks, pulling back, her eyes red-rimmed.

The freckles on her cheeks and nose stand out more now that I’m this close to her. I’d never noticed them before. They make her look younger than she is. She’s eighteen, a senior. She’s actually close to me in height, though, which is nice, because I’m used to everyone towering over me.

“He’s a jerk,” I tell her, and watch her lips tip up in a small smile.

“I thought you two—”

“Nope. I hope I never see his face again.” I smile at her, trying to make her feel better. Show her it doesn’t matter. They are a bunch of assholes.

“I can’t wait to finally graduate,” she mutters, still sniffing. “He told everyone we had sex and that I was terrible. And now I’m stalking him.” Another tear leaks down her face. “They wrote ‘slut’ on my locker.”

“Jesus.” I shake my head and pull her back into a hug. “They’re assholes,” I tell her.

“He’s mad at me because he tried to kiss me last week when I was leaving school late and I pushed him away.”

I pull back, taking a piece of toilet paper off the roll and handing it to her to wipe her eyes.

“Forget them. Like I said, he’s a jerk, and you probably hurt his giant ego.” I can’t believe I even dated him. He’s a sleazeball. If my dad knew how easily I was roped into Nick’s game, he’d be so disappointed in me.

“You believe me?”

“Of course I do,” I answer instantly. She gives me a big smile. “We can share a locker.”

“You don’t have to do that.”

“Please, you’d be doing me a favor. I don’t have any friends here.”

“I thought that you hang out with—”

I cut her off. “They aren’t my friends, and I don’t want to hang out with them anymore. Besides, that’d be bitchy to you if I hung out with the people who wrote ‘slut’ on your locker.”

She lets out a small laugh. “Maggie, right?”

“Yep.”

She lets a breath before wiping her eyes. “I look like a hot mess, don’t I?”

“A little bit. Your face is a bit blotchy, so we should probably wait before we leave. You’re walking out of here with your head held high,” I tell her.

I may be shy at times, but I never back down from anything, something I know I get from my dad. You don’t let anyone push you in a corner or tell you that you can’t do something.

“We’ll be late for class.”

I shrug. “One tardy isn’t going to kill me.”

We wait a few minutes, talking about our upcoming finals, and I hear the bell ring.

Alice walks over to the mirror to look at her eyes. She pulls out a pair of glasses from her bag and slides them on.

“I think I’m good,” she says, turning to look at me.

“Yep.” I grab her by the arm, locking mine with hers, and pull her from the bathroom. We head for my locker, and I show her the code. She puts some of her stuff inside and seems to have her spirits lifted.

“I’m Group B lunch,” I say.

“Me too.”

“Awesome. We can have lunch together and go to algebra after.”

“I’d like that.”

Shutting my locker, we plan to meet up by the vending machines before we part ways at the end of the day.

I spend most of my morning thinking about Eli. He doesn’t seem to be far from my mind, and excitement fills me when I think about him picking me up today. But even with my good mood, it doesn’t take much to notice people are avoiding me. I’m sure Nick has something to do with that. I do my best to ignore them right back, and I don’t let it get to me.

Later that day, when I make it to the vending machines, I see Alice with her head down reading a book. I wonder if she’s really reading it or trying to avoid everyone.

<p>(adsbygoogle=window.adsbygoogle||[]).push({});<p>

Page 6

Source Creation Date: June 30, 2025, 7:04 am

“I’m starving,” I tell her, and she looks up from her book.

“Maybe we can get something from the machine and eat outside?” she suggests.

“If that’s what you want to do, I’m game.” I lean in a little “But don’t avoid going in there because you’re nervous. Might as well get it over with. I’ll be right next to you.”

She stares at me for a second.

“I really do want pizza,” she finally says.

“And French fries,” I add.

“Okay.” She slides her book into her backpack, and I lock my arm with hers again as we head into the cafeteria. I hear people get a little quiet, probably wondering what the hell is going on. The girl who was dating Nick is now hanging out with the girl he’s been spreading lies about all over school.

I glance over to the side of the room and see Nick. I almost miss a step when I see his face. I wonder what he’s telling people about what happened to him. He looks like his face met a concrete wall a few times. I’m guessing he’s not telling anyone he got his ass kicked. I hope that him seeing me with Alice makes him rethink the crap he’s been saying about her, too. I narrow my eyes at him, trying to give him a warning. He quickly looks away.

“I love your shoes,” I tell Alice, pulling my eyes from Nick and trying to change the

subject.

“Really? I made them myself. Well, not the shoes. I just decorated them.”

“Wow,” I tell her, impressed. And like that, we let everything else slip away and enjoy our lunch.

We talk about what we did over the summer and how we hope this school year flies by, and I ask her if maybe she wants to go shopping with me soon. I need a few things before the weather starts to turn a little colder and would love if she could make me a pair of flats, too. We talk for a while about what styles she can do and what I should have her put on mine.

After lunch we go back to class, where we get our packets to help study for an upcoming test.

“This test is going to be brutal,” I tell her as the bell rings, releasing us from school.

She shrugs. “I can help you study if you want. Numbers are easy to me. Actually they are kinda fun. It’s like a puzzle.”

We walk out together toward the parking lot, and she gets a set of keys out of her bag.

“You drive?” I ask.

She points to an old VW. “Yeah, you need a ride?”

“No, someone is picking me up.”

It’s then I see Eli pull up in his truck. His eyes aren’t trained on me, but behind me. I look over my shoulder to see Nick frozen in place before he turns and takes off back

into the school. I have to bite back a laugh.

When I look back, Eli's eyes are on me, and a warmth fills my belly like I've never felt before.

"Who's that?" Alice asks from beside me.

"The man I'm going to marry someday."

Chapter 4

Eli

"You look happy. Have a good day at school?" I ask as I wait for Maggie to buckle up.

"Great," she answers, and smiles at me.

She's a beautiful young woman, with bright blue eyes and blonde hair that falls past her shoulders. There's something about her that is so enticing. It's like being around her makes me feel happy, so I want to be around her. I noticed it when she got out of the truck today, and I feel it now that she's sitting next to me. She's like a buzz of excitement, and I'm happy to be near it.

"So you want to go with me to work?"

"What do you do?" she asks, reaching over and playing with the radio.

It's a small thing, but it seems so familiar. Like she's comfortable around me. Strangely, I like it. Normally being a kid in foster care, and even in a military school, things that are mine are important to me. I always had a problem with sharing, and

the things I owned I protected fiercely. But Maggie seems so innocent that I don't have the fear that she'll take something from me. In fact, I feel as if I want to give her pieces of me.

I shake that thought out of my head and focus on driving.

"I work at the rehab facility, with veterans who come back from combat injured. I go in the mornings to do my own physical therapy, and then in the afternoons I work in the offices, meeting with anyone who wants to talk."

She gives me a thoughtful look. "You must be a good listener."

"I think my own personal experience has helped. And the fact that I majored in psychology and got licensed when I was in the military. Most combat vets don't want to talk to a head shrinker. They want someone they can trust. And I think even though I'm young, I've experienced a lot."

"How old are you?"

I glance over and see a little blush on her cheeks. I'm not sure why she's being shy. Maybe she feels like that's too personal.

"Twenty-five."

"Oh." She sounds disappointed. "I'll be seventeen soon."

"We'll have to celebrate," I say, and that seems to pull another smile from her. She's adorable when she grins like that.

When we get to the clinic, I show Maggie around and introduce her to some of the instructors. I was stationed in the adjoining hospital when I got back after my injuries,

so I got to know almost everyone before I was discharged. Luckily Major gave me a place to stay that was close, and I could continue with my rehab without having to find a new place to go.

“You seem popular,” she says, nudging me.

<p>(adsbygoogle=window.adsbygoogle||[]).push({});<p>

Page 7

Source Creation Date: June 30, 2025, 7:04 am

“It’s my good looks and winning smile.” I flash her a toothy grin, and she blushes. I expected her to laugh. The jagged scar on the side of my face is still pretty jarring, even for me. When I catch my own reflection in the mirror sometimes, I have to do a double-take. “Come on. It was a joke. I’m more beast than beauty.”

She laughs. “I’m okay being the pretty one standing next to you.”

“I’m here to make you look good, boo.” I wink at her.

“Boo? What the heck?” she says playfully.

“Shawty?” I try, thinking maybe she’ll like that one better.

“Try again,” she retorts, crossing her arms and raising an eyebrow.

“If we’re gonna be hanging out, you’ve gotta have a nickname. I’m a Marine. Everyone has a nickname.”

“What’s yours?”

“Cupcake.”

She bursts out laughing, and I stand there and wait on it to pass. I’ve gotten used to getting shit about it, but mostly it’s from guys. I wait for her to catch her breath and then put my hands on my hips impatiently.

“You’re not serious,” she says.

I reach down to the hem of my T-shirt and pull it up to my chest. On my ribcage is a cupcake tattoo, complete with sprinkles.

The smile falls from her lips, and her eyes rake over the skin I've exposed. Suddenly I wonder if I've done something wrong. Being around guys my whole life, I have zero problems with nudity. I could walk around a crowded room in broad daylight and not give two fucks. But after a second I wonder if I went too far. I've never had a younger sister, so I don't know what's beyond appropriate. I guess as long as she seems cool with playing around, what's the harm?

I lower my shirt, and she swallows. Then she shakes her head.

"Okay. I need the story," she mutters after clearing her throat.

"All right," I say as we walk to the common room of the clinic. There are beanbag chairs and places to hang out if anyone is looking for some down-time and someone to talk to. We take a seat near the windows, and the sun shines across Maggie's blonde hair. For a second I simply look at her and appreciate how beautiful she is.

"Story. Spill it," she orders, and nudges me with her foot.

"So I went to military school in high school. But I was really smart and skipped a grade, and I graduated early. Then I went to a military college, and I skipped another. So imagine being a senior in college at nineteen, with all these other hard-ass guys, twenty-one or older."

"Okay," she says, waiting for the explanation.

"They always gave me so much shit. I mean, they gave everyone shit, but I took the brunt of it. It was my birthday, and they decided to make a joke of it and ordered me a hundred pink sprinkle cupcakes and had them delivered to the front office. They

thought I'd get in trouble for having them, or grab a demerit for making a scene."

"Just for having someone deliver cupcakes to you?" she asks.

"It's a military school. The best thing you can do is blend in. And a delivery like that is against the rules. Breaking the rules sucks, and nobody wanted that kind of punishment." I laugh, thinking back to it. "But what they didn't count on was my commanding officer calling me to his office."

"I don't understand." Confusion is clear on her face.

"He was a hard, old man with a temper that would rival Yosemite Sam. But for some reason he took a shine to me. He said he knew I didn't have any family who would have sent them and that the guys did this to get me in trouble. But he couldn't prove who it was who did it. So he said I could keep them. That kind of dessert would normally be considered contraband. It was like giving a hundred cartons of cigarettes to an inmate. I was instantly in charge."

"So what did you do with them?"

"I gave them out to the right people, and nobody fucked with me after that. I took on the name Cupcake, but I owned it," I say, pointing to the spot on my side where the tattoo is. "I think the guys knew that if my commanding officer was giving me the nod, I wasn't to be fucked with. And people respond to leadership."

"Cupcake." She says the same and smiles. "I like it."

"So now we just need one for you, princess." She turns her nose up at that one.

"My dad calls me 'bug.' Don't know where it came from, but it stuck."

“Nah. That one’s his. I want one of my own for you.” She seems to like the idea of that, if her smile is any indication. “We’ll hang out some more and see what pops up, firecracker.”

She rolls her eyes. “Definitely not.”

We spend the afternoon hanging out, and Maggie does some volunteering when one of the clinic physicians needs an extra set of hands. I work with a new patient and talk about his goals and what his home life is like. We decide to set time up every day so that we can talk and he can check in. It’s all part of the process, and I’m happy that I can be a part of it in some way.

After we leave, I drive us back home, and Maggie heads straight into the kitchen.

“What’s for dinner, and can I help?” I ask, following her.

“I’m making chicken, and sure,” she responds as she pulls stuff out of the fridge and hands me vegetables to chop. “It’s movie night, too, by the way. Major will be home in about an hour, and we’ll have dinner and hang out.”

<p>(adsbygoogle=window.adsbygoogle||[]).push({ });<p>

Page 8

Source Creation Date: June 30, 2025, 7:04 am

“Sounds good,” I say, grabbing a beer out of the fridge and opening it up.

“Are you going to join in?” Her voice is hopeful.

“That’s okay, right?” For a second I wonder if she was telling me so that I’d try to find something else to do, but she sounded like she was inviting me.

“Yes.” Her voice is high-pitched, like she’s nervous, and then she clears her throat.

“Yeah. That’d be really nice.”

The sun is setting, and the way the light falls into the kitchen makes it glow. Maggie is by the stove cooking, and for a moment I just stare at her.

She’s young. Too young for me. But something about her makes me feel like she’s older. I shouldn’t feel this pull to her, but I find myself wanting to be around her as much as I can. When I’m in the same room as her, I feel happy. She’s this walking ball of joy that I don’t want to step away from.

“Sunshine,” I whisper, and she turns to look at me.

“What did you say?” She smiles in confusion as she stirs the vegetables.

“Your nickname.” She’s like pure sunshine with her warmth and glow, and I’m just a planet revolving around her. She pulls me to her like gravity, and I can’t seem to walk away.

“Hmm. Sunshine. I guess that’s not so bad. I’ve got blonde hair.” She shrugs and

goes back to what she's doing.

I put my beer down and clear my throat. "I'm gonna go check my emails. I'll be right back."

I don't wait for her answer as I walk out of the kitchen and up the stairs. I practically run to my room and shut the door, locking it and then leaning back against it as I close my eyes. What is wrong with me? This is the daughter of the man who is like a father to me. She's sixteen years old. Why am I having all these feelings of attraction? God, this is so wrong and so fucked up on so many levels.

It hits me that I've been laughing and playing with her today, and she's been giving it back. I've basically been flirting with her, and she didn't seem the least bit upset about it. Jesus, I've got to get this under control. She's a girl.

I rub my face with my hands, and I hear the front door open. Major's voice rings out as he says hello to Maggie. I've got to go down there and face him. I need to get my shit together. I can't let some sixteen-year-old girl trip me up like this. Jesus, you'd think I'd never had someone smile at me before.

As I take some calming breaths, I convince myself that she's just being nice and I'm being nice, too. We can do this. It can be brotherly and sisterly. We can hang out and I can forget about all the things that are running through my mind.

Like how she's close to being seventeen.

Chapter 5

Maggie

"Now turn and pull." I do as Eli says, pulling him as hard and fast as I can. I take him

down to the ground, flat on his back. I stand over him triumphantly, my hands on my hips. He has a smile on his face as he stares up at me.

“You catch on quick.” He smiles even bigger. I can tell he’s proud of me. We’ve been working on self-defense in the garage after Eli gets finished working out and doing some light physical therapy on his leg. He doesn’t even have a limp anymore when he walks. The scar on his face is no longer red and angry. He’s almost fully healed, and I worry that he might be thinking about moving out soon. I push the sour thought away, not wanting to think about it.

I playfully put my foot on his chest as I stand over him. “I can’t help it if being out of the Marines is softening you up. Little bitty thing like me can take you down now,” I tease.

“You’re gonna get it, sunshine.” He grabs my ankle before I can react, pulling me down onto the mat. The movement causes me to fall on top of him. He starts tickling me everywhere, and I try to get away. I’m squirming all around, but laughter overtakes me.

“I give, I give,” I say through laughter. My face starts to hurt from smiling so much. “You’re the worst,” I say rolling onto my back, completely giving up.

“You love me,” he teases, and I look over at him and give him a small smile. My hearts skips a beat because I do love him.

The last three weeks have been wonderful. In these weeks I have fallen for him. Hard. Even if he only sees me as a little-sister type as he walks by me and pulls my ponytail, or teases me about my choice of TV shows. I can’t stop the feelings I’m having. At first I thought maybe I had a silly schoolgirl crush, but each day my feelings grow deeper and deeper. I don’t love him like the way he’s teasing.

He fits here with Dad and me. The three of us work together. I'm dreading when he might start to date. It's a thought that lingers in the back of my head. I've been going to work with Eli almost every day. I love it there, but there's always some woman trying to get his attention.

One is a nurse, Sherry. She's after him. I've even seen her text him a few times. I wonder if Eli gave her his number because of work or something else. I've never seen him flirt back. It drives me crazy thinking about him belonging to another woman. He's mine. I knew it from the first few hours of knowing him, and I'm sure if I told anyone what I'm feeling, they'd say I was crazy. But I don't care.

Rolling to my side, I reach out and touch the scar running down his cheek, thinking about how I always want to kiss it. How I want him to tell me his story, but I know he won't. Something about the way he is with me lets me know he wouldn't want that darkness touching me. I don't care about that. I just want to know everything about Eli. All of it. What brought him here to me.

<p>(adsbygoogle=window.adsbygoogle||[]).push({});<p>

Page 9

Source Creation Date: June 30, 2025, 7:04 am

“You think you’re all healed?” I ask. He never talks about his recovery with me. He’ll work out with me, or he’ll let me watch him work out, but he doesn’t share much about his time overseas. I only catch what he tells my dad from time to time.

“Not sure I’ll ever really be healed.”

My heart breaks a little at that. I want to heal him. His hand comes up, pressing down on mine, covering his scar with my palm. He leans into my hand and closes his eyes.

“You guys wanna do steaks tonight?” I hear my dad call out from inside the house. Eli drops his hand away from me instantly. He gets to his feet, and the moment is broken. Just when I think I’m getting through to him, it fades away as my dad enters the garage.

“Sounds good,” Eli says.

He reaches his hand down to help me up, and I take it. I get to my feet next to him, but he steps away from me and starts picking up the workout area.

“Can you make your pasta salad, bug?” Dad asks, rubbing his hand over his belly, like he has a big belly or something. My dad might spend his days at a desk, but he’s fit. I’ve heard more than I care to from women about how attractive he is. People are often shocked he can even be my dad because he’s only thirty-eight. But he had me young and raised me on his own, never mentioning my mother. I often wondered if it was because he missed her, or something else. I know he doesn’t like talking about it, so I never bring it up.

“Sure, when I get back.” I lean down, picking up my water bottle up from the floor and taking a sip.

“Where you off to?” Eli asks.

“Alice and I are going shopping. My birthday is around the corner and I’m in need of a new dress.”

“You don’t like dresses,” Eli says, catching me off guard. I can’t read the way he’s saying it. I haven’t worn a dress lately, but that doesn’t mean I don’t like them. Or maybe he doesn’t see me as a girly type.

“Never had a reason to wear one.” I place my water bottle on the bench, and my dad lets out a sigh.

“I knew this was coming.” Eli and I break eye contact to look at my dad, and my heartbeat starts to pick him. Are my feelings for Eli that obvious? My cheeks warm. “Bug, I know I said you could date at seventeen, but I was hoping I’d have more time,” he admits, thinking I’m going shopping for dress to wear for a line of upcoming dates or something.

“She can’t date,” Eli fires back, like the idea of me dating is preposterous. Maybe it is to him since he looks at me like a little girl. I narrow my eyes at him.

“That’s not really up to you.” I raise my chin. His eyes narrow on me, and I wish I could see jealousy there. Instead I know what this is about. It’s about the first time he met me and caught me with Nick in the backyard.

“Maggie.” I hear Alice’s soft voice and whirl around. She’s standing in the open garage door. Her long red hair is blowing in the wind. She looks a little different today, and I wonder if she plans on meeting someone at the mall. She has some

make-up on, which isn't normal for her, and her hair is down. Not only that, but she's wearing a dress that hugs all her curves. Normally she tries to hide her figure, which is something I don't get. I know she has curves in all the right places. I'd kill to have a chest and hips like hers.

"Crap, is it two already?" I glance at the clock over on the wall. "Give me a second to change."

I slip past my dad, ignoring the fact that Eli is probably staring holes in the back of my head.

"You look pretty today, Alice," I hear my dad say. "Not that you don't always. I mean." I hold back a laugh at my dad trying to make polite conversation. He's not used to being around anyone but Marines and me. I dart up the stairs and jump right into the shower. I wash quickly before drying off and going to find something to wear. I dig to the back of my closet and find a cream-colored dress. It's strapless, hugging tight to my top but flaring out at the bottom. I pull my hair down from my ponytail and fluff it a bit, then grab some lip gloss and slip on a pair of flats.

I give myself one last look in the mirror, all too aware that I'm wearing a dress in spite of what Eli said.

"Ready?" I call as I walk back into the garage and everyone turns to look at me. I smile like I'm not up to something.

"I'll take you," Eli cuts in before Alice can say she's ready.

"Alice can take us."

"I need to go to the mall anyway, and after we can stop at the store and get stuff for you to make pasta salad for dinner."

I should put up a fight, still be mad about his comment, but I can't. I want to spend as much time with Eli as possible. He's like an addiction I don't want to overcome.

