



His Fractured Girl (“HIS” #4)

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Category: Action&Adventure

Description: It was one night. One regret. But the scars are permanent.

Sophie has demons. Baggage so heavy she can barely carry it, barely get through a night without reliving it. Her scars run deep. Her pain even deeper. And her walls are built high.

Now that shes in college and away from the monsters, she has only one goal: Graduate with honors.

Shes not interested in partying. Not interested in dating. And she wont let anyone stand in the way of her future.

So what happens when her handsome TA throws a wrench in her plan and disrupts her perfect GPA? Stirring feelings shes desperate to fight? Desperate to ignore?

She forms an alliance with her pain and builds a thicker wall.

But Travis is determined.

Hell do whatever it takes to win the stubborn girls heart.

Total Pages (Source): 16

Page 1

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PROLOGUE

Sophie

“Sophie.” The whisper flutters through my mind, pulling me from the dark depths of my sleep. “Come on, Soph, open up those pretty eyes for me.” I try to lift my lids, but the weight of the alcohol is making them so heavy.

“Wake up, baby.”

They open to that word, and the room starts to spin. No one calls me baby. I’ve never been anyone’s baby. I can’t see past the darkness in front of me. For all I know, it’s my mind playing tricks on me.

“There you are.”

My vision begins to adjust, finding a set of dark eyes staring into mine.

“God, you’re so pretty.”

Or maybe I’m still dreaming because Maddock would never call me pretty. He’s dating the prettiest girl in our school. She’s thin. Beautiful. Perfect. Everyone is drawn to Presley. Me... No one even notices me when I’m not with one of the other girls. Maddock certainly doesn’t.

“I want to kiss you, Soph.”

It's definitely a drunken fantasy invading my senses. I let myself settle back into the heavy feeling. My eyes closing as I roll to my back, wanting the dream to play out. But there's nothing but darkness now. I can't see his face anymore. I think I lost it. It's probably because my mind can no longer conjure up a world even in my sleep where Maddock would be interested in me.

"Don't go back to sleep, Sophie."

This time there's a heavy feeling pressing against my chest. A warmth hovering above. I pry my eyes open again and find Maddock looming over me. He's staring down intensely. His hand softly stroking across my cheek. This feels real. Is it real?

"Am I dreaming?"

"No, gorgeous girl, but you're probably still buzzed."

Yeah, I can definitely still feel the alcohol running through my veins. The warmth burning in my cheeks. The most obvious tell is the mental weightlessness. My insecurities aren't pressing at the forefront of my thoughts. I'm not worried about how thick I must feel to him. I'm not thinking about my weight at all.

"Are you going to let me kiss you, Soph?"

The tipsy feeling starts to recede as my nerves sharpen around the edges. I may not be dreaming, but he definitely is. Either that, or the alcohol is confusing him. "I'm not your girlfriend, Maddock. Presley's over there." We all crashed on a sea of cushions and blankets in Sarah's basement, and it's obvious he's taken a wrong turn.

"I don't want to kiss Presley. I want to kiss you. You're so beautiful, Sophie." His hand cups my chin, and the room suddenly feels like a furnace.

“This is the alcohol talking.” I try to shift out from under him, but it’s impossible to budge under his large frame. “You need to get off me, Maddock.” Before his girlfriend wakes up. Though, she was the first one to pass out. Her tiny frame can’t handle as many drinks as someone like me. And we all drank a lot tonight.

“It’s not the alcohol.” His deep voice rumbles across my cheek as his smooth lips slide up to my ear. I’m paralyzed in shock. I don’t know what’s happening right now. “I’ve wanted you for so long, Soph. You’re so fucking pretty.” He nibbles along the crest of my ear, and my saturated system is in overdrive. “Now that Pres and I are breaking up, I can’t deny the way I feel about you.”

Breaking up? Since when? I’ve always been told that alcohol is a truth serum, but what he’s saying has to be a lie. He and Presley have been dating for over a year. They’re so cute together. Most likely to get married. Though it did look like they were fighting earlier. I tried not to eavesdrop, but when I went to the bathroom, it sounded like he was angry with her. Something about Spencer, but that’s the only word that was clear.

“Why are you breaking up?”

“Because she knows I have feelings for someone else.”

That’s impossible to believe. There’s no way he could be ending things over me. That’s not even probable. Presley’s every guy’s fantasy. And I’m just the chubby sidekick who’s lucky enough to get to call her a friend.

“Kiss me, Soph. Show me that I’m not alone in this.”

I lean up on my forearms, looking around the room, trying to make sure I’m not hallucinating. Everyone is out cold. It looks like people literally just dropped in place and passed out. And there’s Presley. Her hair is covering her pretty face. She looks

like she's dead asleep. A steady rise and fall to her chest. Her mouth slightly parted.

"Please don't deny me, baby."

I turn back. His handsome face is mere inches from mine. All the smooth edges of his jawline are illuminated by the moonlight that's shining through the sliding glass door. My system is overwhelmed. The alcohol is slowing my ability to process what's happening. The way he's looking at me is making my stomach flutter. Though the wings of the little butterflies are heavy and soaked with liquor. No one's ever looked at me this way before. People treat me like their kid sister. The guys only speak to me if a teacher requires it in class. The rest of the time, I'm nonexistent. But Maddock is looking at me like I'm the one he wants. It's the same way he looks at Presley.