"Fine." I fake annoyance.

"Grab one of those jacket things before we go," Eli tells me, pulling off his shirt and sliding on another. I can't stop myself from staring at his hard chest. Little marks and scars cover his skin and are still visible through the light layer of chest hair, and tattoos cover so much of his exposed skin.

"Jacket thing?" What is he talking about? I lost my train of thought for a second.

"The cloth things that have, like, flowers on them and stuff. You got like ten of them in different colors." He picks up his keys and wallet from next to the workout bench.

"Cardigan?"

"Sure, if that's what it's called."

<p>(adsbygoogle=window.adsbygoogle||[]).push({});<p>

“I’ll be inside.”

“Malls gets chilly.”

“Really? I mean—”

“He’s right, bug. Go grab one, and get Alice one, too,” my dad cuts in. I shake my head and go back into the house. I grab two cardigans. I’m not arguing with my dad. I never go head to head with him unless it’s something worth fighting for.

“Let’s roll,” I say, returning to the garage and seeing Eli must have changed into jeans real quick.

“We need to get the steaks, too, Major?” Eli asks my dad.

“Yeah, grab an extra. I’m sure Alice would like to join us.”

“You wanna stay over?” I ask Alice. She does sometimes. I don’t think she likes being at home. Her parents fight constantly.

“Sure,” she says so softly I almost don’t hear her. I link my arm with hers and pull her toward Eli’s truck.

As I take each step, I know Eli is hot on my heels.

Eli

“Rule number one, no texting while driving.”

Maggie turns her head to me and gives me that look that makes me want to pull her onto my lap and squeeze her close to me.

“The key isn’t even in the ignition,” she says before returning her attention to her glowing phone. I give her a second, and when she’s finished she tucks her phone in her purse down at my feet. “Alice said she was on her way to my house, but I said you were giving me driving lessons. I told her the Major is home and he can let her in until we get back.”

I start to say something about that, but she holds her hand out expectantly.

“Keys, please,” she says sweetly. God, I can’t resist that smile and those big blue eyes.

“Joke’s on you. It’s a push start, sunshine.”

“Oh, that’s right. You’re a fancy cupcake.”

“With double sprinkles. And don’t you forget it,” I reply.

We’ve come to the parking lot at the college campus near her house. This is where Alice talked about going to college after graduation, and I wonder if Maggie plans on going here, too. When I ask her what she wants to do in the future, she’s less than forthcoming. I don’t know why, but it feels like she’s keeping her dreams from me. Maybe she’s embarrassed by them, or maybe she doesn’t know. I knew at her age what I wanted to do because I had it laid out in front of me. It was easy. But the world is big and wide for her, and she can do whatever she wants. Go anywhere she wants.

The thought of her moving away makes my chest ache, and I have to rub the pain away. I can't wrap my head around what I would do if I didn't get to see her every day, see her smile, or hear her laugh. It would be like a death sentence.

I'm trying to soak up all the moments I can with her, and this is one of them. Maggie was complaining that she doesn't get a lot of experience driving because the Major and I are always driving her everywhere. She'll be seventeen Saturday, and Major has hinted to me that he's getting her a car. I mentioned that I could give her some lessons, and he agreed, but deep down I know the real reasons I volunteered.

I want to spend every moment I can with her. These past weeks have been the best of my life. I feel like not only am I a part of a family, but the person sitting next to me has somehow fused with my soul. Maggie has truly brought in the light to my life, and I can't stand when we aren't together. Even if it's moments like this, where we are just being happy and playful. I know it's wrong to want more from her, and I know she's underage. I hate the part of myself that knows better, but I can't seem to stop. I feel so guilty that she's so young and I've tied my rope to her, but there isn't enough strength left in my bones to make me stop. While I know I can't touch her, I still have to be with her. I try to be as platonic as I can with the small touches I'm able to get. I keep a distance from her. We've become so familiar that it's natural to be close.

"OK, foot on the brake and push the button. Got it," she says, cranking up the truck and gripping the wheel.

"Take it easy on my truck. I happen to love it."

"Not as much as you love me," she says with a wink.

Jesus, her beauty is like a shot to the heart. She's teasing when she says stuff like that, but it's the truth. God, how I wish I could tell her what I feel. Even though it's not

right, I want it. Fuck, do I want it.

“I don’t know. This baby has heated seats,” I say, petting the space between us.

She rolls her eyes and eases her foot off the brake and starts to drive in the empty lot.

“Whatever. I can cook. This truck has nothing on me.”

“You’ve got me there, sunshine. I guess you win all my love.”

There’s a blush on her cheeks, and I love seeing it there.

“So what are you getting me for my birthday?” she asks as she circles and then goes down another row of empty parking spaces. She’s changing the subject, and it’s probably for the best.

“Hmmm. When is it again?” I tease, knowing full well it’s Saturday.

“Like you don’t have it circled in your calendar, cupcake.”

“With big pink hearts,” I tease back. God, I love when she busts my balls. “What do you want?”

She hesitates as she turns and goes down the edge of the lot. The spaces are laid out in big rows that are separated by lights. She’s driving up and down each one smoothly, and I start to wonder if she made up the excuse about not being able to drive. <p>(adsbygoogle=window.adsbygoogle||[]).push({});<p>

Page 11

Source Creation Date: June 30, 2025, 7:04 am

“I don’t know,” she finally answers and shrugs. But there’s something in her voice that makes me think she knows but she doesn’t want to ask for it.

“If you don’t tell me, I’m going to get you a subscription to Guns & Ammo.” I reach out and pull her ponytail, and she glances over at me.

“Major already gets that. Lame.”

“So I’m guessing a knife might not be a solid gift either.”

“Come on, Eli.” She licks her lips and hesitates. “What do you get for women? I mean, like, what would you get a girlfriend?”

“Don’t know. Never had one,” I say flatly, thinking that if she were my girlfriend this would be a very different conversation.

“Oh,” she mumbles, and her cheeks flush. “Too busy to settle down?”

“Never found the right one before,” I answer, not taking my eyes off her. She stares straight ahead. I’d like to say ‘before now,’ but I can’t. No matter how badly I want to.

“I guess I get to be your first.” I feel the truck jerk when she slams on the brakes. “I meant the first woman you buy a present for. Not girlfriend. Sorry, I don’t—”

I lose the seatbelt that’s tightened around my chest and ignore the heartbeat thumping in my ears. “It’s okay. I got you.”

We look at each other, and she looks away embarrassed. She must be to have someone like me creeping on her all the time. She should be having fun with people her own age. She should be with her friend Alice right now. Fuck, she should probably be with a boy, but I grit my teeth at the thought of another man putting his hands on her. I think about what I did to that little bastard Nick, and I want to punch him in the face all over again.

She clears her throat and tries to push away the tension that's settled in the truck. "I guess I'll settle for a cupcake then."

She laughs, but the double meaning isn't lost on me, and I spend the rest of the afternoon trying not to dream about what that might actually be like.

When we get back to the house, Alice's VW is parked out front. We both hop out and go inside, heading straight for the kitchen. Maggie grabs me a Gatorade out of the fridge and passes it to me as she gets a water. Just then, Alice walks in, her face flushed.

"You okay?" Maggie asks, walking over to Alice and looking at her.

"Yeah," she says, and clears her throat. "I took a nap while waiting for you and just woke up."

She glances over at me and then back at Maggie, walking over to the fridge and grabbing a water, too. They both start chatting about our drive this afternoon and how Maggie thinks Major is going to get her a car for her birthday. The man isn't fooling anyone.

Speaking of.

Major comes into the kitchen with a ball cap pulled down on his head. "Hey guys.

Have fun?”

The girls wave off some nonsense about a show on Netflix and head into the movie room. I go to follow, but I stop, looking back at Major heading into the backyard to fire up the grill.

“Can I talk to you for a second, sir?” I ask, and he nods, gesturing at me to join him outside.

I close the door and join him as he lights the coals.

“I just wanted to update you on my physical therapy.” He looks a little relieved as he nods for me to continue. “I’m all finished with the most aggressive part of the process, and I can do the rest on my own. I only require bi-monthly check-ins at this point.”

“That’s great news, son. Happy to have you good as new.”

“Me too. I’ll still maintain my job at the clinic, but I wanted to talk to you about staying here.”

“Are you ready to move on?” he asks, genuine disappointment on his face.

“No, sir, quite the opposite,” I answer, smiling at him. “I wanted to thank you for letting me stay for so long. And I didn’t want to wear out my welcome. I know eventually I need to find my own place, but I didn’t want to rush it.”

“I’ve told you from the beginning, my home is always open to you. For as long as you need. You’ve been really good for Maggie. She’s really settled in here, and I know I owe that to you.” He squeezes my shoulder and then goes back to the grill.

“She’s done the same for me, too, sir.” I think about how much more she’s done for me, and my stomach knots. I shouldn’t feel this way about her. Am I taking advantage?

“Take all the time you need, Eli. We’re in no rush to see you go.”

“Thank you, sir.” I pause, unsure if I’m about to cross a line with him. “Is there anything you want to talk about, Major?”

He looks at me and then at the house. I turn back and see the girls in the kitchen, pulling something out of the cabinet.

“Is there anything you want to talk about?” he shoots back. His dark brown eyes lock with mine, and a moment passes between us.

Neither of us says a word, and the silence is only broken when Maggie shouts from the back door.

“How much longer on dinner? We want to know if we’ve got time for another episode of Gilmore Girls.”

Major answers her, and I wait until I hear the sound of the back door clicking closed before I speak.

“Looking forward to the burgers tonight,” I say, grabbing the plate and putting them on it.

We steer our conversation into safer waters and have a night like any other. Our makeshift family breaking bread and sweeping secrets under the rug.

<p>(adsbygoogle=window.adsbygoogle||[]).push({});<p>

Chapter 7

Maggie

“Can you zip me up?” I ask Alice, lifting my hair up off my back. She gets up from the bed and zips me into my dress. “What do you think?” I do a little twirl.

The top of the dress hugs tight and is covered in white crystals. The bottom is all tulle that stops mid-thigh. I feel a bit like a princess. It’s different than what I would normally wear, but maybe I’m looking for some attention.

“You look like Barbie going to the prom,” Alice says, making me snort.

“I don’t know if that’s a compliment or not,” I tell her, smiling.

“You can pull it off.”

She plops back down on the bed, making her dark green dress ride up her legs. Green always looks best on her with all that red hair of hers. It’s shorter than I’ve seen her wear, but I’ve noticed her style has been changing a little here and there. She still has on a pair of flats, but she no longer tries to hide her body. She even lets her hair down more and puts on make-up.

I’m really starting to think there is someone she isn’t telling me about. I tried to get her to invite some people to my birthday party today, but she didn’t take the bait, and she never hangs with anyone but me.

“How are classes?” I ask as I start digging for a pair of shoes to wear. I’m going to try heels. See how long I can last before I bust my ass. I’m hoping they will make me look taller, older, more like a woman and not a little girl.

“Okay,” she sighs.

“Still struggling with picking a college and major?”

“I just don’t know what I want to do. Nothing is grabbing my attention.”

“Well, maybe try the community college and take basics. Feel things out once you’re in college. Not like there is a giant rush.” I try to reassure her, but Alice likes to have things planned to know what’s coming because I think her home life is chaotic.

“Maybe.” Her voice is soft, and I can detect a trace of sadness in it. I think she’s lost, fighting to find her own way. I thought when her parents finally separated a few days ago she might perk up at not having to listen to them fight all the time. But now her mom has started drinking and having random men over.

“I was thinking…” I come over and sit down on the bed next to her, slipping on my bright pink heels.

“You’re going to kill yourself in those,” she tells me.

I ignore her because I’m making these heels work. Heck, I practiced walking in them on the treadmill every chance I could last week. Of course when no one was home because I never would have heard the end of that.

“Like I was saying, I was thinking. Maybe you should come stay here. Get out of your mom’s house.”

“Mags.” I can tell by how she says my name she’s going to say no.

“Hear me out. I live closer to school.”

“One mile.”

“Still closer,” I push, smiling at her. “Also we’re best friends. Think how kickass it would be to live under the same roof. I’ve never had a sibling, and I’m guessing I never will because I can’t get Dad to go on a date to save my life.”

“No, it’s fine, really. Besides, you have Eli. He’s like a brother.” I narrow my eyes at her, and she holds her hands up in an I give gesture. Yeah, she knows my dirty secret.

“Just think about it.”

“I will,” she finally agrees.

I’ll talk to my dad about it later. She might be in high school, but that doesn’t mean she has to live at home. She’s eighteen. I’m sure my dad won’t care. Alice has been staying here more and more, and I know it’s to get away from her mom’s house.

Jumping up from of the bed, I forget about my heels and almost fall over. Alice catches me by my hips and helps steady me.

“This is going to be a long day if you’re wearing these.”

“Well, you’re my best friend, so it’s your job to make sure I don’t fall on my face and embarrass myself.”

“I’ll try my best, but also as your best friend, if you fall on you face after I help you up I’ll have to make fun of you for the rest of our lives.”

“Deal.”

I grab my lip gloss and apply it, then hand it to Alice. She slicks some on, and I drop it back onto my vanity.

“I wanna give you your gift before we go down.” Alice walks over to her bag and pulls out a present and card and hands them to me.

I rip open the present.

“I think you’re supposed to read the card first,” she laughs.

I open the box to find a pair of decorated flats. They are completely covered in gold sparkles, with a gold bow on the top and a diamond in the center. Sunshine is emblazoned on the back.

“You win.” I kick the heels off, not caring how much I practiced walking in them. I slide on my new shoes. “I love them!” I wrap Alice in a hug.

“I thought you might like them.”

“They’re perfect,” I tell her, feeling a little choked up. Alice has come to mean so much to me. I never really got to have a friend like her before, having to move so often. I didn’t know what I was missing.

I release her from the tight hug, and she hands me my card. The picture on the front is of a hot guy standing on the beach, and I open it.

“I’m shocked you went and bought this at the store without blushing to death,” I tease. Not that I’m not an easy blusher, but Alice gets all wiggly and quiet if you talk about sex. I open the card and bark out a laugh at what it says inside.

<p>(adsbygoogle=window.adsbygoogle||[]).push({ });<p>

Page 13

Source Creation Date: June 30, 2025, 7:04 am

You're seventeen. Congratulations! You're legally allowed to have sex now!

Under the words is a picture of a cherry.

"I can't believe you got this card," I squeal through a laugh.

"Well, I kinda got it online."

"I shall cherish it forever and keep it with me always. If I ever get caught doing the nasty, I can show them my friend Alice told me I could legally do it." I stuff it in my purse.

We both burst out laughing.

"Ladies!" I hear my dad call from downstairs.

"Coming, Major," I shout back. "Better get a move on."

"Did you invite anyone from school?" Alice asks as we make our way downstairs.

"Just the people from my study hall. I knew I had to invite someone or my dad might get disappointed and think I'm not making friends at school. He always worries with how we used to move so much."

"Cool."

"I'm not sure any are coming. I didn't even give a real invite, just kinda told them

when and where one day, so who knows.”

When we hit the bottom step, I see I’m wrong. Everyone is here.

“Oh, shit,” Alice mumbles next to me. “You’re going to have to be all social and crap with everyone.”

I let out a sigh, seeing my plan might have backfired. I was hoping the birthday party would be small, but it looks like everyone showed. Even people from Eli’s work, who I’ve been volunteering with. I spot Sherry, and I have to fight an eye-roll. I shouldn’t be shocked everyone from Eli’s work came. I volunteer there every day after school since the first time Eli took me there, and I was planning to do more on winter break and over the summer, too.

Not only that, but it looks like my dad invited people from his work, too. The house is full of people, and the pleasant thought of a quiet party at home with just a few people goes up in flames.

I put on a giant smile, knowing how much this means to my dad.

“Hi everyone!” I yell, waving. Happy birthdays fill the air, and I feel Alice drop back. She hates crowds, and I won’t drag her into them. They aren’t my favorite thing in the world, but they also don’t bother me that much.

I make my way around the room, stopping to talk to people from school.

“Happy birthday,” Sam says, pulling me into a hug. He sits next to me in study hall and we also have a few of the same classes. Sometimes we share notes and help each other. He’s always super nice and it’s hard not to be friendly with him.

“Thanks.” I smile up at him. “I’m happy everyone came.”

“We wouldn’t miss it.” Tyler, another boy from my class, says, pulling me into a hug. Mandy pops up next to him, wishing me a happy birthday, too. I get lost in conversation with them about the upcoming football game. Nick has been playing terribly, which makes me smile inside. We fall into an easy conversation about school gossip and I’m immediately more comfortable.

I can’t help but see Eli standing off to the side out of the corner of my eye. He’s talking to Sherry, but his eyes are on me. I give him a small smile before turning back to talk to everyone.

I pass through the room, talking to people and saying hi. I’m thankful for the flats Alice gave me, knowing I would have never made it in my heels this long.

My dad comes up beside me and pulls me in for a hug. “You ready for your cake and presents?”

“I’m always ready for cake and gifts, Dad.”

“Come on.” He keeps his arm around me as he leads me through the living room. We pass by Eli, and I want to reach out and touch him. I clench my hand to keep from doing it.

“I know Eli has been working hard to teach you how to drive, so I got you a little something.” He opens the front door, and parked in the middle of the yard is a white jeep with a giant red bow on it.

“Happy birthday, bug,” he says in my ear. I burst into tears and turn to hug him, wrapping my arms around his neck. He lifts me off my feet like he used to do when I was a kid and I got excited when he’d pick me up from school. He gives me a kiss on my cheek and places me back on my feet.

“I’m sure Eli will take you out to test it after the party if you like.” I glance over at Eli, who nods in agreement. Sherry places her hand on his arm, mumbling something about them having plans.

I feel the ground fall out from beneath me, but I try to hide it by yelling, “Who’s ready for cake?”

Chapter 8

Eli

“You want to take it for a drive?”

I nod to the jeep as Maggie stands there staring at it, her eyes wide with excitement. The last of the guests have left and she came outside to look at her new ride.

“Let me get my wallet,” she says, bouncing inside.

It’s not two seconds later she’s got her stuff and she’s practically jumping into the driver’s seat. I climb in the passenger side, and she spends a few minutes playing with all the buttons and adjusting them to her satisfaction. She looks so freaking adorable, like a kid on Christmas morning.

“Where to, cupcake?” she asks, bouncing in her seat.

“Why don’t we go to the lake? The sun is about to set, and the drive will be nice.”

“Oh, perfect,” she says, and we take off.

The whole way over she’s talking about the party and who showed up. How she was surprised so many people came, but I wasn’t. She’s truly a ball of sunshine, and

people are attracted to that. <p>(adsbygoogle=window.adsbygoogle||[]).push({ });<p>

Source Creation Date: June 30, 2025, 7:04 am

Too many people, if you ask me.

I think about the guys from her school who were at the party. All of them wanted to get a good look at her in that dress that showed way too much skin for my taste. I had to grit my teeth and make a conscious effort to not remove limbs from bodies. I'd been cornered by Sherry, and I was only half listening to her when she asked me about going to dinner tonight, and I guess I must have said something to make her think I agreed. I was too busy being distracted by Maggie and how fucking beautiful she looked. I would have agreed to drink a bottle of vodka and move to Russia if someone had asked me. It annoyed me even more because while I was busy looking at how happy she was after getting her Jeep, Sherry piped up and wiped that smile off her face. Maggie tried to hide it, but I'd seen it. The thought of me going on a date made her mad. And a dark place in me loved it. That she was jealous did all kinds of things to my ego.

I tried to be as polite as I could to Sherry when telling her that she was mistaken about dinner and that I wouldn't be able to make it. She seemed let down, but she also kept looking between me and Maggie, as if she suddenly realized there was something there. Maggie and I are almost always together when I'm at the clinic, but it's never more than playful sibling-like banter. I don't know what Sherry got in her head, but she was really cold to me the rest of the afternoon.

"Do you need to be back at a certain time?"

Maggie is trying to ask an innocent question, but there is more there. Especially after the hurt I saw in her eyes when she thought I was going to dinner with Sherry.

“Nope. I’m all yours, sunshine.”

She bites her lip to keep from smiling. But it’s not enough of an answer, I guess.

“You sure? I thought maybe you had a date.”

“Not that I’m aware of. Do you? Seemed to be a lot of boys sniffing around you today.” I can’t keep the irritation out of my voice.

“Awww, you jealous?”

“Nah. I know you love me. No need to worry.”

“Yeah, and I’m not looking for a boy.”

I glance over at her and see the serious look on her face. A moment passes, and it’s different than before. Normally she’d laugh off me saying she loves me, or we’d cover it with a joke. But this time she doesn’t. And it just sits there between us.

We pull into the parking lot of the lake, and she drives down toward the boat ramp. There are spaces off to the side that have the best view, but normally they are full. Luck is on our side and the place is empty, so she’s able to pull right in and we’ve got a perfect view of the water and where the sun sets.

“Guess I should give you your birthday present now,” I say, reaching into my back pocket and pulling out the small box.

Maggie puts cuts the Jeep off and unbuckles, turning to me with both of her hands out. Never let it be said this girl doesn’t love getting presents.

When I place the box in her open hand, she grabs it and pulls it to her chest.

“Oh my God! I love it, thank you.”

“You haven’t even opened it yet,” I say, leaning back in the seat.

“It’s a blue Tiffany box. Are you shitting me? I love it based on the wrapping.”

I laugh and nudge her hand. “Open it.”

She unties the white ribbon and removes the lid. Her delicate fingers reach in and pull out the small linked bracelet decorated with three charms.

“Eli, this is beautiful.” She looks up at me with watery eyes, but her smile is so big.

It makes my chest ache knowing that I’m the one to do that. To make her so happy that she may shed a tear.

“I thought I could add to it as time goes on. The first one is pretty obvious.” I reach out and touch the sunshine. “The second one is pretty obvious, too.” I move over and touch the cupcake charm. “And the third is one that I wanted you to have.”

She looks down at it and back to me. “A heart?”

“Yeah,” I say, and pat my hand on my chest. “Thought since it was yours you should get to look at it every day.”

Suddenly she puts her face in her hands and she’s sobbing. “Oh shit. What did I do?”

I don’t know what happened. One minute she was happy, and the next she’s crying hysterically. This was not the reaction I had anticipated.

Unsure of how to handle this, I open the dash to see if there’s a tissue inside. But it’s

a brand-new car, so there's nothing but the owner's manual. Reaching down, I grab her purse and look to see if there's anything sticking out of it I can use. I don't want to go through her things, but I feel helpless.

When I see a picture of a half-naked man in her bag, I can't help myself and pull it out. "What the fuck is this?" I think for a second it's a photo, but then I see it's a card, and some of my irritation goes away. But only a bit. She shouldn't be looking at stuff like this. But Maggie is still sobbing so loud she doesn't hear my question. Without thinking, I flip it open and read what it says. "Who are you planning on having sex with?"

The growl in my voice must be enough to get through her cries, because she lifts her head and looks at me. Her eyes are bloodshot, and tears streak down both of her cheeks. It makes my heart ache, and I want to pull her into my arms to comfort her. But I'm so mad at this card that I can't think about it.

"It's just a joke," she says, reaching out for the card. But I hold it out of her reach. "Eli, give me that back." <p>(adsbygoogle=window.adsbygoogle||[]).push({});<p>

Source Creation Date: June 30, 2025, 7:04 am

“Why would she say this? Are you planning on having sex? Was it that fucker with the curly hair?”

“What? Who? No, it’s just a dumb card. I don’t want to have sex.” She shakes her head and then tries again. “No, I want to have sex. I just...haven’t. Jesus, I haven’t even had a stupid kiss. It’s a joke!”

“You kissed someone the day I met you. You don’t have to lie to me, Maggie.”

“I’m not lying. I didn’t kiss Nick. He tried to kiss me. I’ve never had a real one.” She’s getting louder, and I can see her breathing pick up. She’s pissed. “It’s not like there’s a line of decent guys showing up to do it either. The one guy I was going to let do it was a jerk and you kicked his ass.”

“Like I should have,” I agree, getting mad, too. I don’t know why, but all of a sudden we’re both pissed off and shouting.

“And it’s not like the one guy I want to kiss me is actually going to do it, so I’ll get this stupid card as a joke and go back to not getting anything!”

“Who do you want to kiss you, Maggie?” I shout back, throwing the card on the floor of the Jeep.

“You, you big dumb idiot! It’s always been you!”

Without a second of hesitation, I wrap one hand around the back of her neck and pull her to me. My mouth connects with hers, and a wildfire of heat and passion ignites

between us. My other hand cups her cheek, and it's far more delicate than the kiss. My mouth is hungry for hers, and a gasp allows me to sweep my tongue inside. Her hands go to my shirt, and instead of pushing me away, she grips it in her fists and holds me as tightly to her as possible. It's like she thinks if she lets go I'll disappear. Her lips are so fucking soft, and she tastes like sweet, sugary icing. I breathe in her scent and run my hands along her neck and collarbone, feeling her soft, exposed skin. This is the kiss that makes everyone before it disappear. There is not a set of lips on this earth that could be more perfect, and I don't know that I can stop.

This has been building for weeks, the knowledge that this is wrong but the inability to stop the urge. I've wanted her since before I should have, and though she's seventeen, this is still wrong. No matter how fucking perfect it feels.

With all the power I have inside me, I break our connection and press my forehead to hers. "We have to stop." I say, trying to breathe in much-needed air. But all I'm doing is taking in more of her scent and branding her in my lungs.

"Eli—" she says, but I cut her off.

"Let's go home, Maggie." I pull away from her touch and watch her bring her hand to her lips. Like she's trying to feel what I just did to her.

I should apologize, but I don't. I'm not sorry. Not one fucking bit. But this can't happen again. I want her more than I've ever wanted anything. More than I wanted a family when I was in foster care. More than I wanted to survive after the bomb went off. More than every dream I've ever had for myself combined. And that is dangerous.

I lean back in the seat and close my eyes, willing her to drive us from here. Because if she doesn't, I don't know what I'll do. I don't know that I'll be able to stop.

I feel both relief and agony when she starts the Jeep and we drive away.

Chapter 9

Maggie

I play with the charms on my bracelet, unable to stop touching them. They make me smile. My fingers always go back to the heart charm. He said it was his heart. I started crying because he'd had my heart all this time and then he gave me his.

I'm not letting how last night ended ruin this. I know Eli is scared. He's worried about what my father might think. He's been a father to him, too, and I know our family means a lot to Eli. He's worried about hurting the Major, and I love him for that, because my dad means the world to me as well. He may also be worried about what others might think, but it can be our secret for a while if we want. Eli and I could steal away moments until the right time comes for us to come out together. I know the two of us are meant to be. I can feel it to my bones.

I was disappointed this morning when I woke up and he wasn't there. I was so used to him taking me to school, but now that I have my own car, it felt silly. I'm guessing because now that I have my Jeep, that's why he wasn't there this morning. He knew I'd be driving myself.

My heart gives a little flutter as I think about the kiss last night. It was so much more than I expected, and I know he felt it too. He had to. It was like I found out I'd only been living as half a person. Then we kissed and that was it. He's my other half. This has to be what soulmates are all about. This has to be what love is. There was so much in that kiss. So much came pouring out of both of us. My cheeks warm at the memory. It was exactly what a first kiss is supposed to be like, and I'm so happy it was with Eli and that I waited for the one.

Now I just have to get Eli on the same page. I know others might not like our relationship, but I don't care. We can keep it on the down low for a while, and no one has to know.

"Hey, Maggie." Sam slides into the desk next to mine, drawing my attention away from my charm bracelet. I was once again lost in thoughts of Eli.

"Hey." I smile back at him.

"I had a great time at your party yesterday. I'd be down for hanging out again sometime." He glances down at his desk, and I see his cheeks turn a little pink.

Page 16

Source Creation Date: June 30, 2025, 7:04 am

Crap. I don't want to hurt his feelings. Sam is always so nice, and I genuinely like talking to him. I don't want it to get awkward. I don't have a ton of friends at school after the whole Nick thing. We're only a little chunk into our junior year, so I don't want to spend the next months in complete social exile.

"Sam, I—"

"Alice is really pretty, and well..." He runs a hand through his short curly hair and finally meets my eyes. I smile brightly at him, and my worry about him liking me as anything more than a friend slips away.

"She is, isn't she?" I push, wanting to hear more about his crush. I'm doing a happy-clap inside, but don't want to seem too excited.

"You think she'll think I'm too young? She is a senior and all..."

"No," I say with a little too much force. They would look cute together, but I worry about them both being too shy. "You're only, like, a year apart, right?"

"A little less than that," he confirms. His dark brown eyes light up.

Alice is going to kill me, but I don't care. I'm already matchmaking in my head and coming up with ideas on how to get them together.

"Maybe we can all hang out this weekend or something," I suggest, already putting things in motion.

“Awesome,” he says as the bell rings and everyone takes their seats. The room goes quiet as the teacher starts her lesson.

The day drags slower than I want it to. I know the day is going to be even longer because I signed up for an SAT class. I take it on Mondays after school in the library, so I’m not able to go to the center and volunteer tonight. I check my phone a few times throughout the day hoping Eli will text me or something. I get nothing from him. Complete silence.

I push any doubts from my head, knowing I need to talk to Eli in person. Maybe the day away from each other will do him good. I know I’m missing him like crazy, and he has to be missing me, too. At least, I hope he is. I want to go back to him picking me up and taking me to school. I know it’s childish, but I feel like it’s our thing.

When I finally get out of my SAT class, I practically run to my Jeep and take off. I head straight for home, and excitement builds in my stomach. But disappointment slides through me when I don’t see Eli’s truck in the driveway. I try to shake it off, thinking maybe he’s working late or something. Alice’s little VW beetle is here, though, and that offers me some comfort.

I grab my backpack from the backseat and head into the house. When I walk through the door, I see Alice sitting in one of the dining room chairs, and my dad on his knees in front of her. His hand is cupping her face, and I can tell right away something is wrong. They turn to look at me when they hear the door close, and my dad’s hand drops to his side. It’s then I see a bruise below her eye.

“Oh my God, Alice.” I rush over to her. “What happened?” I look to my dad to explain, but he looks away, like the sight of it is too much to bear. Alice looks at me, then to her hands in her lap.

“My mom’s new boyfriend. He got a little drunk and...” She trails off. I look over at

my dad again, and this time I can see he's about to explode with rage. All I can feel is sadness welling up inside me. How could anyone lay a hand on Alice? She's the sweetest person in the whole freaking world.

I look at my dad, pleading with him to finish her sentence. I'm sure he got it out of her. It looked like they'd been talking when I walked in.

"The new boyfriend and Alice's mom were having an argument. I guess he threw a cup he had in his hand right as Alice was walking into the room, and it hit her in the face," my dad growls.

"I came to see if maybe that offer was still available. That maybe—"

"You're staying," my dad and I both say at the same time. She looks up at us, a watery smile pulling at her lips.

"Thank you, Major."

"Thomas," he corrects her.

"You can stay in my room with me," I offer. We only have one spare room, and Eli is using it. Plus, I have no problem sharing a room with Alice. Maybe even a little part of me hopes I'll be sneaking into Eli's room now.

"She can have the spare room," Dad says instead.

"But Eli—"

"Moved out," my dad says before I can finish my statement. His eyes are still on Alice. I can feel the anger rolling off of him. It takes a minute for his words to sink in, and it hits me hard. I stand there, not sure how to respond.

“I’ll get your stuff, Alice. You two keep your butts planted in this house until I get back.”

I still can’t move. It isn’t until I hear the front door slam closed that my eyes start to water. Alice reaches up and takes my hand.

“I didn’t know,” she whispers, and I know she’s talking about Eli moving out. She knows how deeply I care for him. How much I love him.

A part of me can’t believe it. He wouldn’t do that, would he? Leave me without so much as a word? I let go of Alice’s hand, but she only grabs it back as I walk toward the bedroom to see it for myself. I push the door open, and a tear slides down my cheek. All his things are gone. The only things that are left behind are the bed, the dresser, and a chair—things that were there before Eli came to live with us.

I catch sight of something on the dresser and walk over to see a note with my name on it. I pick it up, crumple it into a ball, and throw it across the room. Then the tears really stream down my face. I look over at Alice, who’s crying, too, and I feel like an even bigger ass because I know she’s crying for me. She has her own issues right now, but instead of wallowing in her own sadness, she grabs me and pulls me into a hug. We both stand there and cry, holding each other until the sobs finally stop.

<p>(adsbygoogle=window.adsbygoogle||[]).push({});<p>

Source Creation Date: June 30, 2025, 7:04 am

“I’m sorry,” I tell her, my voice hoarse with emotion.

“Nothing to be sorry about. The man you love walked out on you, only leaving a stupid fucking note.” A bark of laughter comes out when she uses a curse word, something she hardly ever does. She walks over and picks up the crumpled paper I threw. I shake my head, not wanting it.

If Eli had something to say to me, he should have said it to my face. Not in some note. Anger starts to rise now, pushing the sorrow away.

“What did your mom do?” I ask her as she shoves the crumpled paper into her pants pocket.

“Nothing. She just stood there.” She shakes her head. “While her boyfriend laughed, and then she went and got him another drink.”

My jaw clenches, and I want to punch her mom, but I know my dad will give her a piece of his mind. And the boyfriend better hope he’s not anywhere to be found by the time he gets there.

“God, Alice, I’m so sorry. I’m crying over a broken heart, and your mom—”

“Don’t,” she says. “I’m glad it happened. I mean, kinda. I finally had a reason to really leave. It was the push I needed.”

“We’re a hot mess,” I tell her, turning to look at the mirror over the dresser. Our faces are blotchy and red. “You were always a better-looking crier than me,” I tease,

making her smile.

“We should eat ice cream, and then you can tell me what sent Eli on the run.”

“I kissed him.” The words come out soft and sad. Wait, he kissed me. I’m not really sure, to be honest. It was the best moment of my life, and it sent him running. I thought he needed time, but I was wrong. He wanted as far away from me as possible, taking with him the life I’d started to dream of.

“Was it good?” Alice asks.

I look over at her and let out a heavy sigh.

“It was life changing.”

Just not the life-changing way I thought it was going to be.

Chapter 10

Eli

Eleven months later...

“Fuck, that’s it,” I groan, squeezing the base of my cock. I wrap my fingers around it tightly because I know her mouth can’t possibly go down that far. My cock is too long and thick, and she can’t get to the end without gagging.

I close my eyes tightly and lick my lips, knowing I’m close to cumming. I use my other hand to run along my chest, rubbing my hard nipples. I want the sensation of her hands on my body, but she can’t reach while she’s on her knees in the shower.

Slicking up my hand, I run it up and down the shaft, helping her milk me to completion. When I cum, it's in long spurts that land on her neck and perky wet breasts. It's a sticky mess, and I'll have to clean her up afterwards, which will start this process all over again.

When the last of my orgasm leaves me, I lean my head against the shower tile and try to hold back the tears. It's all just a fantasy. I'm alone in my shower, and the water is turning cold. The images of Maggie I've conjured in my head spin down the drain with my release.

The warmth I felt in my chest seconds ago is now gone, and all I'm left with is the pain of wanting something I can't have. Not yet.

Getting out of the shower, I grab a towel and dry off and make my way out of the master bedroom and into the kitchen. I grab the pen off the counter and go to the calendar hanging on the wall. I cross today off in red ink, showing that I'm one day closer to her. One more month and I can end this.

Leaving Maggie's house was the hardest thing I'd ever had to do. But I knew it was for the right reason. It was the only way I could stay away from her. Otherwise I would have smothered her with what I felt and would have been unable to have it. She's one month from turning eighteen, and then it's her decision. I will go to her and beg her to forgive me for leaving. I will beg her to take me, faults and all. Because she's mine.

That one kiss sealed it for her, for us. I admitted how much I cared for her, and then I couldn't deny my own desire any longer. Tasting her sweetness and feeling her soft body melt against mine was too much. I wanted it all, and more. I wanted to drink her soul into mine and bind our bodies together for all eternity.

But I knew it wasn't the right time. I knew that she needed some space to decide if

this was really what she wanted. The note I left for her was a sorry way to explain it, but doing it in person would have been wrong. If I had have been within arm's reach of her, I wouldn't have given her the chance to say no. And now, with some time away from me, she can tell me what she's decided. If I'm still what she wants.

I'm not a man who's been with a lot of women in my life. Certainly never in a relationship. Kissing Maggie changed all that, and it changed me. I know the person I want to spend the rest of my life with, and I want her to choose me. But even if she doesn't, there will never be another in my bed. There will only be the thought of her to keep me warm at night. Because I can't live a life with a substitute.

I'd like to think I'm strong enough to let her walk away and be with someone else if that's what she wants. I keep telling myself over and over that if she chooses another man, that's who she needs. But I know deep in my soul that it will break me. I'll try to make her understand. I'll do everything in my power to show her that I love her. And maybe then it will be enough.

I've been in touch with Major since I left, and he's mentioned here and there how Maggie is doing. He's dropped a few details about her going on dates and bringing guys to meet him. Every time he told me about it, I felt like I was going to throw up. But I had to remind myself that this was part of the plan. Give her a year to figure out if she still feels the same way about me as she did before.

<p>(adsbygoogle=window.adsbygoogle||[]).push({});<p>

Page 18

Source Creation Date: June 30, 2025, 7:04 am

Major would cut me almost as deep as Maggie. Part of me wondered if he was doing it just to hurt me, or if he was trying to get a reaction. We never talked about why I left, but I think maybe deep down he knew something either happened between Maggie and me or it was about to.

I wish I could say that I was able to stay away from her completely, but I'd be lying. I'm strong, but I have no power when it comes to my Maggie. I watched her every day. And I don't mean almost every day, I mean every single day. I watched her go to school in the mornings to make sure she got there safe. I watched her go home in the afternoons, or out shopping with Alice.

I always kept my distance, and I made sure she didn't see me watching her, but I couldn't stop. I had to make sure she was okay, and selfishly, it helped ease some of the ache in my heart.

Being pulled in a hundred different directions was killing me when I was living with Major and Maggie. At first it felt like coming home and that I'd finally found the family I'd been looking for my whole life. We all fit together, and it was like my life was finally making sense. Then my feelings for Maggie grew, and they changed. At first she was like a little sister, and I felt protective of her. But as time went on and I got to know her, I fell in love. Hard.

But at least one part of my brain knew that she was too young to have and I needed to give it time. At least until she was legal. After that, in the eyes of the law at least, she could decide what she wanted. It was like ripping my heart in half, but I knew that this pain now could stop a lot of it from happening later. By moving out and giving her some space, it gave her the chance to see if this was some dumb crush or if she

felt even a fraction of what I feel.

Time will tell. One month to go.

After I get dressed I drive to the spot near the high school and wait. When I see her Jeep pull up, I watch as she gets out and grabs her backpack before she's greeted by a guy. I clench my fists at my side and grit my teeth, able to do nothing but watch this happen. She smiles at him, and it's like a punch to the gut. All I want is to have that smile turned to me and for a brief second feel my sunshine. The long-lost warmth that's been missing since the day I left her. I want it back so badly that my heart aches for it.

Thankfully he doesn't touch her as they walk inside, and I let out a breath. I get back in my truck and drive to work, trying to push out of my head thoughts of her with whoever he was.

I roll my eyes at my own efforts, knowing that's an impossible task.

Before I moved out, I'd already been looking for places to stay. I knew that at some point I would have to get a place of my own, and if I'm being honest, deep down I wanted to have my own place with Maggie. I don't think I came to that truth until after I left, but looking back now, I was making all the moves so that when I returned, we could be together. I ended up getting a condo around the corner from her house. It's just big enough for me, and maybe Maggie if she wants one day. I don't allow my thoughts to drift to the what if she doesn't possibilities.

When I get to work I wave to the guy at the desk and make my way upstairs. I asked to have my own office after I moved out of Maggie's house. I knew it was a possibility that she may come back to volunteer, so I banished myself from the building and into the one across the street. This one they use solely for counseling, and it makes it easier to schedule my day. Even if it does mean that I don't get to

interact in the group setting like I did before. I didn't want the sight of Maggie to tempt me into action, and I knew that seeing her there, seeing her smiling face, would have been too much.

I walk through the door of my office and stop short when I see a man in uniform sitting across from my desk. He stands up when he hears me and turns to address me.

“Lieutenant Strong?”

“Yes, can I help you?” I step forward, shake his hand, and indicate for him to sit back down as I take my seat behind my desk.

I don't have anything valuable in my office, so I keep it unlocked. It's not unusual for some of the people I talk to to stop by and leave a note for me while I'm away from my desk. But seeing a Marine fully dressed in my office had the hair on the back of my neck standing up.

“I'm Sergeant Lions. I'll cut to the chase, sir,” he says, pulling out a folder from the bag at his feet and laying it in front of me. “Major Drummond has gone missing.”

“What?” I nearly shoot out of my seat, thinking of running to Maggie. But I stop myself, knowing I need to hear him out first.

“The information is classified, but what we are able to tell you is that he was working on a project for the Pentagon. It's similar to what your experience was while under his command.”

When I was active military I was over reconnaissance, and Major was the one to gather the intel. He was our lead commanding officer, but he did everything from behind a desk. Most of the time. Every once in a blue moon he would have to go out in the field. This was rare, especially since he was a single father, and he was never

put in any dangerous situations. The worst-case scenarios play through my mind, and I realize this man wouldn't be sitting here in front of me if everything was okay. This is worst-case scenario, and I need to get my head together.