Presley. Presley. Presley. My sweet friend Presley.

"But it's not right, Maddock. I don't want Presley to hate me." Out of all the girls, she's actually the nice one. The only one I can genuinely call a friend.

"She won't hate you. I promise. She has a thing for Spencer. Besides, she won't even find out about us."

A wave of unease hits my stomach, but I think that's the alcohol reprimanding my body for drinking too much. My eighteen-year-old system isn't used to hard liquor, and the rum punch Sarah made was strong. Now, I know what Maddock and Presley were fighting about earlier, but none of this is making any sense. Why would Presley want Spencer when she has the most perfect guy ever to exist? I think I need a glass of water.

"Do you know how gorgeous you are?" He shifts back, looking down at my chest. "How incredible this body is?"

There's another heavy flutter as his hand runs up my side, giving my breast a squeeze. It's the first time anyone has touched me so intimately. There's a warmth running through my veins but it's no longer from the alcohol. It's the way his thumb is rubbing over my nipple, circling it with his heavy touch. My mind swirls around the word gorgeous . No one has ever told me I'm beautiful before. Sarah says I need to lose weight. And I heard Joel ask why the fat one was coming along when we went to the lake last weekend.

"Does that feel good, Soph?" The flutter tightens in my stomach. My mind is trying to focus on his face and his question. His touch—it feels incredible. There's a tingling sensation running over my skin, but I'm so confused. I don't know what to think about any of this. It's too much to take in.

"You have no idea how long I've been fantasizing about you, baby. I'd look across the room in class and just imagine pulling your shirt down, wishing I could suck on your fat nipples."

My shirt is shrugged down slowly, and I can't reconcile the look in his eyes or what he just said. There's true desire burning in his stare. He's looking at me like he wants to devour me. He's looking at me like I'm sexy. When his head slowly descends and his lips close around my tightened peak, the shock finally jolts my system.

"Maddock, you need to stop. Presley is my friend. And you guys aren't even broken up yet." I think that's what he said. Or did he say they had broken up? Either way, it doesn't matter. This feels wrong. We shouldn't be doing this. I don't want to hurt her. "We can't do this." At least not until things have ended between them and I'm positive Presley won't hate me if I start dating him. Because I really would like to date him. That would be amazing.

"I told her it was over earlier, but I think she was too drunk to understand because she was still clinging to me. Tomorrow, I'll spell it out for her. Make sure she knows

we're done." His hold on my breast tightens, and his tongue starts licking over my pebbled skin, sending tingly little sensations prickling through my body. "God, your tits are so fucking sexy."

His warm breath casts over my sensitive peak, causing goose bumps to flare up my arms. I've never felt wanted like this before. The desire is stirring low in my gut, pulling tighter as he suctions harder. His mouth is nursing the pleasure right from my body. I didn't know how good it would feel to have a guy kiss me there.

"And she's not your friend," he groans against me, rubbing his cheek over and around. "The girls are always talking about you behind your back. I hate what they say about you, Soph. You're so pretty and nice, but they don't really like you. They think you're a tagalong. And that you copy everything they do."

The insecurities blow right back in like a gust of wind. That old familiar feeling of rejection is a sobering pill to swallow. Out of all the girls, I thought Presley genuinely liked me. But it sounds like that's not the case. I guess she's just been pretending to be my friend like the rest of them. She calls me the tagalong, but she's always the one who invites me everywhere. If she didn't want me to come, she should've left me off the chat. I may be chubby but I'm not dumb. Nor am I a pity case.

"Hey!" He tips my chin up, peering into my eyes. "The only reason they talk about you is because they're jealous. Just look at you, baby." His eyes roam down as his pearly whites sink into his bottom lip. He's staring at my chest again, and that flushed feeling rushes over me once more. "None of them have a rack like you. Your body is what us guys fantasize about. But we're always too afraid of being shot down, so we go for the safe girl. That's why I asked Presley out first. I thought you were out of my league."

That's absolutely preposterous. He's out of my league. He's the guy everyone wants to date. And Presley is the last one I would call a safe bet. She's out of everyone's

league. It just goes to show how we should never assume things because even guys have insecurities.

“If you had asked me out first, I would’ve said yes.”

“So, say yes to me now, Sophie. Tell me I can have you.”

Have me? I’m not sure what that means, but when his mouth wraps around my taut peak again, I give up trying to make sense of everything. I just want to feel. For once, I don’t want to think about how I don’t measure up. I don’t want to think about all my imperfections. How I’m chubbier than all the girls. How I bore people when I talk about school stuff. I just want to feel sexy and worthy...and good. And goodness is he making me feel good. I’ve never felt so wanted in my life.

“Lie down, baby.”

I lie back, feeling a wave of dizziness come over me. I close my eyes to stop it, but the spinning starts again. When cold air suddenly hits between my legs, my eyes fly open again. He’s stripped me of my panties and now I’m on full display for him. For him, and for anyone else who wakes up.