"Tell me straight, is he dead?" I clench my fists under my desk and brace for the impact of his words.

"From our intel, we have every reason to believe he is still alive. He was captured sometime within the last forty-eight hours, but he was able to contact us and give positive details that I'm not at liberty to share."

<p>(adsbygoogle=window.adsbygoogle||[]).push({});<p>

Page 19

Source Creation Date: June 30, 2025, 7:04 am

“What are you able to share exactly?” I grit my teeth as impatience claws at my neck.

“We don’t have any idea where he is or what’s happening to him right now. Unofficially, I’m telling you more than I’m allowed to, but I’m doing everything I can to give you the courtesy I would expect were the roles reversed. Officially, I’m here to give you his living will and inform you that you’re now the legal guardian of Maggie Lynn Drummond.”

Look down at the open folder and see the portion that’s highlighted. Everything is laid out in black and white with clear instructions that were witnessed and notarized. Major made me the guardian of his daughter were anything to happen to him. And, since Maggie is still legally a minor for another month, that means that I’m in charge or her.

I sit in the chair as my heartbeat pounds in my ears. Maggie belongs to me now.

Chapter 11

Maggie

“How are you feeling?” Ms. Petty asks, looking down at the notes I’m making.

I give her a fake smile, one that’s so common it almost feels real. It comes easy, too easy. It’s not that I don’t like Ms. Petty, it’s just that I don’t seem to have a reason to smile. But when you don’t smile, people will ask you what’s wrong, and I got sick of having to lie and say everything was fine when it’s not. I’m broken. He took a piece of me when he left, and he didn’t even look back. My pride won’t let my true

emotions show, so I'm sticking with the fake it until you make it motto. But the problem is, nothing has changed since the day he left.

For a while I kept thinking he would come back, but he didn't. He's never going to, and as much as I've tried to move on, it's not working. Over time, I've gotten better at the fake smile. Moving through the motions. Wanting to get through this last year of school. I'm trying to graduate early if I can, and so far, it looks like I can. I hope that starting the next chapter of my life will help me not feel so numb. If I move past this stage the lost feelings I'm having might go away and make me feel less aimless. I have no direction in my life, and I hate that I feel this way. Hate that he made me feel this way.

"I think I'm ready," I tell her, closing my notebook and shutting my book. I have to be ready. I've been preparing for my SATs for what feels like forever. I only had to do this test and pass my finals and then I'd be done. No coming back after winter break.

"That's great." Ms. Petty beams down at me, always a little too happy for my taste. It can be so wearing. I glance over at Zack, who's staring at her with giant puppy dog eyes, wanting her attention. All the guys do. It's not hard to get why so many of them have signed up for the after-school program. It's written on their faces. I have to admit it's a little funny to watch them drool over the teacher.

I slide my stuff in my bag and pull out my phone to check the time. It's almost five, and I'm disappointed I still haven't heard from my dad. He hardly ever has to go on trips for work. Most of what he does is here. Not that I know a lot about what he does for work. What I do know is, whatever he does must be top secret. He told me he shouldn't be gone too long, but it's been five days and I'm starting to get worried. I haven't heard so much as a peep from him. Maybe he feels more comfortable being away since I'm almost eighteen and Alice lives with us. Maybe he isn't so worried that he has to check in as much as before.

I head out of the room and toward my Jeep in the parking lot. I pull up Alice's number and hit call.

"Hey," she answers, her voice sounding a little down.

"What's wrong?"

Alice hasn't been great lately, and to top it off she didn't enroll in college. Something is off with her and Sam, and I can't figure out what it is. When Sam and I ask her, she says nothing, but I'm not buying it.

"I'm at the doctor's. Think I have a stomach bug or something," she mumbles into the phone. I cringe. Alice is the worst sick person ever. You'd think the world is ending when she catches something.

"I'll come and sit with you. Where is your doctor's office?"

"No, it's fine. I'm about to head home."

"Okay. I'll make you some chicken noodles and mashed potatoes."

"That sounds divine." She almost moans into the phone, and my lips twitch. Food is the one thing that can always perk her up, but Alice is a terrible cook. Luckily for our house, I know what I'm doing around the kitchen or we'd all starve to death. "You hear from your dad?"

I slide into my Jeep, and the nervous feeling about him returns. Alice knows I've been worried about it. "No." The line goes quiet. "I'm sure it's fine." I try to reassure us both.

Alice is so soft hearted and is probably worrying more than I am. She's gotten close

to my dad since she came to stay with us. Having grown up with two shitty parents, I think she's savoring having others really care about her.

"You know the Major. He'll likely be back by the end of the week being a pain in our asses about something."

"Yeah," she mumbles, and I hear someone call her name in the background. "They're calling me back."

"Okay, love ya. I'll see you at home," I tell her, and I end the call and make my way home. On the way I do a mental checklist in my head, trying to think if I have all the things I need to make dinner.

<p>(adsbygoogle=window.adsbygoogle||[]).push({});<p>

Source Creation Date: June 30, 2025, 7:04 am

When I pull into the driveway, I freeze when I see Eli's truck. My stomach knots into a tight ball when I see him sitting on the front porch. His head is down, but it rises when he hears my Jeep. When his eyes come to mine, it feels like someone punches me in the stomach. My heart starts pounding and my hands get sweaty.

So many emotions push forward, but I grab on to the anger that's rising up and hold tight. I won't cry. I won't. I repeat it over and over again as I steel myself. I hop out of my Jeep, fixing my practiced fake smile. Eli stands as I walk toward him, and there's a solemn look on his face. He clearly doesn't want to be here.

"Major's not home, so..." I tell him dismissively. I breeze right past him and grab the handle to the front door. I get a little madder when I feel it's unlocked. He's already let himself in.

I don't invite him in, I just grit my teeth and walk inside. Hell, I slam the door behind me, hopefully right in his handsome face, but I don't turn to look. Then I hear him open the door, and my name comes from his lips. Yeah, this not-showing-my-anger thing isn't working.

I drop my bag and turn to look at him. He looks tired. No, he looks wonderful. A lump grows in my throat.

"Please leave," I manage, happy with myself at how strong my voice sounds. I can tell it's a direct hit as my words strike him hard. I can see it on his face. He brings his hand up to run through his hair that's a little longer now. I itch to touch it. To touch him. He doesn't want you, I remind myself.

“I can’t do that, sunshine.” His eyes flick to my wrist where my charm bracelet is. I grab my wrist, covering it up as if I’ve been caught with something I’m not supposed to have. I couldn’t bring myself to take it off. I’d tried a few times but couldn’t do it.

“Don’t call me that,” I throw at him before turning and heading up the stairs. I hear his heavy boots behind me. I move faster, trying to make it to my room, wanting to get away from him. He gets to me first, pulling me into him. My back hits his front as his arms wrap around me. My body melts into his on its own, and I can’t stop the reaction. I hate how much I want him.

“Sunshine, please,” he whispers in my ear. I can hear the pain in his words. It’s deep and rips at me. Slowly I turn to look up at him. He’s so close. His smell invades my senses. I swear he’s gotten bigger since the last time I saw him.

His forehead drops to mine, his eyes falling closed. We stand there in silence, neither one of us saying anything.

After what feels like forever, he finally open his eyes and they meet mine.

“Major is missing.”

My stomach drops at his words, but somehow I remain standing. I don’t know how long I stand there trying to process it. My dad is missing?

“All I know is he went dark over twenty-four hours ago and they can’t locate him. Nor has he contacted them,” he adds. “Oh, sunshine, don’t cry. You know Major is coming back. Nothing can stop him. I think we both know that.”

I didn’t even realize I was crying. I believe Eli. It would take the world going up in flames for my dad to not come home. I take a deep breath and step back from Eli.

“Thank you for letting me know.” He just stands there, not moving. “Please lock the door on your way out,” I add.

“Sunshine, I’m not going anywhere.”

My eyes narrow on him, and I know we are about to square up for a fight.

“I don’t want you here. Even less so knowing the only reason you came here was to give me the news about my dad. I’ll be fine. I have Alice.”

He shakes his head. “This isn’t up for debate.”

“You know what—” I snap back, but he cuts me off.

“According to the law, you’re mine now.”

Chapter 12

Eli

“What are you talking about, Eli?”

Her flushed cheeks and clenched fists should make me wary. But instead I’m turned on like I’ve never been in my life. Seeing her in person, holding her against me, smelling her sweet scent. It’s all too damn much, and I can’t stand the space between us.

I reach in my back pocket and pull out the paper and hold it out to her. “Major had his living will changed so that if anything ever happened to him and he couldn’t get home, I was your legal guardian.”

Her hand is shaky as she unclenches her fist and jerks the paper out of my hand. She is pissed off, and I absolutely hate it. I knew that my leaving wouldn't be easy on her, but I had hoped that knowing one day I'd come back for her would help.

She scans the document and shoves it against my chest as she storms past me and into her bedroom. I follow her step for step until I get to her entryway and stop. I know that going into her private space without permission would cross some kind of line, and I don't want her to be threatened. I want her to feel everything I feel for her, but that may never happen.

"Maggie," I say, hating that she doesn't want me to use her nickname. "Let's talk."

"I don't have anything to say to you right now," she says, and turns her back on me.

"That's fine. But I've got things I need to say to you." I still don't take a step into her room. I know there will never be an easy way to apologize for what I've done or to help comfort her while her dad is missing. "I'm sorry I left the way I did. I thought that it would be for the best. I never meant to hurt you, Maggie. I was told today about Major, and you and I both know there are things about his job that can't be discussed. They're supposed to call us tonight and give us any updates they have on the situation. You and I have a lot to talk about, and maybe now isn't the time for all of that. But at least while we are going through this, let me help. I'm here, and I care about Major just as much as you do. I won't let you go through this alone. Please don't let me, either." <p>(adsbygoogle=window.adsbygoogle||[]).push({ });<p>

Source Creation Date: June 30, 2025, 7:04 am

I see her take a breath, and then her shoulders fall. It's as if the anger visibly leaves her, and some of the tightness in my chest releases. I wait a moment, letting her decide if she wants to speak, and watch as she turns around to face me.

“You’re right. It’s about the Major right now, and we need to focus on that. Alice should be home soon, and I’ll make us something to eat while we wait on the phone call.” She looks around the room and then back at me. “She took your old room, so if you’re staying I guess you can take Dad’s room—”

“I’ll sleep on the couch in the family room,” I say, stopping her. I wouldn’t feel right taking Major’s room, and the couch we all used to hang out on is big enough to be a bed. “I’m sure he’ll be home soon enough. I wouldn’t want him to yell at me for messing up his neat folds.”

There’s a pull of a smile at the corner of her mouth, but she bites her lip to keep it from growing. Then a sadness takes over, and she bursts into tears. I’m in front of her and pulling her into my arms as the sobs start to shake her body.

“Shhh. Don’t cry. Everything is going to be okay.” She leans against my chest as my arms rub up and down her back. I hold her while she cries and try to reassure her that the Major is alive. “He’s going to be fine, don’t worry. You know how he is. He’s like a cross between a Jedi and MacGyver. Nothing can touch him.”

Her body relaxes a little and selfishly I take the comfort she’s giving me. I should keep her at a distance until we have time to talk things through, but I’m not strong enough to push her away. Not now. Not when she needs me.

“Hey,” I say, getting her attention. I slide my hand under her chin and make her tilt her head up to look in my eyes. Her beautiful blue eyes are filled with tears, but she nods, knowing I’m telling her the truth. “Be strong, sunshine. I promise you that I’ll make sure this all turns out all right.”

She nods again, and my words give her some reassurance. And before I can process what’s happening, she places her soft full lips against mine. It’s not a ravenous kiss like the first time I tasted her. This is over faster than it began, and I think we’re both surprised by it.

Maggie leans back and touches her lips, shocked she did it. “Thank you,” she whispers before stepping out of my arms.

And that’s exactly what the kiss was. A thank you for comforting her and telling her it’s going to be okay. But my arms are cold without her, and it takes everything in my power not to pull her back to me.

“Let’s go downstairs and wait on Alice,” she says walking around me and going to the door. Just before she walks out of her room, she turns to look back at me. “Don’t you dare make me a promise you can’t keep, Eli.”

I square my shoulders and walk over to her, getting in her space. “I’ve never lied to you, sunshine. And I never will. You and I are going to straighten things out, make no mistake.”

With that, I take her hand and lead her downstairs to the kitchen. When we get there, it’s like no time has passed. We don’t have the playful easy way we had before, but we move around the space like we have a hundred times before. I help her cook, and a comfortable silence passes between us. It’s only broken when Alice comes home and we have to give her the news.

She's just as upset as we are, having become a part of the family. The Major has taken care of her, and Maggie is truly like a sister. After the girls have a good cry and we all try to eat dinner, we wait for the video call on my laptop. They said that this would be a secure channel to talk to us, and they could get word to us sooner.

The three of us huddle around it in the kitchen as the screen comes to life and a woman in a suit appears before us.

"Good evening, I'm Bethany Gold, and I'm the family liaison here at the Pentagon. I've been given some updates on Major Drummond and wanted to give you some good news."

Excitement rolls through all of us, and Maggie's hand grips mine. I glance down to see her other hand is holding Alice's, and she's almost coming out of her chair with anticipation.

"Most of the information is classified, so I'm unable to tell you a lot of details. But what we can tell you is that he was able to eject his flight seat, and the homing device was activated one hour after landing. It's a strong sign that he's safe, and we have sent a search party to where the beacon was located. We haven't heard any news yet, but we will keep you updated as we get information."

I squeeze Maggie's and look over at her, giving her a small smile. It's not bad news, but it's not great. Only the news of him coming home is going to ease her fears, but knowing that he's okay right now is a comfort.

"Can I ask where he is?" Alice says softly, and Ms. Gold shakes her head.

"I'm sorry, but the details of the mission are currently deemed classified. I'll see if I can get clearance later on. It will take the search team at least a few days to locate the beacon, if not longer, so settle in. I'm here day or night to answer what questions I

can. But for right now, this is positive news. Take comfort, and try to get some rest.”

We thank her for what she was able to provide us, and I close the call. There’s a moment of silence before Alice stands from the table.

“I think I’m going to go lie down. I don’t know if I’ll be able to sleep tonight. But I need to try.” She reaches out a hand to Maggie and rubs her shoulder. “You going to be okay?” <p>(adsbygoogle=window.adsbygoogle||[]).push({ });<p>

Page 22

Source Creation Date: June 30, 2025, 7:04 am

Alice pointedly looks at me and then back to Maggie as if to ask if she's okay alone with me.

"Yeah, I'm good," Maggie says and gives her friend a hug.

Once Alice is out of the room and I hear the guest room door at the end of the hall close, I turn my eyes to Maggie.

"Sunshine..." I begin.

"Not right now, Eli," she says, walking over to the kitchen sink and putting away her glass. "It's been a long day, and I just want to go to bed."

Her shoulders sag, and I stand up, going over to her and resting my hands on them. She might not want me right now, but we've been like magnets since the moment we met, and if I'm in the same room with her, I have to be near her.

I start to rub her shoulders, easing some of the tension, and her head falls back on my chest.

"I was just going to say that I can make you some brownies if you want something sweet." I kiss the top of her head, and for a moment I keep my lips there. Smelling her shampoo and whatever sweet scent that makes up my Maggie.

She laughs a little, and it might be the best thing I've heard in almost a year. "You don't know how to make brownies."

“True. But you do. And I could help.”

“So your way of making me feel better is to make me cook so you can eat?” She turns in my arms and looks up at me with a smile, a real, genuine one this time, and my heart beats like never before.

“I think that sounds about right,” I say, reaching out and running a finger on her jaw. “Come on, you know you love me.”

The words turn her to ice, and I realize that something I used to say to her so many times has a completely different meaning now. She does love me, and I love her. But she doesn’t know that. All she knows is I took off. I need to tell her everything. All that I’ve been holding back from her.

But it’s too late. She’s stepped away from me and now she’s got her hands up in front of her. She doesn’t want me to come anywhere near her, and the thought is tearing me apart.

“Maggie, I didn’t—”

“That’s enough, Eli,” she spits out. “I’m going to bed. Don’t follow me.”

With that, she turns, and I do as she asks. I don’t follow her. Instead, I stand there thinking about how much my leaving hurt her and how much I want to make it right. It might be the smallest thing I can do right now, but it’s something. I go to the cabinet, take out a bowl, and make her brownies.

When I’m finished, I leave a plate of them outside her door. They aren’t as good as hers, but it’s a start.

Chapter 13

Maggie

I roll over in bed and look at my clock. I don't need to get up for another hour, but I know I'm never getting back to sleep. I barely slept at all. Flipping the covers back, I sit up in bed and drop my head into my hands.

God, this is a mess. I feel like I'm all over the place.

"Dad, you better come back to me." I say to myself before standing up from my bed and walking over to my dresser. I pick up the framed picture of him, Eli and me from my seventeenth birthday. God, we looked so happy. I'd always felt like my dad and I were a family, but it was always just the two of us. I loved having our family grow. Or I thought I did.

Now I have no idea what's happening. Eli's sending me mixed signals that don't make sense. I can't go there right now. I already feel like my broken world has now become unfixable. I can't lose my dad. I just couldn't bear it. Not having him or Eli... I push the thought from my head. I can't go there right now.

I want to kick myself for all the moping around I've been doing these last months. I should have been soaking up every second I could with my dad. What if I never see him again? A sob leaves my throat, and I choke it back.

I walk into my bathroom and brace my hands on the sink, looking at myself in the mirror.

"Get it together, Drummond." I say it in the same tone my dad would always use on me when I was having a tantrum or an emotional breakdown. "Get your ass up and do your day."

I let go of the sink feeling a little better and start getting ready, moving through my

regular morning routine like it's any other school day. When I open my bedroom door I stop short when I see a plate of brownies sitting there. I pick it up.

He made them. My heart does a little flutter at his effort, but another part of me questions what is happening here. Why he is doing this? Does he really want me? Maybe he's just making nice because he knows he has to. He's my legal guardian now. He has no choice, so he has to be here.

I hear a sob come from Alice's room and I go over. I enter without knocking and find her lying in bed. She looks like she's been crying all night. I drop the brownies on the bedside table and crawl into bed with her. I wrap myself around her and let her cry. There isn't much I can say that hasn't already been said. I know she needs a good cry. It will make her feel better, and I want her to know I'm here. I'll lie here forever if it makes her feel better. Alice has already lost enough people in her life. Major better get his ass back here.

"Thank you," she whispers.

"I love you," I tell her, and she gives me the words back. I crawl from the bed, grab a box of tissues, and bring them back to the bed. She sits up and takes a few from the box.

"He's coming back," I tell her again, the same thing I told her last night.

She nods, but I can read the doubt all over her face.

<p>(adsbygoogle=window.adsbygoogle||[]).push({});<p>

Source Creation Date: June 30, 2025, 7:04 am

“What are those?” she asks, looking at the oddly shaped brownies.

“Eli made them.” I hold out the plate. “Want one?”

She debates for a second before picking up one of the brownies and taking a bite of it. She barely gets a few chews in and she’s flying off the bed, making a beeline for the bathroom. I hear her vomit.

“Jesus, are they that bad?” I pick one up and take a bite. They aren’t great, but they aren’t vomit-inducing, either. I hear the faucet turn on, and Alice comes out a moment later.

“Think I’m still sick,” she mumbles, falling back into her bed.

“What did the doctor say?” I ask, remembering we hadn’t talked about it last night.

“It will pass.”

I place my hand on her forehead to check her temperature, but she feels fine.

“I was going to go to school, but maybe—”

“No, please go. I’m going back to sleep. I’m going to try to sleep this off.”

“You sure?” I ask. I don’t like the idea of leaving my crying and vomiting best friend alone.

“Really, I can call or text if I need you.”

I level her with a stare. Alice is not great about asking for help. She doesn’t like to be a bother, something her shit parents ingrained in her. “Promise,” she says, making me feel a little better.

“Okay. Anything I can get you before I go?”

“Close the curtains.” I do as she asks, then leave her room and shut the door. I walk down to the kitchen, and I stop when I see Eli making breakfast. I’ve missed that sight.

“Morning, sunshine,” he says, placing a plate with a bagel and strawberries in my spot on the breakfast bar.

I set down the plate of brownies and slide into my seat, unsure of what to say. Instead of trying to force it, I give a small mumbled thanks. I don’t want to face whatever it is he has to say. So I choose to eat as fast as I can so I can leave.

I can feel him watching me the whole time as I eat my food. When I’m finished he takes the plate from in front of me before I can grab it to take to the sink.

“I’m taking you to school,” he says, shutting down any chance I had of a quick goodbye.

“No, I’m fine.”

“Maggie, I’m driving you.” This time he says it with more force, and I clench my teeth.

I’m mad that he’s calling me Maggie, because it makes what he’s saying feel like an

order. And it is. Technically, he's my guardian, and I have to do as he says.