I quickly scan the room, but no one has even budged. It’s like the alcohol has cast a sleeping spell over everyone. There isn’t even a stirring. Nothing but a lull of soft snores sifting throughout the room.

“You need to keep quiet.” His gruff whisper is at my ear. “I want my tongue between these thighs, but if you make a peep, I’ll have to stop.”

I swallow down a gulp of nerves, trying to reconcile what’s about to happen. This is something I’ve dreamt about, something I’ve imagined when I’m alone in my room, but I never thought it would actually happen. Or be happening with the hottest guy at

our school. He shifts back, positioning himself between my thighs and my stomach goes haywire. This is really happening. Maddock is about to go down on me. He's staring between my thighs, looking eager for a taste. He looks more excited about what's about to happen than I am.

My stomach flutters with a nervous anticipation as his head starts to descend. When his mouth presses against my swollen skin, the nerves are overridden by tingles. He's kissing me slow and sweet, his tongue sweeping up through my folds and then flicking over my clit. It's different than I anticipated. Though, I really didn't know what to expect. He starts to grow hungrier and then I feel his mouth everywhere. His tongue licking wildly. His teeth taking little nibbles. It's almost too much, and I'm struggling to grasp onto the tingly feeling.

I think my nerves may be in control because my body doesn't want to relax. It's like a tug-of-war is going off in my gut. One moment I'm being pulled toward my release, then it grows slack, and I lose it. It's hard to chase the feelings when they're so inconsistent. But then...his lips close around my clit and the humming starts deep in my gut. The heat envelops my nerves. The tingles trickle over me again, and I start to draw closer and closer. But right as it begins to build to the peak, enticing me closer to the edge, his mouth disappears.

My eyes snap open and he's climbing over me again, looking like a feral wolf under the moonlight shining in. "I need you, Sophie. I need to be inside you."

The throbbing pulses begin to fade, and my nerves are back in control.

"I've never done this before, Maddock." I'm still a virgin. All of this is a first for me.

"I'm glad you saved yourself for me, Sophie. It makes me feel special."

I wasn't saving myself for anyone. It's just that no one has ever been interested in me

before.

“I want you to get on top, so I don’t hurt you.”

I look into his eyes and my stomach is winding tighter. It’s not that I don’t want to, but I imagined my first time being different than this. I thought I’d lose my virginity to someone I’d been seriously dating. Someone I was in love with. Not that I couldn’t feel that way about Maddock, but it takes time. Plus, I didn’t think I’d have sex on a floor in a room full of people. I imagined being in a suite at a hotel with candles lit around the room and rose petals sprinkled across the bed. But...I also never imagined a guy like Maddock wanting me.

“It’s okay, Soph. I promise it will feel good. I’m not one of those assholes who wants to rip you apart. I’ll go nice and slow. I want your first time to be something you’ll remember as being special. So, you’ll set the pace, okay?”

That’s awfully considerate that he wants it to be good for me. Cammie was talking about how Justin just plowed right into her when they had sex for the first time and how it hurt so much. Her first time was miserable, and he didn’t even care. It’s one of the reasons she broke up with him. But Maddock actually wants to make it good for me. It seems like he actually cares about my well-being. If that’s the case, maybe he’d be okay if we waited until we’re alone because that would be more special. Or even after we’ve gone on a date. Or maybe ten. It feels like everything’s moving so fast. And so is the room.

“I don’t think I’m ready, Maddock. Can we wait until we’re someplace more private?”

His head turns, scanning the area. Everyone is still exactly where they were a few minutes ago, eyes closed, completely oblivious to anything happening. I almost feel like we should check to make sure everyone is still breathing.

“No one will ever know, Soph. Don’t you think it makes it hot?” He presses himself between my legs, and I feel his hard bulge right against my naked skin. “None of those girls are as brave or as wild to do something like this.” He starts to rub against me. “It makes you fearless, baby. It makes you a naughty girl.” He rocks faster and a slow simmering heat is starting to roll in my gut. “God, I want you so much, Soph.” He leans down and sucks on my nipple again, making the butterflies raise their heavy little wings. Maddock wants me. “It’s all I can think about. I want to make you mine once and for all. Claim the girl I think could end up being my high school sweetheart.”

My reservations loosen their grip with each of his sweet words. I would give anything to be his. I never knew he had such strong feelings for me. Maybe the moment doesn’t have to be perfect. Maybe being spontaneous is better than overthinking. Besides, I want to make him happy. I’m worried that if I don’t do this, his feelings will change toward me. I’m worried he’ll regret his decision to end things with Presley and will change his mind.

“Okay.” The word slips from my mouth. “But if it hurts, can we stop?” I have a low threshold for pain and don’t want to find myself in the same position as Cammie, regretting my decision.

“Sure, baby. You’re the one in the driver’s seat. If you get on top, it will hurt less.” The fact that he knows that is almost sobering. It reminds me of who he’s been with, and the guilt starts to creep back in. But he told me Presley has feelings for someone else. And it’s not like I’m going against girl code and dating my friend’s ex because apparently, she doesn’t even like me. But Maddock...he likes me. And he doesn’t care what anyone else thinks. He just wants me to be his.