"Fine." I turn and grab my backpack. Walking outside, I fish out my cell phone and scroll for Sam's number.

"Hey," Sam says when the call connects. He's always so chipper this early in the morning.

"Hey," I say back.

"What's wrong?" Damn, I thought I was hiding it better. I tell him what happened as I stand outside Eli's truck. Well, a short, quick version about my dad.

"God, Maggie, I'm sorry. I'm sure he's fine," he tries to reassure me.

I watch Eli come out of the house and head for his truck. His gym shorts and shirt are gone, and now he's wearing slacks and a buttoned-up shirt rolled at the sleeves. God, why does he have to look so hot? I notice he doesn't even limp a little anymore. I hear the truck unlock, and I tear my eyes from him and climb in.

"I know he will," I agree.

"What can I do?" he asks.

"Will you check on Alice for me today? She's not feeling well and—"

"Of course," he says quickly. "I'll go between classes. I have a three-hour break in the middle of the day."

Eli climbs into the truck and starts it up.

“You’re a lifesaver, Sam. Thank you. It means a lot.”

“Anything for you, Maggie.”

Eli stares at me, and his hands clench the steering wheel. I swear I see jealousy burning in his green eyes. I say goodbye to Sam and hang up, putting my phone back into my bag.

“I know your dad lets you date, but you won’t be dating while I have a say in it.”

“What?” I snap, pissed off. I’m not even dating anyone, but the nerve is ridiculous. He’s been in charge for five whole minutes and he’s acting like an asshole. “You know what? Whatever.”

I throw my hands up. Eli leans over toward me, and my breath freezes as I wonder what he’s doing. But the sound of my seatbelt clicking pushes down my excitement as he leans back in his seat. He throws his truck in reverse, and then we take off down the road.

“I’m jealous,” he finally says, and I glance over at him. His knuckles are nearly white as he drives, and his eyes are hard as he stares straight ahead. “So fucking jealous it eats me alive.”

Something about his confession soothes the anger inside me. Knowing that the thought of me with someone else makes him angry does something to warm my insides.

“Sam is a good friend. Nothing more. He’s always there when I need him.” I know the last line is a dig at him, but I can’t help myself. Him leaving me is still raw.

Eli drops his head a little, and I feel guilty for the comment because it’s not needed

right now. We are all already in enough pain. I shouldn't add to it like a selfish brat.

"Sorry," I whisper, but I know he hears me.

He takes a quick glance over at me before he returns his attention to the road. We are already at the school, but he doesn't go to where people are normally dropped off. Instead he pulls into the parking lot and parks.

<p>(adsbygoogle=window.adsbygoogle||[]).push({ });<p>

Source Creation Date: June 30, 2025, 7:04 am

“I’ve been here for you more than you know.” I stare at him in confusion as he turns off the truck. His body moves to face me, and I feel the full intensity of his attention. “Sunshine, a day hasn’t gone by that I haven’t seen you since I left. I couldn’t stop myself.”

“What are you saying?” I ask, knowing that can’t be possible.

“Sometimes...” He shakes his head. “Okay, all the time, I follow you to school and home, making sure you get there all right. Hell, I even get reports about your work at the center every day. Don’t you see it? Don’t you understand what I’m telling you? I’m—” His words are cut off when a knock sounds on his window. We both turn to see Ms. Petty standing there with a bright smile on her face.

Eli hits the button and rolls down the window for her.

“Mr. Dark Roast With One Sugar. I missed you at the coffee shop for our morning date.” She holds up her coffee cup with ‘Mojo’s Coffee House’ stamped on it. Now I’m the one feeling jealousy rush through me. Of course he’s been dating. Here I was thinking he was about to confess his undying love for me. Now I just feel stupid.

“Maggie.” Ms. Petty turns her smile on me.

“Hey,” is all I’m able to say.

I can’t sit here and listen to them flirt, so I grab my bag and jump out of the truck. I need to get away from both of them as fast as possible.

Chapter 14

Eli

“Damn it,” I say under my breath as I watch Maggie head into the building. I can’t get out because the chick I see at the coffee shop is standing in front of my door. I could knock her out of the way with it, but causing a scene right now might not be the best idea.

Every morning when I was away from Maggie I used to get up early and go grab a coffee before I came to sit at the school, waiting to make sure Maggie got in safely. I went around the same time so I often bumped into the same people on their morning commute. This woman was always super friendly, but I never spoke more than a word or two to her. I never even asked for her name. I didn’t give her mine, so she started referring to me by how I took my coffee. I could tell that she was pushing for some sort of flirty conversation, but I wasn’t interested. The only person I had eyes for was Maggie. Maybe I should have been more direct, because now she’s standing beside my truck like we’re longtime friends.

“What was that?” she asks, leaning in a little.

“Nothing,” I mumble, cranking up the truck. “If you’ll excuse me, I need to go.”

“No need to rush on my account.” She gives me a flirtatious smile, and I try my best to be polite.

“Just need to get to work.”

“I didn’t know Maggie had an older brother. I’m Rose, by the way. Rose Petty.” She reaches her hand out, and I awkwardly take it, giving it a small shake. “It’s nice to meet you...”

“Eli,” I say, taking my hand back. “I’m her...” I pause for a second, trying to think about what to say. “I’m not her brother. I’m taking care of her while her dad is away on business.”

I don’t know why I add the last part. It’s none of her business, but I want to make it clear that she’s much more to me than that. I remind myself that she’s still in high school so decide to keep my mouth shut. Especially when talking to one of her teachers.

“Oh. Okay then.” She looks at me for a second and then shakes it off. “Well, Eli. I hope to see you tomorrow morning. Or maybe sooner.”

I give her a tight-lipped nod, neither confirming nor denying her request as she walks away. She looks back as I start to pull out and gives me a small wave. I begin to wave back before I think better of it and shake my head as I leave the parking lot.

When I get to work I throw myself into it and try to push away thoughts of Maggie and Major. I don’t want to worry about if he’s okay because I know he is. He’s the best Marine I know, and he could survive any situation. If he was able to activate a signal when he landed, then I know he’s going to be okay. It’s just a matter of time when he comes home.

Maggie, on the other hand, is a whole other ball game. We need to talk, and I know this might not be the right time with the stress of the situation around us, but I don’t know if I can keep my distance much longer. She’ll be eighteen in a month, so she can make any decision she wants after that. But I need her to know how I feel in my heart and that I’ll wait for her to decide.

By the time the alarm on my watch beeps, I know it’s time to go get Maggie from school. I have a bounce in my step knowing that I’m going to get to see her again. Yesterday was bittersweet, and last night was rough. Knowing I was in the same

house as her again but not able to talk to her was the worst. Hopefully today we'll be able to have some time together and I can get this weight off my chest.

Chapter 15

Maggie

This might possibly be the longest day of my life, and I'm not sure if I'm thankful for that or not. It doesn't matter. The bell is about the ring, bringing the school day to an end, and I'll have to face him. I thought about dodging Eli and not riding home with him, but what's the point? We'll just have to see each other at the house. I would be avoiding the inevitable. I need to get this over with. We have to come up with a new plan. No way can I live with him for the next month until I'm eighteen. I won't make it. One thing I am sure of, I'm definitely not going back to my SAT class. I don't think I can face interacting with a woman Eli has been seeing.

<p>(adsbygoogle=window.adsbygoogle||[]).push({});<p>

Source Creation Date: June 30, 2025, 7:04 am

The idea of him with someone else makes me want to throw up and punch something at the same time. My eyes water as I think about it again. God, I don't know if I can do this. I know I have to get it together. I can't be a mess in front of Alice. I'm the strong one, the one who calms everyone, but I'm not sure if I can do my fake smile anymore.

What he was saying to me when he got interrupted doesn't make sense. It isn't adding up. He made it sound like he'd been mildly stalking me. Well, maybe not mildly, but still. I think knowing that now could make it worse. If he had feelings for me and still dated other women... That would be so messed up. A tear escapes, and I quickly wipe it away, not wanting anyone to see.

When I get outside, I spot Eli's truck. He's staring right at me, and I know he saw the tear slip free. I want to run, but he must see it in my eyes. Before I know what's happening, his giant body unfolds from the truck and he's standing in front of me. His eyes never stray from mine.

"Sunshine."

How can he say my name so softly but still imbue it with a warning? If I run, he'll chase me. I see it written all over his face. It reminds me of the times we'd practice self-defense and how it would turn playful and fun. God, I miss that. I miss him so much, but I'm starting to think maybe he hasn't missed me the same way. It was easy for him to find a substitute for me.

Shaking the thoughts from my head, I move around Eli and walk to the passenger side of the truck. But he's there just as fast, opening the door for me. I climb in, and

he closes the door behind me. I buckle my seatbelt as he comes around—I don't want what happened this morning to happen again. I can't stand for him to be that close to me.

He jumps in, starts the truck, and pulls out.

"I didn't know that woman's name before this morning when she told me," he fires out like he's been dying to tell me the words.

"Oh, so you don't even bother with their names first?" I throw back. I'm suddenly so angry I yell at him.

"I guess you could say that. Maybe because I don't give a shit about other women. There have been no other women. There's only you!" he yells back.

I stare at him, and the tears I was holding back fall.

"Sunshine, don't cry. I'm sorry, baby, I didn't mean to yell. I just can't handle you thinking I've been with someone else, that I've betrayed you like that."

His words don't stop my tears. They only make them flow more.

"Shit. I'm making it worse." He pulls the truck off to the side of the road, and it's then I notice where we are headed. To the lake. Where we shared our first kiss. I'd thought so many times about that night. I was never able to bring myself to come back here, though.

He parks in the same spot and then turns off the truck.

"If you've been with someone, I don't care, sunshine," he growls. "Okay, I care. I fucking care a lot, but I'm not mad at you. I'm mad at myself. I should've done more

than just leave that note, but I was scared if I talked to you in person I wouldn't do the right thing."

"I didn't read the note," I admit.

His mouth opens a little and quickly clamps shut. He looks like he's trying to get himself together, but then I hear a string of curses leave his lips.

"No wonder you fucking hate me. You thought I walked out without a glance back. That...that night was the best thing that ever happened to me. Knowing you had been feeling the same things I had been. I wanted you to be my life. I want you to be my life but I knew I had to step away for a little. Let you grow up a little more, then I could have you."

"I don't hate you." My words come out breathy, and it's like a weight is being lifted off my heart. Eli unclips my seatbelt and pulls me into his arms.

"Oh God, sunshine. You must have thought I was an asshole," he says softly as my face burrows into his neck.

"What did the note say?" I mumble against his warm skin.

"I love you and I'll be back."

I pull away, wanting to look into his eyes. I know my face is still blotchy from the crying earlier, and I'm sure I look a freaking mess, but I don't care. I'm smiling so big it almost hurts my face.

"There you are. That's the sunshine I've been missing."

Chapter 16

Eli

“You love me?” she asks, running her finger along my jaw.

“With everything in my heart. I love you so much, Maggie. That’s what’s been eating away at me. You and Major had become my family, but you were too young for me to have those feelings for you. When they started to change and I knew I couldn’t have you, it was tearing me up.” I tuck a strand of hair behind her ear. “Then that kiss...”

“That kiss,” she repeats, leaning her body into mine.

I can’t stand it anymore and I put one hand on her neck, bringing her mouth closer to mine. “I think I need to see if it’s as good as I remember.”

My lips connect with hers, and every memory I had of that first kiss is nothing compared to now. The image I had doesn’t hold a candle to the way she feels in my arms, the softness of her lips, or the warm heat of her tongue. The kiss is consuming, and her arms go around my neck as I hold her close and enjoy the feel of her. The first time we kissed it was like throwing gasoline on fire. This time it’s like hard woods that have turned to simmering coals, where the heat could melt glass. Everything about this kiss is different, yet it’s like I’ve come home.

<p>(adsbygoogle=window.adsbygoogle||[]).push({});<p>

Source Creation Date: June 30, 2025, 7:04 am

I run a hand over her hip while the other trails a path from her jaw to her neck. Her delicate skin, softer than the petals of a rose, has me entranced. I can't get enough of her, but I don't want to rush it. I know I can't.

With more willpower than I ever thought I possessed, I break the kiss and press my forehead to hers. "Better. It was better than I remembered."

"I love you, Eli," she says, and I pull back to see her big blue eyes so bright and happy.

"I knew it all along," I tease, and give her another soft kiss. "But we have to be careful, sunshine."

"It's okay, I'm on the pill," she says, and bites her lip.

"Maggie, that's not what I meant." I clench my eyes shut thinking about the fact that she's already on the pill, or that she wants to have sex. Jesus. I need a second to catch my breath. "You're seventeen. I love you so much, but there's only so much we can do right now. And I want to wait until your birthday."

"But—" She starts to protest, but I place my finger over her lips.

"Please, sunshine. This means a lot to me. I care about the Major, and as soon as he comes back I want to talk to him about this and let him know my intentions."

The reminder of our situation at home makes her sit up a little straighter in my lap.

“Okay,” she answers. “I get it. Maybe this isn’t the best time to take that step.”

“I wanted to wait until your birthday to come back. But now that I’m here, I won’t deny my feelings for you. We’ve got plenty of time to figure out us. I’m not going anywhere.”

“You promise me.” She narrows her eyes on me, and I smile as I rub her jaw.

“I promise you with all that I have. I’ll never leave you again. You’re my heart, Maggie. Leaving it behind was absolute hell. And I’ll never do it again.”

I take her lips in another kiss, and she holds on to me fiercely. I can feel her love pour through me, and it’s the sweetest, most powerful thing I’ve ever felt. Her body starts to move on top of my lap, and my aching cock begs for more. He wants friction of any kind, and I’m sure I could get off from dry-humping her in my truck. But we have to wait. As much as I want her and want to feel her against me, I have to put both hands on her hips and hold her still.

“Not too far, sunshine. Just kissing.”

“But I’m seventeen.” She nearly pouts as I take her off my lap and put her in the passenger seat.

“Right now, I’m your legal guardian, and you’re underage. For the sake of the law, let’s keep it to kissing.”

“Fine. But I want lots of them,” she says, smiling now.

I give her another kiss as I buckle her in, and it seems to ease some of the sting. We take off toward home, and I feel a sense of peace come over us. It’s not completely covering us because there’s a piece of home that’s missing. But I know in my soul

Major will be back soon.

Chapter 17

Maggie

“What are you doing, sunshine?” Eli whispers into the room.

I should’ve known he’d wake up. I think he knows where I am, even in his sleep. It’s hard to stay away from him. I feel like there’s an invisible thread that connects us, and when I’m away from him for too long, it starts to pull me back. An ache deep inside of me blooms.

“I’m not under the covers, and it’s not like we can do anything. We’re in the freaking living room. Alice could walk in at any moment.”

I roll to my side to look at him. He’s on the fold-out bed in the living room. This is the first time he’s ever pulled it out. Normally he sleeps on the couch and doesn’t bother with having a bigger bed. How could I resist? I just need to lie here with him. He makes me feel at peace. Safe—something I have to have right now.

He starts to get up. “Please, just for a minute. I had a bad dream,” I admit. “I’ll stay on my side, I promise.”

Eli has been adamant about how far we can go. Never more than kisses or a hug. He won’t even really cuddle. He says it’s too tempting. I never thought of myself as a temptress, but Eli makes it sound like I’m a siren meant to drive him insane.

“About your dad?” His voice goes soft, and I can hear the edge of his own pain.

“Yeah.”

Two weeks and nothing. They found where his signal went off, but when they got there—wherever there was—he was gone. That’s the last update we’d gotten. Not that we hadn’t tried to get one every day.

Eli grabs me, pulling me into his arms and shocking me a little. “He’s coming back. I promise.” He places a kiss on top of my head. I melt into him, needing his comfort. He’s all I have to lean on right now.

“Something is wrong with Alice.” I say the same thing I’ve been saying for weeks. She’s pushed everyone away. “She not even talking to Sam now, either.”

Eli tenses a little at the mention of Sam’s name.

“For the last year while you were gone, it’s been Alice, Sam and I. We do everything together.” I can tell he still doesn’t like that, either. It’s silly because Eli’s the only person I’ve kissed, but I do enjoy his jealousy over me. Something about it is empowering.

“Sam had a thing for Alice, not me.” I nudge him with my elbow. He fakes a sound of pain, like anything could dent all that muscle he has. “But it didn’t work out. We were only ever friends. They helped me when I was really sad about you being gone.”
<p>(adsbygoogle=window.adsbygoogle||[]).push({});<p>

Page 27

Source Creation Date: June 30, 2025, 7:04 am

“Sunshine.” He says my nickname like he’s in pain. I’m not telling him this to make a jab. I’m telling him this so he understands my friendship with them.

“He knows about you and me?”

“Yes,” I say instantly.

“But Alice doesn’t?”

“She doesn’t know that we are becoming a thing.” Two more weeks, I remind myself. Just two weeks and I’ll be eighteen.

“We are a thing,” he corrects me, and I smile.

“I’m worried that she’ll feel alone. My dad is gone, I’m with you, and Sam got a girlfriend.”

As if I conjured her, Alice walks into the living room, flipping on the light and freezing in place when she sees us.

I jump up from the bed. Alice’s eyebrows rise in shock, then a smile crosses her face. “It’s about time.” She keeps smiling, but I can see the sadness in her eyes. It’s always there. Why does the world choose to constantly go after the softest people? Alice can never seem to get herself up before someone or something is trying to knock her down.

“I should have told you,” I tell her, feeling a little guilty.

“No, I get it. It’s fine, really. I’m happy for you. I know how much you love him. How much it hurt when he left.” Her eyes travel over to Eli and narrow. I have to fight a smile.

“How about I make us all breakfast?” Eli says. Alice and I both say no at the same time.

“How about I make breakfast?” I volunteer instead, teasing Eli.

“Actually, I’m heading out. Got a few things to do. I wanted to see about finding a new job. Can’t just sit around here all day,” Alice says.

“But I didn’t think you knew what you wanted to do yet. Please don’t tell me you’re going to go back to your old job.” A sheepish look crosses her face. “Alice! Your manager was a pig.”

“I know, but I need a job.”

“Not that bad,” I throw back, but she looks at me like that’s not true.

“I’m going to apply at a few places, and I have some other stuff to take care of, too.” She shifts from foot to foot, and I can tell she’s hiding something. I want to push, but I’m kinda happy that she’s getting out of the house and not hiding up in her room.

“Okay. Dinner?”

“Yeah, I’ll be back by then,” she says, then gives me a small wave and leaves the room without even hugging me goodbye. I stand there for a moment, not sure what to think. Everyone deals with things differently, I guess.

“Come on, I want pancakes,” Eli says, coming up behind me and placing a kiss on

my neck.

“You always want pancakes.”

He grabs my hand and pulls me toward the kitchen.

“Well, I had to live without your cooking for a year. That shit was rough. Too much take-out and ramen noodles is hard on a man after being spoiled by you.”

“It doesn’t look like it was hard on you.” I poke at his stomach.

“That’s because the only way I could take out all my frustration was by working out all the time.”

“Well, you have me now, and yet you still seem to be working out your frustrations.”

“Oh, trust me, I’m just working out another kind of frustration.” I turn around to see Eli’s eyes roaming over me. He turns away, shaking his head at his own lack of self-control. I have to bite back a smile, but I know what’s coming.

“I’m going to go take a shower and get ready.”

And there it is. Every time Eli gets that look in his eyes he’s out the door, trying to get away from me. It would drive me crazy, but each time I remind myself that it’s only a few more weeks. And on top of that, I know he’s never going anywhere again.

I make breakfast, plate it, and put it on the breakfast bar. I quickly go to my room to get ready as fast as I can before coming back down to the kitchen. Eli is already sitting and waiting for me to eat by the time I get there.

“Better?” I ask, and he nods, leaning over to give me a soft, quick kiss. I always

wonder what he's doing in those long showers. I have an idea, and maybe one day I'll get to see it for myself.

"Eli," I say, and he turns to look at me. "When the time comes, are you going to give me more of you?" My cheeks warm at how that sounded, and a mischievous smile lights up his face. "I don't mean like that." I smack his arm. I do, but that's not what I'm getting at right this second.

"I mean that you never really talk to me about your past." I reach up and touch the almost completely faded scar on his face, running my finger down it. Then I do the thing I've always wanted to do. I lean over and kiss it softly. When I'm finished, I lean back to search his eyes.

"Sunshine, I'll give you anything you ask for. I haven't told you too much about it because it's dirty and dark and I don't like to think about it. To be honest, I only just got away from it again."

"What do you mean?" He's not in the military anymore.

"Nightmares. They came back."

"I didn't know you had nightmares," I say, hating I didn't know that about him. I'm happy that he's telling me now, though.

"I did. Right after that bomb blew up on me and my men. It almost killed all of us. The nightmares are echoes of it—hearing people scream into the darkness and not being able to do anything about it."