He lays down on his back, and my mind spins with a million different thoughts as I sit up. Insecurities and doubts are creeping back in, swirling with the alcohol. But the overriding thought is that I want him. I shift over his lap, straddling his hips. It feels

kind of awkward to just get right to the sex. Shouldn't we be kissing and getting in the mood? I guess we already had foreplay. And now, it's his turn for pleasure since I didn't exactly return the favor.

He's working to pull his jogging pants down, and I'm nervously watching as his dick springs free. I've never seen one before, so it makes me even more nervous. Not that it's big or looks too thick to fit, but it's going to be inside me. And in a few minutes, I'll no longer be a virgin. I'm about to have sex.

"Now, just raise your hips so I can sink inside."

Doesn't he want me to touch him first? Stroke him a little to build the anticipation? I guess guys just operate different than us girls. I should probably be excited he's so eager to be inside me. He looks like he can't wait a second longer. And I've heard about blue balls before. Maybe his are already starting to ache.

I raise my hips, not wanting to cause him pain, and he lines himself up. His cock presses against my entrance, and a wave of nervousness hits. I'm anxious about how it's going to feel, but excited that soon I will no longer be a virgin. It's another thing that Sarah has made fun of me for. Now, I'll be able to say I had sex with the hottest guy at our school. I wonder what she'll think of me then.

As my thoughts spiral, he begins to pull me down on top of him. His cock is sinking inside my body faster than I expected, tugging against my skin. It feels tight. And there's a burning sensation taking root. It's starting to get uncomfortable, and I think I want to stop.

"Maddock... I..."

His hips thrust up, and a sharp pain slices through my core. I wasn't prepared for it. Cammie said it hurt, and I've read about it in books, but this... It feels like I've been

torn. But I guess I have.

“Sorry, baby. The worst part is over. Now, it will start to feel good. God, you feel incredible, Soph. You’re so tight.”

That tightness he’s enjoying feels like a dry burn to me. I think I need to climb off and take a breather. Plus, the alcohol is making me queasy. Maybe if I were sober, and we were in a romantic setting, him kissing me, telling me all the things he likes about me, I’d feel more at ease. Maybe then I’d be able to relax, and this would feel better. But my thoughts are all over the place and I can’t get settled.

“Now, rock those hips, Soph. Show me how naughty you can be.”

I’m not sure I can. The pain hasn’t subsided. And I don’t think I want to be naughty anymore. I’m more of a good girl. I like getting straight As. I like following the rules. I shift to climb off, wanting a reprieve, but his hands grip onto my waist.

“Fuck, Sophie. That’s it. Just like that, baby. Damn, you feel so good. It never felt this good with Presley.”

His praise has me changing my mind. My mind focusing on his face. He looks to be really enjoying himself. It makes me want to give him more. I do want to make him feel good. Maybe I just need to give it a moment and everything will feel better like he said, and I’ll start to get into it. I push back down, slowly taking him all the way in again. I’m trying to ignore the burn and focus on his face. Watching his eyes grow heavy again as his teeth sink into his bottom lip. I want to channel that feeling and push past my nerves. I lift back up, and he lets out another strangled grunt. Obviously feeling the pleasure. I like giving him pleasure. It definitely makes it more pleasurable for me.

“Damn, your thick lips feel so good. Your heavy cunt is hugging my shaft like a

glove.”

My body tenses and my insecurities are right back at the forefront of my thoughts. I’m sure he meant it as a compliment, but my rattled mind is taking it as an insult. Being reminded of my weight isn’t exactly what I want to hear during sex. But guys are always saying how they want a girl to feel tight, so I should stop worrying and focus on the fact that he said it feels good, that it feels better than when he’s with Presley.

“Come on, Soph. Take me for a ride, baby. I want to see those heavy tits bounce as you fuck my cock.”

His hands urge my hips to move, and I try to follow his lead. At least, the burning sensation is gone. It still feels like every movement is pulling against dry skin, but maybe the faster I move, it will start to loosen. I think I need to take a deep breath and remember who it is that I’m having sex with right now. I just gave my virginity to the hottest guy in school.

“Maddock?”

My body freezes in place, the sound of Presley’s voice sobering me with fear. I’m praying she’s just calling for him in her sleep. My breath is trapped inside my lungs, trying not to make a peep.

“Sophie?”

I look over my shoulder and the horrified expression on her face guts me. She’s seeing everything. She knows exactly what’s happening. And the guilt is crashing down hard.

“What are you two... Why... How could you do this to me, Maddock?”

She starts to scramble to her feet, struggling to get up from the floor, and I'm suddenly bucked off Maddock's hips, falling back onto my butt as he goes after her.

"Presley, wait!"

He takes off after her, and I quickly fix my clothes, needing to go apologize to her too. We never should've done this. We should've waited until long after they had broken up. We should've waited until there wasn't a chance of her catching us. She might already hate me, but I never wanted to hurt her. And even if she has feelings for someone else, it doesn't mean that she wants Maddock's new relationship rubbed in her face.

I stop short outside the bathroom door, feeling like I'm going to be sick as I listen to Maddock's nervous voice.

"I swear, baby, I was passed out. And when I woke up, I thought it was you riding my cock. It wasn't until you just spoke that I realized it wasn't you on top of me."

I cling to the wall, nearly losing my balance. My mind sobering with every single one of his lying words.

"Baby, please. You have to believe me. Why would I ever go for a girl like that when I have the prettiest girl at school? You know me, Pres. You know how much I love you. I would never do anything to hurt you. And certainly not at the chance of getting caught. Just think about it, babe. If I was going to cheat on you, why would I do it when you're lying right next to me?"

The tears slide down my cheeks and it feels like all the air has been sucked from the room. I'm struggling to breathe. Struggling to make sense of what he's saying. He's blaming me. Acting as if I took advantage of him in his sleep. Oh my God. I can't believe what he's saying. And I can't believe I fell for his lies. I gobbled them down

like candy, savoring the sweetness, but I should've known it couldn't have been true.

“I was so drunk. I'm still drunk. If you hadn't woken me, she would've gotten off and I never would've known what happened.”

The room is closing in. I think I'm having a panic attack, either that or a heart attack. I quickly rise from the ground and run, grabbing my bag before I escape through the sliding glass door. I just gave him my virginity.

As soon as I'm in my car, the sob rocks through me. I fight to get myself calm. Fight to clear my eyes so I can get myself home. When I see the blood smeared across my thighs, the pain tears through me again. I just gave that asshole something special, and I can never get it back. And the worst part is, I betrayed my friend. The look on Presley's face will forever be burned in my mind. It's a wound I'll be living with for the rest of my life.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 2:46 am

1

Sophie

Present Day

“ As some of you may have already seen, your grades for your product design assignment have been posted online.” Oh, sweet. I hadn’t realized they were already up. “If you have any questions regarding the grade you received, please feel free to see my TA during office hours. We’ve provided comments in the notes section to explain the reason points were deducted, but if you would like more clarity, or disagree with our conclusion, please come by so we can help. My TA will be available immediately following class today, and again tomorrow.”

I’m positive I got a one hundred on the assignment. My design was so awesome. It was... an eighty?! I blink my eyes, making sure I’m seeing the number correctly on my screen. I got an eighty on it. But why? My logo was awesome. It matched the product perfectly. And I explained my concept in detail, making sure to hit every expectation that was listed on the grading rubric. But an eighty? That’s bullshit.

I scroll down to the comments section to read through the notes.

Pretty design, but not appropriate for a soda product. Although you met all the requirements for the assignment, this concept would not be successful. When creating a marketing package, you need to consider your entire audience, not just the female population. Men don’t typically buy things with flowers on them, nor are they drawn to pastel colors. Most people buy based on expectation of what the product will

deliver. The selling points for a soda are taste, enjoyment benefit, and look of packaging to catch buyers' attention.

When looking at your packaging, I have no idea how I would benefit from your brand. With flowers on the label, my first thought is that it tastes like flowers or dirt, in which case I would need to have a closer look to learn more, but I would never do that given the colors you have chosen. Remember, the main goal is to sell to the general population. You need to make people believe your soda is better than all the rest.

Really? He doesn't understand that it's an "organic drink," made from natural plants and sugars. That's why I put flowers on it, to show it's a natural product made with organically grown ingredients. And the colors I chose are to make it stand out amongst the sea of brands that are already on the market. Instead of going with the standard spectrum of colors, I went with pastels. It's different and unique, which will actually draw your eyes in to have a closer look. It makes perfect sense to me. I would buy this drink if I saw it on a shelf, because I would know right away that it's organic and not made from chemicals. That's what makes it stand out from all the rest. That's what lets you know it's the better product.

"Okay, class. Remember, your personal brand logo is due on Friday. The rubric has been posted online. If you have any questions about the assignment, email my TA. But please do not ask for an extension because one will not be granted no matter what the circumstances. This assignment was listed on the syllabus given to you at the beginning of the semester, so you've had plenty of time to plan accordingly. And just so you know, any assignment turned in after midnight on Friday will automatically lose twenty points. All right, class is dismissed. We'll see you Thursday."

I shove my stuff into my bag, trying to get out as fast as I can. I want to be the first one at the TA's door, so I can get this cleared up right away. Apparently, the guy needs an introduction to the world of organic products because my concept was spot-

on. And even if it isn't perfect, I definitely deserve better than a B. It was barely even a B. An eighty is almost a C and that's going to mess with my 4.0 GPA. I'm aiming for magna cum laude here. I can't afford to get a B. And if I drop the class, it will put me behind on my prerequisites for next semester and then my entire schedule will be thrown off.

"Oops, I'm sorry," I say, nearly colliding into someone as I go to reach for the door. I look up and the heat hits my cheeks. It's him. It's the one who always sits in the back corner of the room. The unfathomably gorgeous guy who constantly looks deep in concentration. He's always typing away during class while staring up at the front of the room. It's as if he's taking down Professor Maxwell's every word. Most of the other guys in class usually mess around on their phones so it's nice to see that he's actually interested in learning something, and not just scrolling through bikini babes on social media.