<p>(adsbygoogle=window.adsbygoogle||[]).push({});<p>

“Oh, Eli.”

He cups my face, leans in, and kisses me. It’s soft, but he lingers for a moment as if I’m soothing the memory for him, helping wash away the pain of it.

“When I came here to do my physical therapy, I got some of my own counseling. Living here and becoming better, the nightmares stopped. And I think part of that was you. My sunshine kept the darkness away. But then I left, and they started creeping in again. I know that it was the stress and hurt that brought all the insecurities flooding back in. But mostly, I was sad because I was without you.”

My heart hurts for him.

“My first night back here, they were gone. I don’t know how you do it, but you light up my world.”

“Eli—”

“Don’t do it, babe.” He gives me a kiss on my nose and pulls back. “This is a good moment for us. We’ve had enough crying. Smile for me. Light us up.”

And I do. I give him the biggest smile I can. We eat in comfortable silence before we finally have to head out so he can take me to school.

Before I slide out of the truck to tell him goodbye, he gives me a kiss. Like always, it’s soft and over a little too fast for my liking.

“Love you, sunshine.”

“Love you, too, cupcake.” I give him a wink and shut the door behind me, then I turn around and almost run right into Ms. Petty.

Chapter 18

Eli

I watch as Maggie walks past her teacher and gives me a nervous look over her shoulder. For a half a second Rose glares at me, but then she shakes it off as she comes around to my side of the truck.

“Good morning, Eli.” Her voice is low and much more welcoming than I had anticipated. “Glad I was able to catch you before you took off. Normally you’re dropping little Maggie off so fast we don’t get a chance to chat.”

I don’t miss the way she used catch. Nor the fact that she referred to Maggie as little. She likely caught the two of us kissing, and though that may not be against the law, it’s certainly not going to be looked on highly by a school official. Instead of telling her to mind her own business, I try to be polite and smooth things over.

“I’m usually trying to get to work on time. Is there something you wanted to talk about?”

“Well, I happened to snag a couple of tickets to the hockey game this weekend. I thought maybe you might want to come along and help keep me warm.”

Before I can respond, her hand sneaks in the window of my truck, and her palm rests on my chest. This is bold for the little contact I’ve had with this woman, and to be honest, I’m shocked. She doesn’t even know me, yet she’s trying to touch me. I don’t

want to be touched by anyone but Maggie, and the feeling of her hand on my body makes my stomach churn.

“Miss Petty—”

“Rose, and I think you might want to consider the offer. After all, if I don’t go to the game, I’d have to spend my weekend talking to the school superintendent about a student’s guardian and their possible relationship.”

“Did you just threaten me?” I ask through gritted teeth as I grab her wrist and push it away from me.

She takes a step back as an angry look passes over her eyes, the one she was giving me when she saw me kiss Maggie. Her glare turns to a sneer as she straightens her coat.

“Oh, it’s not a threat, Mr. Strong. I’ve had my eye on you and Miss Drummond for a few weeks now. I think the school board would be very interested to see what’s been taking place.” She raises her chin and cocks an eyebrow at me. “I’ll be here after classes today, Eli. Maybe if you change your mind we can come to an agreement. We could have a drink at my place and I could let you work things out.”

She turns on her heels and struts back into the building, swaying her hips exaggeratedly.

I’m so pissed off that I didn’t immediately tell her off and put her in her fucking place. But she could cause so many waves for Maggie and me, and I know she doesn’t need that right now. Not with the Major still missing with no sign of him.

“Fuck!” I shout, and hit the steering wheel with my hand. I take off toward work and feel so angry with myself. This is why I’ve been keeping Maggie at arm’s length. We

haven't done anything, but that doesn't mean we won't get asked.

It's not like I'm seventy years old for Christ's sake. I'm only twenty-six, but to someone seeing me with an eighteen-year-old, they assume I'm after one thing.

By the time I get to my office, I'm somewhat calm. No one can prove anything, especially a lie. It would all be hearsay, and when Major comes home, he'll back me up. When.

It's been two weeks and nothing, but I've still got hope. If there is a chance left, he'll take it, and he will make it home. I have to believe that. For myself and for Maggie.

Chapter 19

Eli

"Mr. Strong?" the voice on the other end of the phone asks.

"That's me," I say, leaning back in my office chair.

"This is Superintendent Roger Dale. I'd like to speak to you about a few things if you have a moment."

I sit up in my seat, and a chill runs down my spine. It's been a week since Rose's threat, and I'm guessing she finally made good on it.

Maggie and I have been really careful not to even touch while we are out in public. Although Maggie has been less than thrilled about my lack of affection outside the home, after I told her what happened, she understood. Rose Petty is a conniving snake, and she's trying to use this opportunity to get back at me because I turned her down. What makes me the angriest is that she's using Maggie as a weapon, and it's

disgusting. <p>(adsbygoogle=window.adsbygoogle||[]).push({});<p>

“Yes, go ahead.”

“Mr. Strong, I’d like you to know that it’s been brought to the school board’s attention that there might be an inappropriate relationship between you and your ward. We’ve done some preliminary investigation, and while we do have the documentation that you are the guardian of Miss Maggie Drummond, there has been an indication of an abuse of power.”

“And let me guess, those allegations were made by a Rose Petty.”

“We are not at liberty to discuss who brought these allegations forward, but we want you to know that we take them seriously and want to pursue an inquiry.”

I grit my teeth. I want to tell him to fuck off, but I don’t think that’s in Maggie’s best interest. So instead, I explain the situation to the best of my ability, hoping to cause as little damage as possible.

“Mr. Dale, let me be frank with you.”

“Please,” he says.

“Ms. Petty came onto me, and I turned her down. I’m First Lieutenant in the United States Marine Corps, and I’ve been put in charge of a very precious young woman. The man who gave me this honor is like a father to me, a man I respect above all others. I’m in charge of protecting his daughter, of loving her as if she were flesh of my flesh and blood of my blood. There is no distance on this earth that I wouldn’t go to keep her safe and out of harm’s reach. There have been no lines crossed between

Miss Drummond and me, and I can provide witness to this. People who live with us will swear in court that no law has been broken. I am an upstanding citizen in this community and a decorated veteran of this country. If you have any further erroneous and scurrilous allegations to make, you may do so with my attorney, but until then, I would appreciate it if you offered me some respect, and didn't assume that every little story brought to your lap is the truth."

He pauses for a moment before he clears his throat. "Mr. Strong, we will need to speak with Miss Drummond—"

"Negative," I say, cutting him off. "If you wish to speak with Maggie or myself again, it will be through my attorney and while one is present. That is her right, as well as my own. Good day."

I hang up the phone in my office, slamming it down on the receiver so hard, I'm surprised the plastic doesn't crack. I'm not sure what the outcome of this will be, but I know that I can't handle this shit much longer.

One more week and we won't have this bleeding into our world.

Chapter 20

Eli

"He should be here for this," Alice says as she wipes away a tear.

I take the paper flower out of her hand and tape it to the door for her.

Alice has been a mess since the Major went missing. I know why, but sometimes when people are hurting, you need to give them their space. Alice may be small and innocent, but she's got a heart stronger than any Marine I've ever met. She cries a lot,

but I know that she's missing a piece of our family like we all are.

"When he comes home, we'll do this right. We'll have a big party and make him jump out of the cake," I laugh, and give her a small hug.

She sniffs a little but nods and wipes away the tears. She straightens her shoulders and grabs another flower, taping it on.

She made a big garland for the kitchen, and we've been down here decorating since before the sun came up. She even helped me make breakfast that wasn't completely terrible, and I'm so nervous and anxious to see if Maggie likes it.

Today's the day. Maggie is finally eighteen, and I've got a day planned for us. After I pick her up from school.

I debated waking her up last night at midnight to wish her a happy birthday, but I knew what would happen. I didn't want this hurried through. I wanted to enjoy this moment. I didn't want our first time together to be something hidden in the dark. I wanted to see every inch of her. I want to take our time. I want Maggie to go into this with eyes wide open.

I hear a squeak come from down the hall. I listen to her feet on the stairs, and Alice starts giggling. I barely turn around and Maggie is flying at me. I catch her in my arms just as her mouth lands on mine. My hands go to her ass, keeping her held to me so she doesn't fall.

The kiss is deep and sweet and holds so much more to it than anyone would ever know. This is our moment. We can finally be together. She pulls back to look at me, her smile bright, and fuck if something deep inside of me doesn't move, knowing she's mine. Will always be mine. I don't know how she does it but she makes me feel hope, something I've never felt before. A real belonging.

“Happy birthday, sunshine.”

“Happy birthday to us,” she says, leaning in for another kiss before she jumps out of my arms.

“What the hell?” I try to grab at her, but she’s already headed for the living room.

“Love the decoration,” she calls over her shoulder.

Alice giggles again. “What are you doing?” I ask as she starts picking up all my stuff that I have stacked neatly in the corner of the living room. I’ve been living out of my bag since I came back but made an effort to limit the space I took up—old habits die hard, I guess.

“Putting it where it belongs.” She heads toward her room, and I follow her, not sure this is a good idea. But she throws my stuff inside and shuts her door.

“What’s for breakfast?” she asks, almost out of breath.

I can’t help but laugh. I’m not so sure it’s a good idea I sleep in her room, but she’s just so fucking cute in this moment I’m going to let it go for now. I let the mess she made go, too, something that would normally make me itch, having spent so much time in the military. <p>(adsbygoogle=window.adsbygoogle||[]).push({});<p>

Page 30

Source Creation Date: June 30, 2025, 7:05 am

“I don’t even care if you made it, I’ll eat it with a smile on my face—the one that isn’t going anywhere today.”

God, it feels good to see her smile. Major may not be here, but I’m glad some of the gloom is wearing off. At least for today. If anything we should be soaking up every moment we can, because life can rip things right from your grasp.

I pick her up and throw her over my shoulder, making her scream. She wiggles, and I smack her ass.

“How about you sit your little ass on my lap while I feed it to you?”

“Sounds like the best breakfast a woman can ask for.”

I give her ass another smack, making her squeal again, but she doesn’t tell me to stop. I don’t know how I made it all those months away from her without that sound.

Chapter 21

Maggie

I wiggle in my seat. I don’t know how I’ve made it through the day. The minutes on the clock slowly tick by. I know Eli has something planned for us. I tried to get out of going to school today, but he made me, something about having to get tonight ready for us.

Anticipation thumps through my veins, but there’s a little something in the back of

my mind. I try to keep thoughts of my dad at bay. The fact that he's not here for my eighteenth birthday is hard, but I'm trying to stay strong. I wonder, though, what he'd think of Eli and me being together. Would he be upset, or would he welcome it? I'm guessing no dad welcomes their daughter having a boyfriend. I would like to think he would welcome Eli. We all know Eli is a good man and he'll be good to me. It even feels weird calling him my boyfriend because he's more than that.

"Maggie." My teacher Mr. Sanders pulls me from my thoughts. "You're wanted in the principal's office."

"Ohhhhh!" A dramatic coo rings out in the room from the other students, as happens every time someone is called to the office.

I wonder if maybe there's news about my father or something. I jump up, grab my bag and put my books inside, then I practically run from the room. When I make it to the office I come up short when I see Ms. Petty and Principal Ford standing there waiting for me. A small knot forms in my stomach.

"Is it my dad?"

"Come into my office, Maggie," Principal Ford says, motioning to his office.

"Did they find him?" I push, needing to know now.

"No. I'm sorry. That's not why I called you down here."

I release a breath I didn't know I was holding. Fear slips away and confusion sets in.

"Okay." I nod and walk into his office, taking a seat. He goes around to his side of the desk and sits, and I have to roll my eyes as Ms. Petty joins us. She comes in and closes the door, then walks over to lean up against his desk.

I used to think Ms. Petty was pretty, but jealousy doesn't look good on her face. It makes her look older and sour, like she's been sucking on a lemon all morning.

"It's come to our attention that your guardian and you have been—"

I put my hand up, stopping him mid-sentence. "I don't have a guardian. I'm an adult."

"That may be the case today, but this still needs to be looked into."

"Good luck with that." I stand, not wanting to participate in this conversation. Eli and I have done nothing wrong. Not for lack of me trying, though. Eli is an honorable man, and I won't sit here and listen to anyone try to say otherwise. "Not that it's any of your business, but I'm a virgin. Heck, you can even get that checked with my doctor if need be. As of today, I'm legally an adult and can do as I please."

"How would your uncle feel about this?" Ms. Petty snaps. Jesus, her name really is fitting. I can see the anger rolling off of her now. Not that I blame her. I'd be pissed, too, if I couldn't have Eli.

"I don't have an uncle." I shake my head. I have no clue what she is talking about. I glance over at the clock and see it's almost time to go. It wouldn't be worth going back to class at this point.

"Your uncle. The man who's been raising you most of your life. The man who left you in Eli's care."

I pull my eyes away from the clock to look at her. Her face is smug now.

"Ms. Petty." Principal Ford joins us in standing.

I glance over at him and reach for the folder he has lying in front of him with my name on it. Ms. Petty's words are tumbling around in my head. They can only mean one thing. But it can't be true. Can it? I open the folder and look at the top of the page.

Adoption.

The date is three days after my birth. I didn't even know my dad had a brother. I scan through more documents, not even hearing what Ms. Petty and Principal Ford are saying. I hear the bell ring but keep standing there, reading.

"Oh, your Eli didn't tell you that your dad wasn't really your dad?" Ms. Petty's voice is dripping with self-satisfied victory. The fact that she's trying to hurt me with this news is disgusting.

I throw back my head and laugh.

"That's where you're wrong." I square my shoulders and stare her down. This chick is crazy and clearly has some serious problems. "My dad is my dad."

I toss the file on the desk. "If he wanted me to know this, he would have told me. I'd also bet anything Eli has no freaking idea. And if he did, you're right. He wouldn't say anything, because it doesn't matter. Major is my father."

<p>(adsbygoogle=window.adsbygoogle||[]).push({ });<p>

Source Creation Date: June 30, 2025, 7:05 am

I turn to look at Principal Ford now. He's glaring at Ms. Petty, clearly pissed. She crossed the line and her true colors are starting to show. This isn't about her concern for me at all.

"Maybe things are starting to add up for you now. Ms. Petty clearly has a problem with me and is trying to make my life difficult."

"Maggie. I'm sorry I had—"

"My dad is missing. Now I have to come down here and listen to you people try to make threats about taking another person from me." I grab my bag from the chair. "I suggest we never talk about this again," I say over my shoulder and stride out of the office.

I try to shake off the dirt Ms. Petty tried to throw at me. I know why my dad didn't tell me about his brother and the adoption. I'm his daughter, and he never wants that questioned. I know that's the reason, because I know my dad. If there's a story to it that he thought I should know, he would have told me. But I know Major. He loves me, and I don't need to know anything else.

I push all that aside. I know who my family is, and no piece of paper will change that. I'm going to focus on the future, and I'm going to do it in the arms of the man I love.

Chapter 22

Eli

I sit outside in my truck and wait, my cock hard and thick, throbbing with need. Today's the day, but we have to keep up appearances. There are already too many eyes on us. One step out of line and it could be bad.

She's the most important thing in my life, and I will do everything to protect her. Even if it means ignoring the steel length resting along the inside of my thigh.

Squeezing my eyes shut, I try not to think about it. I try not to picture her soft curves under me and the places my tongue is going to go. How her sweetness will taste and what sounds she'll make when we're alone.

"Fuck," I grunt, and lean back on the headrest.

One touch from her and I knew that my life had been changed. One moment a year ago and my world was forever hers. From that moment on, everything I did, every motion in my life, every beat of my heart, was for her. When her lips met mine, it sealed her fate. She didn't know it that day, but it happened.

The minutes tick by, and though it feels like an eternity, she appears. Her blue eyes find mine, and like every time before, I'm home.

She's walking toward me, and every step brings her closer to my grasp. To the moment when I'll never let her go.

This is one of the first times I've allowed all my urges for Maggie to burst forward. For so long I've pushed them down to the bottom of my feet and stomped on them. Sure, I've taken care of myself when the want has become too much. But seeing her and letting my desires flow freely has turned me into a bull being taunted with a red rag.

I don't get out of the truck when she comes close. Instead I wait as she hops in the

truck and leans over to place a kiss on my lips. But instead of leaning back, she smiles and rubs her nose against mine.

I want her so bad, but I close my eyes and lean in to give her a soft peck to hold me over.

“So where are we headed?” she asks, nearly bouncing in her seat as I wait for her to buckle up.

“It’s a surprise,” I answer, reaching over and rubbing her leg while I drive.

It’s quiet on the way, but it’s a comfortable silence. She places her hand on top of mine, and I feel the warmth from her palm radiating through my skin. God, I can’t wait to feel all of her, but I remind myself that we’ve got all the time in the world.

When we make the turn for the lake, she looks over at me and gives me a suspicious look. But instead of going the way we have before, I keep on driving another mile around the lake and to a driveway. The way is a little long, and hidden around trees, but when we reach the end, it opens up and there sits a little log cabin with the lake at the back of it. The views are spectacular, and the back-porch swing is the perfect spot to watch the sun set.

“Where are we?” Maggie whispers to herself as I jump out of the truck and go around to her side and open the door. “Cupcake, did you rent this for the weekend?”

Her eyes are bright with excitement as she jumps out of the truck and into my arms. I hold her close and kiss her neck as I carry her to the front door and grab the key out of my pocket. I open it up and carry her inside, turning her so she can see the whole place.

“Nah, sunshine. I did something a little bigger than that.”

The space is so big, yet warm and comfortable. A giant living room with a fireplace overlooks the lake, and an open kitchen and dining room sparkle in the light streaming in from the windows. The back wall of the house is made of glass, and there's nothing to see but lake and mountains for miles around.

"Eli. What did you do?" She turns in my arms, and her blue eyes meet mine.

"I bought it for us. Happy birthday, baby."

"Oh my God! You bought this?"

"I've had my eye on it for a while. And when we were apart, I decided I had to have it. Even if we never lived here, I knew it was our home. This felt like the place where I wanted to spend the rest of my life with you, even if I didn't think it was a possibility. I had to have it."

"I can't believe you did this. It's too much."

"It's not enough, sunshine. It will never be enough." I kiss her lips softly and slip my tongue inside to taste her. It turns heated and heavy, and I hold her tighter to me.

"Eli, I love you so much."

"I love you, too, Maggie," I say as I carry her through the house. "I stocked the kitchen thinking we could spend the weekend here. I know now might not be the best time to move in, with everything going on."

<p>(adsbygoogle=window.adsbygoogle||[]).push({});<p>

Source Creation Date: June 30, 2025, 7:05 am

There's a pause between us, and I see something pass over her eyes. But she pushes it away and then brushes her fingers across my cheek.

“This is perfect. I absolutely love it.”

“We'll figure it out, sunshine. But for now, I want to show you the rest of the house.”

I carry her through the place, showing her all the rooms. Most of them I left unfurnished, wanting Maggie to decorate the place how she wanted. I did have some basic furniture delivered, like couches and tables. But most importantly I had the master bedroom taken care of.

When I get to the back of the house, I push open the door to our suite. The bed is gigantic and piled high with fluffy pillows and blankets. The master bath has a big shower and soaking tub for two. I wanted to be able to be with her every second, and that included tub time.

“Jesus, Eli. This is beautiful. How did you do all of this?”

“I've been waiting for you a long time. I had to keep myself busy.” I give her a soft kiss, but it's Maggie who pushes for more.

Suddenly the kiss turns deeper, and she swiftly jumps and wraps her legs around my waist. I walk over to the bed, not breaking our connection, and lay her down in the middle as I climb on top of her.

“We were supposed to make dinner,” I say against her lips as I feel her hands run

under my shirt.

“We’ve spent enough time in the kitchen, Eli. I want to stay in bed with you.”

The look in her eyes is hungry, and I think it may almost match my own. I want her like I’ve never wanted anything, and I’m finally able to take the forbidden fruit that’s been hanging in front of me.

“Let me love you, sunshine,” I say, taking her hands and pressing them down on the mattress. “I want to memorize every single inch of your body so when I go to sleep tonight I can dream of it while I hold you in my arms.”

“God, that’s so hot,” she says, smiling up at me. “Keep talking. I like it.”

She closes her eyes and settles into the covers like I’m about to read her a bedtime story.

“You want dirty talk or just a description?” I tease, kissing down her neck. She moans a little and leans back, giving me more of her exposed skin.

“Mmmm. Dirty,” she says, her voice turning husky with desire.

I slip my hands under her top and push it up, removing it from her body. Then my fingers go to the waistband of her shorts, and I undo them, sliding them slowly down her hips and thighs.

“I’ve waited so long to see you like this, Maggie. To have you under me in your panties, so innocent and sweet.”