To be honest, I hadn't expected him to be so tall or broad. His shoulders practically span two of me. The glances I've snuck when he wasn't watching haven't done him justice. His eyes are so much darker up close. They're like the color of a midnight sky. And all the smooth lines of his face make him look like he was cut from stone. A brilliant artist's work of sculpted perfection.

"Here, let me get the door for you." He holds it open for me to pass, and the butterflies start to flutter in my stomach. He's the first college guy I've met with manners. It almost seems like being chivalrous is a rare trait these days.

"Thanks." I smile, feeling the blush in my cheeks as he smiles back. His dimples are completely disarming. It's been a moment since I've felt a flutter in my stomach, but it's definitely not a feeling I should give any stock to. He's too good-looking, which is the first red flag. Guys like him are either taken or they like playing the field. Or both from my experience.

“You’re very welcome, pretty girl.” My stomach flutters even faster, and that’s my second warning sign. Smooth talkers willing to dish out compliments so easily aren’t trustworthy. “What’s your name, by the way?”

“Sophie,” I answer, not wanting to be rude. Though, I probably should’ve made up a name.

“It’s nice to meet you, Sophie. I’m Travis.” He tips his head, giving me another one of his charming smiles, and the hairs on my arms are now raising like he’s just shocked me with static energy. It’s a feeling I don’t trust.

“Sorry, I have to run.” I turn to take off toward the business building, eager to put distance between us, but apparently, he’s going the same direction.

“So, where are you headed?” He falls in step with me.

“I have to go talk to the TA. He gave me a low grade on my assignment because he didn’t grasp my concept. I don’t think he’s all that clued in to organic products. Being a guy, he probably lives off beer and pizza. Sorry.” I look over, realizing my mistake. I just said all that out loud, not even paying attention to my present company. “No offense. I’m not talking about you. You don’t look like you live off pizza.”

My eyes scan down his frame. He definitely doesn’t look like he survives off junk food. He looks like he lives off protein shakes and sit-ups. There isn’t a shred of excess weight on his body.

“None taken.” He chuckles, and I realize I’m totally checking him out. “Personally, I’m a burger-and-fries kind of guy.”

Burgers are my favorite. But when I eat them, they go straight to my hips.

“So which product did you have?” he asks.

“The organic soda.” I turn toward the office building. “I put flowers on my packaging to represent the fact that it’s all natural and made from naturally grown ingredients. But he said that it made him think the drink would taste like dirt and he wouldn’t buy it.”

He holds the door to the business building open for me, and I’m beginning to wonder if he needs to speak with the TA too.

“I mean, stupid, right?” I pass through, thanking him again. “There are so many organically grown products that show the herbs and plants on the packaging, and they all sell.”

“Most of the products I’ve seen with flowers on them are soaps and lotions.” He continues to follow me down the hall. “But food products want to fit in with the crowd, right? Say for example, if I’m selling a package of organic cookies, I want people to think they taste as good as the real thing. I want people to associate them with junk food, but the bonus is they’re organic and healthier for you. Same goes for soda. No one wants to drink something they think will taste like medicine or something that came from the ground.”

“Wow. So, you’re in the same camp, huh? Team TA. And here I was thinking you were cute?” I honestly can’t believe I just said that out loud. I’m flirting with a complete stranger, who probably has a girlfriend. It was a stupid move on my part, but I can’t retract my words now.

“So, are you saying I’m no longer cute because I disagree with you?” His smile is splitting his cheeks again, and the flutter in my stomach is getting turbulent. He’s flirting back. But that’s not a sign of him being single. Nor is it a sign of him being a decent human being.

“Cute or not, you’re wrong.” Though, cute is a piddly word for a guy like him. “I think people who shop organic like knowing their food is all natural. They want to know it came from the earth and not associate it with a chemical plant. So, if I were looking for an organic soda, I’d want to know it was made from plants and flowers.” I look toward the hall, realizing I have no clue as to which room number I’m looking for. “By the way, do you know which room our TA is in?”

“It’s right here.” He stops in front of a closed office door. I guess he has a question too, but when he puts the key into the lock and turns the knob, it’s obvious my assumption was completely wrong.

Oh my God. He’s the TA. It’s him. And here I was going on and on, and he didn’t even stop me. God, I feel like such an idiot.

“How about you take a seat.” He holds the door open for me again. “And we can discuss this further.”

I stomp inside, feeling like I was just blindsided. “You tricked me!” I plop down into the chair, feeling like I’ve just been completely bamboozled.

“How so?” He closes the door and comes around to take a seat behind his desk, looking more like a teacher’s assistant as he steeples his fingers under his chin. So, that’s why he looks so studious. He’s been attending class to assist the professor. “I was merely carrying on a conversation with you. You were the one who assumed I was just another student.”

“Yeah, well, you could’ve told me who you were.” He just let me ramble on, embarrassing myself further.

“That would’ve spoiled the fun. I was enjoying your candid take on my grading, and your assumption on my beer gut.” He looks down at his flat stomach, which is no

doubt rippled underneath his button-down shirt. “I also liked your smile.”

The butterflies try to take flight, but I quickly squash the feeling. He’s already deceived me, proving he can’t be trusted. And I’m positive there’s a girl in the picture. Maybe even a couple. An upperclassman with his looks...and that smile... There’s no way he’s single.

“Now, let’s look at your grade because I’m assuming that’s why you’re here.”

He turns toward his computer and pulls up my design. “This one, correct?” He shifts his screen so I can see.

“Yes.” I look at my pretty logo, still thinking it would make an amazing design for a soda can. “That soda would sell by the cases.” I would buy it. I’d buy it on color alone. The fact that it’s good for me would just be a bonus.

His head starts shaking as he looks back at the screen. “As pretty as it may be, it doesn’t sell the product. And that’s our job. To teach you how to sell products to the masses, not just to girls who like frilly-looking things.”

Frilly-looking things? How rude. I put a lot of thought into that design. I wanted to make something that would show exactly where it came from. I was trying to sell to the masses.

“Well, I thought I had done that. Clearly, I didn’t.” Though, I think his opinion is narrow-minded and I wholeheartedly disagree with him, but I’m gathering it’s a losing battle at this point. “Could you just tell me what I can do to pull up my grade? Is there going to be an extra credit opportunity? Or could I submit a second design?” Next time, I’ll paint the can black and write drink me or die on it. That will get people’s attention. Maybe put crossbones over a chemical symbol.

“An eighty is still a good grade, Sophie. When you said low, I was expecting for you to have gotten a D or an F. There were a lot of students who completely missed the mark. But your effort showed. It just wasn’t quite what we were looking for.”

He doesn’t understand. An eighty is like an F in my mind, especially if I’m striving for honors. “I’m trying to get a perfect GPA, Travis. An eighty will kill me right out of the gate.”

“Wow.” He shakes his head. “That’s a lot of pressure to put on yourself as a freshman, Sophie. You know college is supposed to be fun, right?”

Fun doesn’t get you into grad school. Fun doesn’t get you a decent job and pay the bills. Fun makes you drink too much and end up making the biggest mistake of your life. Fun is dangerous. But getting good grades and being able to rely on myself... Now, that is safe.

“I didn’t come here to party and get wasted.” I’ve vowed to never drink again. “I came here to get my degree so that I can get accepted to a top-tier grad school and can one day get the job of my dreams.”

His smile really is unnerving. It weakens my defenses, and after everything I’ve been through, I don’t like feeling weak.

“You don’t even want to have a little bit of fun?” He holds his fingers up in a pinch.

“Sure, I do.” I nod. I like to have fun with my roommate. Going to the movies. Having girls’ nights. Participating in cooking competitions with our toaster oven to see who can make the most gourmet dish for dinner. “But I also want good grades. Now, can you please just tell me what I need to do to fix this?”

It looks like he doesn’t even know what to make of my response. I guess I’m not the

typical student, but I'm assuming he's a typical guy, and that the way he's looking at me is meant to make me believe that he actually cares. When in reality, the only thing he probably cares about is getting laid.

"I'll have to get back to you on that. Professor Maxwell doesn't usually give extra credit opportunities, so I'll have to discuss it with him first. I'll be able to let you know what he decides by next class."

Really? That's it. His stupid grade may actually stick, which means I'm either going to have to drop the class or figure out how to get one hundreds on every remaining assignment from here until the end of the semester—which is going to be impossible with this guy grading them. Awesome. Just awesome.

"Do you know when the last day to drop the class is?"

His brow creases. It doesn't seem like he likes the idea. If he's so concerned, he can change my grade. Or at least, give me another chance on the assignment.

"The deadline is next Friday. But why would you drop it? You have As on all the other assignments."

"I want magna cum laude. And if there's a chance that won't happen, I'd rather have to repeat this class in the spring than ruin my opportunity." Preferably with a different professor and a different TA.

"Why is it so important to you, Sophie?"

Did I not just give him an explanation?

Because I'm never going to be the prettiest, or the most popular, but I can be the smartest. And with smarts brings success. And success brings power. And power

keeps the monsters away.

“It’s a goal I set for myself.” I shrug. “Thank you for your time.” I stand from the chair. “Once you let me know about Professor Maxwell’s decision, I’ll decide whether I need to drop the class or not.” I turn to walk out of the office, but his voice stops me at the door.

“What are you doing tonight, Sophie?”

The flutter in my stomach is a dangerous warning.

“Studying.” Working on my personal logo assignment so I can have him take a look at it before I turn it in for a grade on Friday. I definitely can’t afford another B, that’s for sure.

“I’m throwing a party tonight; would you want to come? Have a little fun this evening.”

Definitely not. Going to a party is the last thing I want to do.

“Sorry. I’m not a partying kind of gal. Besides, it’s a school night.”

He lets out a sigh, shaking his head. I’m not trying to be a curmudgeon. I’m trying to keep myself from falling into another trap.