I reach behind her back and undo her simple cotton bra, pulling it off her and tossing it on the floor. She’s nearly naked below me, and I can see the faint tan lines around her

breasts. Her pale skin is creamy and chilled with goosebumps. Her nipples are hard peaks pointing up at me and begging for my mouth to suck on them. I lean down, running my nose along the tender skin around the heavy swell of her breasts. I inhale her sweet scent and trace my tongue slowly up between them.

“Fuck, how I’ve wanted to do this for so long,” I confess, pushing her breasts together and rubbing my face between them, feeling the soft flesh against mine before taking one of her hard peaks in my mouth.

I give her one long lick and then suck on them, soft at first and then harder until she’s moaning with pleasure.

“That’s it, sweet sunshine. Let me hear those moans. Soak those little panties for me.”

I turn to her other breast and give it the same treatment—licking her first and then sucking her until she arches off the bed. Back and forth. I love her beautiful tits, and I want to make them sensitive to the touch.

“When I make love to you, I want your nipples to rub against my chest and for them to ache for me. I want you so far gone that you want me everywhere all at once.”

Her hands grip my fingers tighter as she cries out with pleasure. Her body is moving under mine more and more, and I know her arousal is heightened and building.

I move down her body slowly, kissing her stomach and sides as I go. I lick a trail to her belly button and kiss just a bit lower for a few moments. I’m savoring her skin where it’s softest, nuzzling her curves. She’s absolutely perfect, and I’m so fucking turned on by the feel of her, I’m close to losing my mind.

“One day, I’ll put my baby right here,” I say, kissing the lower part of her belly right where the top of her panties are. “One day, when I make love to you, I’ll give you my

seed, and you'll let it take root. You'll let me breed you. Won't you, sunshine?"

I look up at her as I slip my shirt off. Her eyes are wide with desire as she looks over my naked chest, and she nods.

"Yes."

Her answer is breathy and nearly choked as her hips move under me. I unbutton my jeans and kick them off, leaving me in only my boxer briefs. I reach down inside them and give my cock a few strokes before I move down between her legs and lick my lips.

"I want to kiss this sweet pussy I've been dreaming about for longer than I should have been. You want me to?"

"Oh God, Eli. I'm so... No. Yes. Wait. I don't know." Her hands go to her pussy, and she tries to cover her panties.

"Shhh. Just relax. I'll make sure you like it." I kiss her fingers and slowly push them to the side.

I press my mouth to her panty-covered pussy and lick the wet spot there. The taste of her arousal hits my tongue, and I can only imagine it's like when a shark can smell blood. The immediate need I have for her pushes through every sane thought in my head, and I pull her panties to the side and cover her cunt with my mouth.

<p>(adsbygoogle=window.adsbygoogle||[]).push({});<p>

Source Creation Date: June 30, 2025, 7:05 am

Her wet pussy lips swell in my mouth as I suck on them, licking the sweet juices off. She shouts my name, and her hands go to my hair again as I lick her over and over. The taste is maddening, and I feel drunk. Never have I tasted anything so delicious in my life, and I don't know if I can stop.

I grind my cock into the mattress, trying to find some sort of relief. But the only thing that is easing my pain is drinking down Maggie's heavenly juices.

"Sweet God, you taste so fucking good," I say before ripping off her panties, gripping her thighs and spreading them farther apart.

My mouth goes back to her sugary center, and I suck on her clit as her body trembles under me.

"Goddamn it, Maggie. If I had known you had a magic pussy like this, I would have gotten to you a long time ago."

I growl against her as my tongue dips down into her tight channel. I fuck her there with my mouth, giving her as much of me as I can. She's mewling with need, and I know she's so incredibly close.

Bringing my hand up to her clit, I circle it with my thumb as I continue to lick her virgin opening. She's dripping with honey, and I greedily eat it up, wanting it straight from her.

I stroke her steadily, and the even rhythm is enough to push her over the edge. She explodes under me, and I hold her body, kissing her softly as she climaxes in my

arms. I gently lick up her passion, wanting it more than I want my own, as she cries out over and over.

Her orgasm is long, and I feel like a fucking beast giving her this level of pleasure. Instead of giving her time to recover, I start all over again, needing more.

“More, sunshine. I want all of you. I want you wrung out and soft when I slide my cock deep inside you. I want your pussy velvety smooth when I push in.”

The fat head of my cock throbs with desire; the image of her pretty pink pussy wrapping around him is almost too much. I squirt a little cum into my boxer briefs, but clench my fists in the sheets to help hold myself together.

I won't last two pumps inside her, and I feel like her innocent little cunt knows it. Maggie moves her hips and taunts me with it, and all I can do is cover her with my mouth.

I keep talking to her, and she gives me two more orgasms before she's finally lying still and completely relaxed. I kiss my way up her belly and then to her breasts as her heavy arms reach for me.

“I never imagined how good that would feel,” she says, her eyes heavy with passion.

“It tastes even better,” I tell her, leaning down and kissing her lips, passing her sweetness between us.

The smell of her pussy and the taste of it on her tongue has me rubbing my aching cock against her. My cock is still restrained behind my boxer briefs, but he's hard as steel and wants to get inside her.

I reach down between us and push my underwear off. The naked head of my cock

drips cum onto her pussy, and we both watch as I smear it with him. The hard shaft spreads it around until she's coated in me, and I dip the head down, gathering some of her honey on the tip. I bring it back up and rub that on her, too, combining her sticky sweetness with mine.

The head glistens, and I want more, so I dip back inside her and do it again, bringing it back up to the top of her pussy and rubbing it all over her. When I go to do it a third time, she raises her hips and makes me stay inside her. I hold it there for her while I stroke my shaft, pretending it's her tight cunt.

"Please, Eli. More," she begs as she moves under me.

I push in farther, letting her have another inch before I pull out and look at my soaked cock. I use the cream to lube up my cock, and I jack myself off as I push back in a little more.

My fist moves faster this time, jacking quickly. I feel the need at the base of my cock, and then spurts of cum pump out into her opening. I look down and see the cum seep out the sides of her opening as I squirt inside her. I want her slick, and this is the easiest way to do it.

"Eli? Did you just...?"

I look to see disappointment in Maggie's eyes, thinking that I'm finished.

I smile at her and kiss her lips. "I've been waiting for this for a long time, sunshine. There's plenty more where that came from."

I kiss her lips again as I push inside her fully, feeling her tense and relax under me. I'm seated all the way inside her, and I grit my teeth as I try to keep from cumming again so soon.

“Fuck,” I moan, and bury my face in her neck.

I give us both a few seconds to recover, and when her legs wrap around my waist, I know she’s okay.

I pull out slowly, then thrust back in and wait. I give her a second to adjust to my size and then repeat it. After a few thrusts, I start to ride her easy. Steady in and out, not stopping.

“God, I love you so much,” I say, kissing her. Her nipples rub my chest, and she moans into my mouth.

She’s so tight, and it’s painful, but like her, I’ll adjust. Having her virgin cunt wrapped around me is the only thing going through my mind. I’m her first, and her last. This pussy will mold to every ridge of my cock because it’s the only one it will ever know.

She’s mine. “Mine.”

I growl as I thrust harder and move my mouth to her nipple. I suck on it hard as I grip her hips and pull her down on my cock. My inner caveman is pushing forward, and my primal need to have her is winning.

I know she’s on the pill, so I can’t get her pregnant yet, but in my mind, that’s what I’m doing. I’m breeding her with every base instinct I have, rutting my baby into her.

“Eli, I’m cumming!” she shouts as her nails dig into my shoulder, and I release with her. <p>(adsbygoogle=window.adsbygoogle||[]).push({});<p>

Page 34

Source Creation Date: June 30, 2025, 7:05 am

We cum together, and I nearly black out from how fucking good it feels. I've waited so long to have her, and now that it's done, it's only beginning.

I roll us over as her orgasm peaks and move her on top of me. "Another," I demand.

"Another," she moans, and gives her body over to me.

Chapter 23

Maggie

"Sunshine." Eli moans my name, but his eyes stay closed. He hasn't woken up quite yet. Well, that isn't entirely true. He woke me a few times in the early hours by doing delicious things to me. I had no idea pleasure like that existed, but I should have known better. Eli makes everything in my life better, and I know it's because he's my other half.

I maneuver myself over him, straddling his big body. My thighs have to stretch wide for his size. I lick up his chest, feeling the ridges of his muscles against my tongue, wanting to taste every part of him. I can't seem to stop touching him. It's like I'm trying to make up for lost time. It's still hard to believe we're here together. For so long I've felt lost without him, and I know deep down it's because we are each other's future. Without him I felt like I was going nowhere. But all this time he was building a life for us in the hope that one day we could be together. God, I love this man. I hate that I ever even questioned him, something I will never do again.

"I take it all back," I whisper against his skin.

“What’s that?” I look up into his eyes and see he’s wide awake now. One of his hands slides into my hair, playing with the strands.

“That you’re shit at making breakfast. Because this is hands down the best breakfast I’ve ever had.” I smile up at him before taking a nibble at his hard-muscled chest. The sleepiness fades from his face as he flips me over, pinning me below him. His hands lock mine over my head, his fingers linking with mine. I can’t get enough of how easily he moves me around. It’s erotic and exciting all at once, and it makes me feel even more like I’m his.

“I should let you rest.” His mouth comes down to my neck, licking and sucking me. I wrap my legs around him the best I can. “But I think all my control is gone.” I moan at that, that I make him this way. It’s empowering, and even more so after a year of thinking he didn’t even want me. I don’t know how he lasted, though, with the way he is acting now.

“Good.” I rub against him, loving that he’s not holding back. That last night we ripped everything between us to shreds. All the walls and barriers fell away. Nothing could keep us apart now. Neither one of us would let it.

He pulls his head back to look at me. “You sure, sunshine? I know you’re sore.” Concern is written all over his face.

“I don’t care.” All self-preservation is long gone for me.

“I care,” he mumbles, and a flash of worry shows in his eyes.

“Eli, I’m fine. Just—” I’m stopped abruptly when my phone starts to ring. I would normally ignore it at a time like this, but I know who’s calling.

“That’s Alice’s ring,” I tell Eli.

He nods, knowing I can't ignore her call, especially with how she's been lately. He rolls away from me and goes for my bag. He digs in my purse and then hands the phone to me.

"Hey," I say, but she interrupts me instantly.

"Oh my God, Maggie. It's your dad. They found him. You have to come home!"

It takes me a minute to register what she's saying. I look at Eli, and my eyes fill with tears. Hope grows in my chest, and so many emotions pass through me. I'm thankful I'm still sitting in bed because I might have fallen over otherwise.

"He's coming home," Eli says, reading my face.

I nod, and I can feel it's true. I always knew he'd come back.

"I'm coming," I tell her, and hang up the phone. Eli is already tossing my clothes at me as I start getting dressed. When we are both ready he grabs me, pulling me in for a kiss that's deep and hard, letting me know that he's here for me. For us. That everything we face from forever forward, we will be doing together.

"Let's go to Major's house, sunshine." I notice he doesn't say home, and I smile at him. My family is back and about to be whole once again.

The ride feels like it takes forever, and when I try to get Eli to speed, he shakes his head, talking about precious cargo. I roll my eyes but smile while I do it.

When we finally reach home, I'm out of the truck before it stops, and Eli yells something about me being safe. The front door flies open, revealing Alice. She looks like she's been crying again. I go to grab her, but stop. Her robe has come undone, showing her in a pair of pajama shorts and a tight tank top. I glance down and see

what is very clearly a baby bump. My eyes widen in shock as she hurriedly covers up the bump, pulling her robe closed.

“Don’t,” she whispers as I feel Eli come up behind me.

I want to say something, but her eyes are pleading with me to keep quiet, so I do. I don’t know if it’s because she doesn’t want to talk about it or that she doesn’t want me to say something in front of Eli.

Memories from the last few months flip through my mind, signs I should have seen but didn’t. I was so wrapped up in missing Eli, and then my dad went missing. God, I’ve been a shitty friend to her. I must have made her feel like she couldn’t tell me what was going on. I was so consumed with my own life and what was happening to me that I couldn’t see my friend had gotten pregnant.

<p>(adsbygoogle=window.adsbygoogle||[]).push({});<p>

Source Creation Date: June 30, 2025, 7:05 am

I nod, her letting her know I'm not going to say anything. At least in this moment. But I'll be cornering her soon when it's just the two of us.

"He's alive," Alice says, and she gives a small smile, even though her eyes are filled with tears.

"They told you?" I ask, wanting any information as fast as I can get it. She pauses for a moment before grabbing my hand.

"Come and talk to them." She pulls me into the living room, where my laptop is sitting on the coffee table. It's already open. Eli sits down next to me on the sofa as I start typing to make the call.

"Come sit," I tell Alice, motioning to the space next to me on the sofa. She's still standing on the other side of us. She shakes her head, and my eyebrows pull together. "Alice, come sit," I try again, not understanding.

"I think this is a family moment," she finally says.

"You're like my sister. What are you talking about? Major loves you like a daughter. Now get over here." The tears that filled her eyes start to fall.

"Sweetheart," I hear my father say, and I gasp. His face fills the screen, immediately capturing all my attention. I feel Eli pull me close and then kiss the top of my head.

"Dad." My hand goes for the screen as I reach out to try and touch him. "Come home!" I snap, much crankier than I mean to sound. The command makes him smile.

“I love you, too,” he says with a little chuckle.

“I love you, Dad, but please tell me you’re okay and that you’re coming home.”

“I’m a little banged up, but I’m coming as fast as I can. I promise.”

Anxiety leaves my body at those simple words. I have so many questions, but I know now isn’t the time. And I also know there might be things he can’t tell me.

My dad’s gaze trails over to Eli, who’s holding me close. “You been keeping her safe?”

“Always, sir,” Eli replies.

“You better,” he tosses back, and I smile. “Where’s Alice?”

I look up at where she was standing moments ago, but she’s gone.

“She left.” I say the words more to myself, confused.

“What?” my dad asks.

“I don’t know. She was standing here a moment ago,” I inform him. “She’s taken this really hard. Not that we all haven’t, but you know Alice. She’s soft with stuff, and she’s already lost so much. To think she almost lost you has been a lot for her.”

I try to reassure my dad so he’s not worried something is wrong. Since she has come to stay with us, he has treated her like she’s family, like she belongs with us, and she does.

Pain is etched on my dad’s face, and he nods his understanding.

“All right. I’ll be home soon. I love you guys.”

“We love you, too, Dad.”

“Keep my girls safe, Eli. Or else.”

“Promise you that, sir,” he confirms. My dad nods, and the call ends. I throw myself at Eli, climbing in his lap and wrapping myself around him. He holds me tight, and we both share in this moment.

“We’re going to be a family,” he whispers into my ear. His words are filled with so much emotion. I lean back to look down at him, knowing he never really had a family before.

“We’re going to be the best damn family you ever thought you could have, Eli,” I tell him with confidence. I know it to be true. I lean down and kiss him soft and sweet before pulling back and resting my forehead against his.

“I have to go talk to Alice.” Eli nods. He knew I was going to say that. “Something is really up with her, and I’m worried.”

Eli cups my face with his big hand, his thumbs brushing my cheeks. “If anyone can get through to her, it’s you, sunshine.”

I wish that were true, but I love that he believes it. I think I’ve done something wrong with Alice, and I’m not sure what that is. She was there with me through this whole last year when I thought I’d lost Eli. Now she’s going through something, and I want to be there for her in any way I can be.

I slowly pull myself from him and head to her room. When I get there she’s walking out with a bag over her shoulder. She has on yoga pants and a baggy sweatshirt,

trying to hide the baby bump. But now that I've seen it, there's no missing it.

"Alice," I say quietly, and she stops in her tracks. Her eyes widen a little. I know she's trying to sneak out on me in an effort to avoid this conversation.

"I can't do this anymore. It's too much, and the doctor says it's stressing me and the baby out."

"Oh God." I grab her and pull her in for a hug. So many questions flood my mind, but I don't want to push. I'm worried I'll stress her out or something. "But Dad is coming home," I try to reassure her. He'll murder whoever left her alone and pregnant.

"I know. It's what I've been waiting for. I wanted to make sure he was okay before I left. I needed that."

I pull back and plead with her. "Don't go, Alice. Please."

"I need to be alone for a little while and get myself together. I have this little one to think about now."

I glance down at her belly. I don't want her to leave, but I know I can't stop her. She's an adult, and it's not like I can lock her up here.

I open my mouth, but she stops me. "Please don't ask." She says it softly in a voice laced with sadness. <p>(adsbygoogle=window.adsbygoogle||[]).push({ });<p>

Page 36

Source Creation Date: June 30, 2025, 7:05 am

I want her to open up, but I think about how maybe I've been a crappy friend for not seeing this long ago. I want to give her some kind of support, so I'll give her this. I step out of her way. She takes a step and pauses to lean in and kiss me on my cheek.

"Love you."

"Love you, too," I tell her. "You better call me every day, and I want to be at the next checkup," I challenge, unable to help myself.

"Deal," she says, then turns to leave.

Chapter 24

Eli

"He'll be home by morning," I tell Maggie when she comes back into the living room. She comes straight to me and into my arms. I hold her close and kiss the top of her head. "Everything okay with Alice?"

She nods, but I have a sense something isn't right. I don't want to push, because she has a special relationship with Alice. She was able to lean on her when she thought I wasn't coming back, and I know they developed a bond in that grief. As well as how upset Alice has been since Major went missing.

"Can we stay here tonight?" Maggie asks, looking up at me.

I'd never deny her anything, and definitely not this. I knew logistics of buying us a

house would be problematic with Maggie still in school. But now that Major is on his way back, maybe we can talk man to man and work things out.

“We can do anything you want, sunshine.” I tuck a lock of hair behind her ear, and she slips her hand into mine.

“I want you to take me upstairs. I’ve dreamed about you in my bed so long, I want to make it real.”

I lean down and kiss her lips softly. “Did you dream of me sneaking in your room while you slept?”

“Yes,” she whispers against my lips. I rest my hand against her neck and feel her heartbeat pick up.

“I’ll tell you a secret,” I whisper back as the hand at her neck slides down her chest. “I did.”

Her breath catches as my hand eases down the front of her sweats and into her panties. Her pussy is wet and still a little sticky from all our lovemaking.

“I would walk in your room and close the door behind me. You know I couldn’t help myself.” I push two fingers inside her soaked cunt and feel her clench around me as she moans with desire. “Sometimes I would just stand there. But sometimes I would do more.”

“Wh...” She swallows. “What would you do?”

I move my lips to her ear and lick the shell. “You know what I did, Maggie. It’s why you’re so wet right now. You know, and you liked it.”

She tenses up when I press against her G-spot. I take her mouth, demanding entry with my tongue as her pussy clenches again and her arms cling to me. We stand there in the middle of the living room with my hands down her pants, and I rub her to an orgasm. She cums all over my fingers, hard and loud, and I wrap my arm around her waist when she starts to sag against me.

When I've wrung the last of her pleasure from her, I pull my fingers free, lick them clean, and then carry her up the stairs to her room.

"I think it's time we christened this bed, sunshine," I say, laying her down and pulling her clothes off of her.

"I'm so sleepy now," she says with a satisfied smile.

She stretches, pushing her beautiful tits up in the air, and my mouth waters. I strip off my clothes and then pull her legs to the side of her bed as I kneel in between them.

"You can take a nap if you want. I'm going to eat a snack first." I close my mouth over her naked pussy and suck in her sweetness. I moan at the flavor of her release, at how good it tastes.

Reaching down between my legs, I start to jack off while I eat her out. It's okay if she wants to sleep, I'll get off like this.

"Eli, please," she moans, reaching for me. "Let me do it."

I look up to see her hand reaching for mine. She wants to jerk me off while I eat her. Fuck, why is that so hot? I push her back on the bed a little and move beside her so we are in a sixty-nine position, but on our sides. I feel her warm hands around my cock, and I groan deep in my chest as my mouth goes back on her pussy.

Suddenly I'm overwhelmed with sensations as her warm tongue licks my shaft and I bury my face between her creamy thighs. I've got the taste of sweet pussy in my mouth, and my cock is getting sucked. It's almost maddening because it feels so good, but I want my cock in her. I want her to focus on her own pleasure instead of mine.

I jerk away from her touch and move between her legs, thrusting my cock into her in one long, hard stroke. We both cry out with pleasure when I'm fully seated inside her. I look down to see disappointment on her face.

"I was having fun." Maggie almost pouts, and I have to bite back a laugh.

I thrust again, and she moans, closing her eyes as I make love to her.

"Let me take care of you, sunshine. We've got all the time in the world."

Slowly I make love to her on top of her pink comforter. My cock is so hard as I ride her pussy, and every thrust hits her sweet spot. I grip her hips and watch as my cock disappears into her tight channel. Seeing her cream on me has me at the very edge of the peak, and I can't hold off much longer. I reach between us and thumb her clit until I feel her pulsing around me.

Her body tenses up, and she arches off the bed, shouting my name. I hold myself inside her, emptying my cum and trying to keep from passing out on top of her. The pleasure is so fierce that I have to collapse on my side and take her with me. I pull her to me and keep us connected as we both try to catch our breath.

<p>(adsbygoogle=window.adsbygoogle||[]).push({ });<p>

Source Creation Date: June 30, 2025, 7:05 am

“Okay, so no making love in this house,” I say, smiling.

“Why do you say that?” she asks as she pushes a sweaty piece of hair out of her face.

“Because I don’t think your dad would appreciate the noise.” I kiss her lips and see a blush spread across her cheeks. “It’s okay, sunshine. We’ve got a house in the woods where we can be as loud as we want.”

We spend the day cleaning up the house and going through Maggie’s room. She doesn’t have a lot of stuff from moving so much, but we pack up things she knows she wants to go to the new house, and I load them up in my truck. No matter what, we’ll live there, and it’s the next step in our lives. It doesn’t take long, and after we’ve done that, we go through the house, seeing what she wants and getting ready for Major to come back tomorrow.

When we get to the guest room, I see that Alice’s stuff is missing.

“Maggie?” I call from the room, and she comes in to see it for herself.

“Yeah, she said she needed some time away. I don’t know what’s going on right now. But I feel like I’ve been a bad friend.”

“Everyone handles grief in different ways, sunshine. You clung to Alice when I was gone because that’s what helped you work through it. I think she’s been through so much trauma in her life that it’s easier for her to deal with her grief on her own.”

“Maybe,” she says, but I can still see something is on the edge there.

“Tell me what’s been bothering you. I know something’s on your mind.” I take her hand, lead her over to the bed, and make her sit on my lap. “Talk to me, Maggie.”

“At school on Friday—God, that seems like a lifetime ago,” she says, shaking her head. “They told me that Major isn’t my biological father.”

All the worry she’s been trying to hide shows on her face, and I wrap my arms around her. “What do you mean?”

“I saw adoption papers. I know they don’t mean anything, but why would he keep it from me? It said he was my uncle. I didn’t even know he had a brother. It’s overwhelming, and I have so many questions.”

I take one of her hands and kiss her wrist, where I feel her pulse thrumming. “Does this change the way you feel about Major?”

“No!” She’s quick to answer as she shakes her head. “It doesn’t change anything. It’s just surprising. I feel like there’s this secret that he kept from me, and I never knew it. I’m kind of pissed actually. He’s my dad, and nothing will ever change that. Especially not a piece of paper.”

“Then when he comes home, you can talk to him about it.” She nods, and I squeeze her hand in reassurance. “Major keeps secrets for a living. There’s no one better at it than him, and it’s for a reason. If he didn’t tell you, he had good reasons. But he’s an honest and honorable man. So if you ask him, he’ll tell you what he can.”

“And what if I don’t like what I hear?” Her head dips, and it’s then that I hear the true worry in her voice.

“Sunshine,” I say, tipping her chin to look at me. “There is nothing that will ever shake his love for you. And nothing that will ever shake my love for you. So keep

that in mind when those worries creep in. At the end of the day, your family is right here, and we're not going anywhere."

She smiles at me, and I can see her worry slip away. "Stop making sense, cupcake." She pokes me in the ribs, and I grab her wrist.

"Careful. You don't want to start something you can't finish," I warn, kissing her neck.

"Maybe I do," she retorts, moving her hand down and placing it over the front of my jeans.

She runs her palm up and down my growing length, and I growl against her skin. "God, you're like a drug."

I pull her leg over so she's straddling me as I undo my jeans and pull my cock out. She's got on a cotton dress, so all I have to do is reach under and pull her panties to the side. I'm inside her in seconds, and I hold her to me as I let her tight pussy adjust.

I take her mouth in a deep kiss and then move down her neck. I yank down the top of the dress, exposing her breasts. Sucking a nipple into my mouth, I grip her hips with both hands and start to move her.

"Eli," she moans as she leans her head back and rides me.

I can't keep my hands off her or go more than a few minutes without wanting to be inside her. I've never been so needy before, but with Maggie, there is never enough. I always want more.

"God, you're going to be raw if I keep taking you like this. I'm so sorry," I moan as I thrust into her again. I should stop, but I'm a beast and can't. I just keep taking her

for my own pleasure, but I make myself feel better by giving her the same, too.

“Don’t stop,” she moans, and I feel her tremble.

She moves her hips in a steady rhythm as she bears down on me. She’s rubbing her clit and grinding so that she can get off on my cock. The sight and sounds have me drunk with lust, and I can’t hold back anymore.

“I’m coming!” she cries out, and I feel her climax on me.

I release into her and cling to her body, needing to be inside her as much as I can. I want to devour her, and any space between us makes me angry.

It’s either minutes or hours later, I can’t be sure, but when we finally open our eyes again, it’s dark out. I carry Maggie up to bed, and this time I don’t give in to my urges. Instead, I spoon behind her and we fall asleep with her in my arms.

<p>(adsbygoogle=window.adsbygoogle||[]).push({});<p>

Page 38

Source Creation Date: June 30, 2025, 7:05 am

It's one of the best feelings in the world, knowing that I've got an eternity of this ahead of me.

Chapter 25

Maggie

“What are you doing, sunshine?”

I wiggle in closer, trying to dig myself into him as deep as possible. I hate when there's any space between us.

“I missed you.”

He laughs, making my body shift on top of his.

“I only left the bed a few minutes ago. I wasn't sure if you'd even know. You were sleeping like a rock.”

I sigh, letting myself melt into him. I know why he snuck out of bed and what he was up to. His plan had half worked. He'd done wonderful things to me all night until I'd finally passed out. Then he tried to sneak out. But my body is too attuned to him now. The moment I felt him slide out from around me, my eyes popped open.

I knew he didn't want to be in my bed in case my dad came home early. I tried. I really tried to stay in my own bed, but I cracked after twenty minutes, and here I am, lying on top of him on the sofa.

“I missed you, too. I couldn’t sleep without you,” he says, kissing the top of my head.

“Me either.”

“I love you, sunshine.”

“Love you, too, cup—”

My words die as the light in the living room flips on, and my dad stands there staring at us. His eyebrows are raised in question, but he doesn’t look upset.

I push off Eli, who is trying to sit up at the same time. I almost fall on my ass trying to get off him as fast as I can. Eli catches me, but I waste no time getting on my feet and running toward my dad, launching myself at him.

A grunt leaves his body when I hit him. He takes a step back at my impact, but wraps me in his arms.

“Sorry! Oh God, I’m sorry. Did I hurt you?”

He doesn’t let me go, just holds me tight in his arms. He places his cheek on the top of my head as he hugs me.

“I have a few bruises, but I’m fine.”

“I love you.”

“Love you, too, bug,” he says.

He gives me a kiss on the head, and we finally let each other go.

I almost bump into Eli, not having realized he'd come up behind me.

"Sir." One of his arms wraps around me, pulling me to him. The other comes out to shake my dad's hand. I tense because Eli is making it clear we are together. No more hiding. Not that it matters because there's no way my dad doesn't know what's happening after what he walked in on. My dad looks down at Eli's hand, and I start to panic. Please no. I need us to be a family. No more time apart. I say the silent prayer in my head and wait.

My dad takes his hand, but instead of shaking it, he pulls him into a hug. I'm encased between the two men as my dad wraps his arms around both of us.

"Did you take care of my little girl while I was gone?"

"Of course, sir."

My dad steps back, looking down at me. "Guess you aren't my little girl anymore."

I see a flash of sadness in his eyes. "I'll always be your little girl, Dad. I'm just not, you know..." I don't even know what to say.

"You're mine now," Eli finishes for me. Heat hits my cheeks at the thought of my dad hearing that. But it's true. I'm his and he's mine.

My dad smiles, and it shocks me a little.

"Sir, I want you to know that—"

"You can stop right there, Eli." My dad holds up his hand. "I know you, and I know the kind of man you are."

“I’ll protect her and keep her safe until I take my last breath,” Eli says, holding me close.

“Good. Let’s sit down. It’s been a long day.”

“Can I get you anything?” I ask my dad. He glances around the room before shaking his head.

Eli and I sit on the sofa, and my dad sits in his chair.

“You’re okay with this, Major?” Eli breaks the silence.

“I’ve known this was coming for a while.”

“You have?” I blurt out.

“Since the first moment I saw you two together. You looked star struck,” Dad says, looking at me. “And you looked like you’d seen heaven for the first time.”

I glance over at Eli, who looks shocked.

“But I wasn’t worried about it. I watched closely at first, and I knew Eli wasn’t going to make a move or act on it. I wasn’t sure what his plan was, to be honest, but I have to say it pissed me the fuck off when he left.”

Eli drops his head a little, and I can see regret all over his face. I grab his hand.

“Dad—”

“Let me finish, bug.”

“I knew why he took off. I respected that as a father and was happy he didn’t want to cross lines with you. But to see my little girl broken up about it, well, like I said, it pissed me off. So much so I used to call and drop things about you dating so I could make sure he was feeling that pain, too.”

“Of course I fucking was. It was like being ripped in two,” Eli snaps. He goes to stand, but I pull hard on his hand to drag him back on the sofa. I know he only does it because I silently asked him to. I move a little so I’m half sitting on him. My dad sits there with a smile on his face.

“Glad to hear it. I get it now. Trust me. I more than get it.” He says it like he’s been through something like that himself.

“Dad, I’m going with Eli. You know that, right? I don’t want any more time away from him.” <p>(adsbygoogle=window.adsbygoogle||[]).push({});<p>

Source Creation Date: June 30, 2025, 7:05 am

“I made Eli your guardian because I knew one day you’d belong to him. I also knew he’d do anything for you, including ripping himself in two if he thought it was best for you. You have my blessing. I won’t be something else that keeps you apart or puts a sad look on your face.” My eyes water. “That said, a ring and a wedding better be in the near future.”

“Closer than you know, Major.”

I turn to look at Eli. He leans in and gives me a soft kiss on the cheek. I bite my lip as excitement takes over. This couldn’t be more perfect. But there is one more thing I want to know.

“No more secrets,” I say, turning to look back at my dad, and his body goes still.

“I never wanted to keep it a secret. She wouldn’t let me tell anyone,” my dad says.

“Who wouldn’t let you tell me I was adopted?” I ask in confusion.

My dad’s jaw drops, and he looks shocked. His mouth falls open, but then he turns angry.

“You’re my daughter,” he says through clenched teeth.

His words sound final, and I meet his eyes, giving him the same look he’s giving me. Hell, he taught me the look.

He runs his hand through his hair and lets out a breath as if coming to a decision.

“When I found out my brother and his wife were pregnant and due any day, I dropped everything and took off to go see them.” He leans forward, putting his elbows on his knees. “Ethan and I were never alike. We grew up in the same house, but you’d never have thought it. Yeah, we had crappy parents, and we took care of ourselves. Well, I took care of him more than he did me. Which was backwards seeing as I’m the younger one. But he was my brother, and I couldn’t help myself.”

I can see a splash of pain flash across my dad’s face as he recounts.

“The thing is, you can only help someone for so long. Helping Ethan was a daily battle. It was like fighting a flood. The water wouldn’t stop pouring in. I knew I was the only one who was going to get me somewhere in life, and Ethan thought life should hand him things. I got tired of fighting the fight for him. So when I was eighteen I enlisted and left.”

Even as he tells me the story about my birth father, I feel nothing. I only feel sadness for my dad.

“I kept in touch here and there. Knew he was getting mixed up in drugs and doing odd jobs for money. I even sent money every month to him, though I probably shouldn’t have. It likely enabled him, but he was my brother.” My dad sits back up and looks at me. “When I got to the hospital, his wife was already in labor. You took no time coming out. Came out ready for the world.”

“Lighting it up,” Eli whispers in my ear. A tear slide down my cheek, and Eli kisses me right below the ear.

“Took one look at you and knew I wouldn’t leave that hospital without you. I knew it that very second. I never really had a family, but I knew you and I—” He points at me and back to him. “—you and I were going to start one. You were my little girl.”

I smile, more tears flowing down my face. “How did you make it happen?”

“I should be ashamed, but I’m not. I’m not even going to fake it. I paid them off, gave them some money and threats of not wanting to fight me for custody. They weren’t fit. They didn’t have a home or anything. I wasn’t going to let them raise you like my parents raised us. I don’t think Ethan wanted that either, deep down. He knew.”

Eli pulls me closer to him, and I take comfort from his warmth.

“I know things were hard around here, having to move so much, but I tried. I—”

“Dad, stop. Please don’t do that. Things were perfect. I didn’t care we moved around. I was happy we were always together,” I tell him. I knew why we moved so much. He did it so he had a job that always kept him stateside. He did it for me.

I pull from Eli’s hold, and my dad meets me in the middle, giving me a hug. “Do you want to know more about them?”

“It doesn’t matter,” I whisper to him. I don’t need to know unless he wants me to.

“They passed away when you were two. Drunk driving.”

He holds me tighter, and I hug him back just as hard. I didn’t lose something. He did. He lost a brother. I don’t know the people he spoke of, and they aren’t my parents. The only thing I can thank them for is giving me to my dad. Where I belong.

“I love you.”

“Love you, too, Maggie.” We finally pull back, and I yawn. My sleepiness is kicking in.

“You going to tell us where you’ve been, Major?” I get out behind another yawn.

“Been a long day and night. How about a rain check?”

“Deal.” Eli comes up behind me again, pulling me toward him in a tight hold.

My dad glances over at the clock on the fireplace. It’s a little past 4 a.m. now.

“Alice?”

“She’s left,” I answer.

My dad’s face snaps back to mine. His face changes, and I’ve never seen him look like this before.

“What do you mean she left?” His voice is hard and edged with anger.

“You being gone was hard on her. She didn’t take it well. And she has other stuff going on. The stress was getting to her.”

“She left.” My dad repeats the words as if he’s not understanding them.

“Yeah, I tried to stop her, but she wanted space. I’m really worried about her, Dad. I think that maybe—” <p>(adsbygoogle=window.adsbygoogle||[]).push({ });<p>

Page 40

Source Creation Date: June 30, 2025, 7:05 am

Before I can finish my sentence, my dad is turning and running out the front door. I hear a car take off and speed down the street. I turn to look at Eli, who shakes his head and lets out a sigh.

Chapter 26

Eli

“Eli, stop distracting me,” Maggie moans as I kiss my way down her stomach.

We’re back at the cabin since Major never came back to the house, and he’s not answering his phone. Maggie’s been asking all kinds of questions, but I can imagine deep down she knows the answers, she’s just not sure she wants to hear it out loud. So my job, since I only want her happy, is to keep her mind on other things.

I strip off the rest of her clothes and then do the same with mine. I want us naked and skin on skin with nothing between us.

Pushing her thighs apart, I bury my face between her legs and feast on her sweet cunt. Her tender lips are covered in her nectar, and I drink it down while listening to her moans of pleasure. I grip her thighs roughly, then release, not wanting to leave bruises but unable to help myself.

“Cum for me, sunshine. I can’t stop until you do.”

As her thighs begin to shake, I pull back and growl. I grab her by the hips and flip her over, pulling her up on her knees and go back to eating her out from behind. I want to

taste her in every position, and this way lets me lick all of her. I suck on her clit and slide my tongue up to her opening, and then farther up to her tightest hole. I lick her there, and she tenses, but then relaxes as I kiss her slowly and bite her ass cheeks. Sliding two fingers into her pussy, I lick her asshole, wanting to get her off like this. I want her to be mine in every way, and maybe even one day she'll let me fuck her here. But for right now, this is enough.

She cries into the pillow, and I spank her ass hard. "Turn your head to the side. I want to hear you cum."

She does as I say, and I finger the sweet spot inside her wet channel as I eat at her. It takes only a second before her scream of pleasure echoes in the room and rings in my ear. It makes me so goddamn hard as her pussy clenches on my fingers and I pretend it's my cock.

"I can't wait," I say through gritted teeth as I pull my fingers out and sit up, grabbing my dick.

I push the fat head of my cock into her puffy wet folds and sink home in one long stroke. Her cunt sucks me in, and her wet heat surrounds my shaft. My eyes roll to the back of my head at how fucking tight she is. Gripping her ass cheeks with both hands, I look down to where we are connected and start fucking.

"So pretty," I whisper as my thumb rubs on her asshole and my cock disappears inside her tight little pussy. "So goddamn pretty."

"Eli, I can't take it. It's too deep."

Her thighs clench as I bottom out inside her, so I lean forward, blanketing her body with mine. The feel of her hot sweaty skin against mine is heaven. We rub together as I bite her shoulder and keep thrusting.

“Shhh. Relax, sunshine. It’s deeper this way, but you’ll get used to it. Spread your legs a little wider and breathe.”

She does as I say, and I moan, feeling my balls smacking against her pussy. The sticky slap is obscene and only turns me on more.

“Fuck, you feel that? You’re taking all of it, Maggie.”

I trail my hand around her hip to her pussy and pet her wet little clit. She’s begging me to stop but puts her hand over mine to keep me from taking it away. It’s the kind of command she doesn’t want me to follow, and I give her exactly what she truly wants.

“I’m scared,” she says, closing her eyes tight and pushing her hips closer to me.

“It’s going to be so good, sunshine. Let go of it.”

She takes a shaky breath and then stills as I thrust into her one last time. That’s all it takes to trigger her orgasm, and she half shouts, half moans her release.

I hold myself deep inside and empty my cock into her waiting body. The tight walls of her cunt squeeze around me, and I bury my face in her hair as I pump every drop into her. The orgasm is hard, and it fights to get out of me. I feel like pieces of my soul are coming with it, but that’s okay. I want Maggie to have everything I can give her.

Her trembles are lessening as she catches her breath, and I roll us onto our sides. I settle behind her, spooning her closely. I refuse to take my cock out of her, because this is his home. There’s no place else he’d rather be, and who am I to deny his needs?

“I love you, Eli,” Maggie says as she tries to catch her breath.

I kiss her shoulder and nuzzle her neck. “I love you, too.”

We lie there in silence for so long I think Maggie’s fallen asleep. But she surprises me when she speaks up.

“Are you going to tell me what’s going on with my dad?”

“No, sweet sunshine. That’s his story to tell.”

I make love to her all over again, pushing out every thought but her and me from her head. We’ve got a lifetime together to talk about other things, but right now the focus is on us.

There’s nothing more important than my Maggie, and I plan on proving that every day for the rest of our lives.

Epilogue

Maggie

Six years later...

“Sunshine!”

I hear Eli call through the house, and I cover my mouth to hide the laughter. I don’t know why I’m laughing, but I always do when I get nervous. Fear and giggles try to erupt from my chest, but I stay still, not wanting to ruin the surprise.

We’ve been married almost six years now. I graduated high school early and then

went straight into college. Eli got a ring on me the second he could, and we were running down the aisle about thirty seconds later. He's been after me to have a baby since our honeymoon, but I said I wanted to finish school first. I got a degree in nursing and ended up majoring in physical therapy. After I graduated from that, Eli and I started our own practice, and we've been building it up the past couple of years. I know he wants a baby, and I think we're both finally in the right place for that to happen. <p>(adsbygoogle=window.adsbygoogle||[]).push({});<p>

Source Creation Date: June 30, 2025, 7:05 am

“Maggie?” I hear the question in his voice as he goes from room to room.

Finally, after he walks up and down the hallway twice, he opens the door to the spare bedroom. I see the door open, and it takes a second for him to look around and register what’s happening.

I’ve spent the past two months secretly creating a baby’s room. I even put the crib together all by myself one afternoon when he and Major went fishing. The whole room is bathed in pink and fluffy things, and I’m standing in the middle with a picture of a sonogram.

Eli is shocked silent as his eyes find me. He looks down at the framed picture and then back to me. His cheeks turn red, and his eyes fill with tears. It makes my hormones jump for joy, but I stand there and tell him what he’s been waiting so long to hear.

“I went to the doctor and found out I was pregnant. I waited until I could find out what we were having to tell you. Surprise, cupcake. We’re having a girl.”

“Sunshine?” His voice is thick with emotion as he takes a step toward me. “This better not be a joke.”

“Nope. You’re going to be a daddy.”

With those words, he rushes to me and sweeps me off my feet. I laugh out loud as he swings me in a circle, but then he stops abruptly and puts me down.

“Oh God, I have to be careful,” he says, looking down at me in shock.

Suddenly he drops to his knees and pushes my shirt up, exposing my stomach.

“I love you so much, baby girl,” he says, kissing my belly.

My baby hormones are all over the place, and I immediately burst into tears. Eli sees me and stands up, cradling me in his arms and carrying me over to the rocking chair.

“This is supposed to be for the baby,” I say as I laugh through tears.

“It is. I’m just rocking her a little early, that’s all.”

He kisses my cheeks and wipes my tears away. It was the perfect way to surprise him, and the perfect way to start our next chapter. Life couldn’t get much better.

THE END