“You need to loosen up and live a little. All that studying is going to cause wrinkles. What do you say? A few drinks, a little dancing, a good conversation with your ‘cute’ TA?”

Those dimples are tempting, but there’s no way I’m falling for his charms.

“Thanks for asking, but I’m going to pass. I’m sure there will be plenty of pretty girls there for you to dance with.” And converse with. And do all kinds of dirty things with. “I’ll be waiting for your email regarding my grade.”

I turn and walk out the door, feeling raw. A five-minute conversation and the past is at the forefront of my mind. The memories chasing me down as I rush back to my dorm.

“Uh-oh. What happened?” Torrin asks as soon as I enter the room. She’s all dressed up like she’s going out, and there’s a pile of clothes on her bed like she’s been trying on every outfit she owns.

“I received a shitty grade on my assignment and I’m not sure I’ll be able to pull it up.” I leave out the part of being asked out by the most gorgeous man I’ve ever seen and how the lid has been taken off the pot of my memories.

“Aww, I’m sorry, Soph.” Torrin comes hobbling over in her heels to give me a hug. She truly is the sweetest girl I’ve ever met. Genuine and kind. And probably the most beautiful. “How about you come out with me tonight and have a little fun?” Fun . That seems to be the word of the day.

“Where are you going?” I look down at her tight little black dress and silver stilettos. Wherever she’s headed is fancy, which is not my scene. Plus, I’m not in the headspace for going out.

“My brother is throwing a party to celebrate the team and I’m going to crash it.”

And that sounds like trouble waiting to happen. Lukas doesn’t want her going to parties, and I doubt he wants his kid sister hanging around with all his friends. As soon as she walks in, he’s going to send her right on back home, and then tomorrow he’ll be stopping by to give her one of his bossy lectures.

“Won’t he get mad when he sees you there, Torre?”

She shrugs and turns back toward the mirror. “He’s going to have so many people there, he won’t even notice me in the crowd.”

My eyes shoot straight down to her skintight dress. There’s no way she won’t be noticed. Torrin is a knockout. Long legs, blonde hair, blue eyes. And in that dress...Lukas will know she’s there by the crowd of guys swarming around her.

“If you don’t want to be noticed, you should probably change. I don’t think a dress is appropriate for a football party.” Maybe for a fraternity formal or an evening gala. But a bunch of football players drinking? She’d be better off showing up in one of her brother’s jerseys and jeans.

“Ugh.” Her shoulders drop. “You’re right. See...” She turns and starts digging through the pile of clothes again. “I don’t even know what to wear to a party because I’m never allowed to go to them.”

“Here.” I walk over and pull out a pair of her jeans and a cute bodysuit matching the team colors. “Wear this with your tan ankle boots.”

“Thanks.” She smiles, giving me another hug. “So, does that mean you’ll go with me?”

Go with her? I just got done telling Travis I don’t do parties.

“Please? I don’t want to show up alone. And Lukas is always nicer to me when you’re around.”

I definitely don’t like the idea of her showing up alone either. Especially if she’s going to be drinking. Guys will be trying to take advantage, and her brother may be

too busy hosting or locked in his room with a girl to even notice some guy forcing himself on her. She's too nice and too pretty. And way too naive.

"Any chance I can convince you to stay in instead? We can have a dessert-making competition." I know it's a long shot, but it's worth a try. But when she gives me her puppy dog eyes, my stomach drops.

"I'm dying to know what it's like, Soph. And since it's at my brother's house, it feels like it will be safe." Unless she stands by Lukas's side all night, she's not safe from anything. "You don't have to come. But I really don't want to go alone."

"Okay," I sigh. There's no way I'm going to get her to change her mind, and I won't let her go into a lion's den alone. "But when the clock strikes midnight, we turn into pumpkins."

"Deal!" She smiles, skipping back into the bathroom to change. Now, I need to figure out what I'm going to wear. I'd be fine in a ski mask and a snow parka so guys will leave me alone, but then Lukas will definitely know we're there. I need an outfit that will help me blend in. And will keep the guys from staring at my chest.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 2:46 am

2

Travis

“Yo, man! Cheers to us for being undefeated so far!” Brennon clinks his bottle to mine. He’s been the best addition to the team. Usually, freshmen come in overly cocky and under-skilled, but he’s truly talented. Not to mention as humble as they come.

“We’re having a great season.” I nod, taking a sip of my beer. “And you’ve had some amazing plays, by the way.”

“Thanks, man. Makes it easy when you’re playing with the best.”

I look across the room at Lukas. He’s the best one on our team. I’ve never seen anyone so talented on the field, which is why he’s going to be first pick in the draft. I’ll bet my left nut on it.

“So, where’s Willow?” I ask, looking around for his girlfriend. “Did she not come?”

“Nah.” He shakes his head. “She has an exam to study for, so she couldn’t make it out tonight. Besides...” His smile drops. “Parties aren’t really her thing.” That’s the second time I’ve heard that today. Willow should hang out with Sophie; they’re two peas in a pod. Driven as all get out. Both pretty as hell. Though in my biased opinion, Sophie is prettier.

I still can’t get that girl off my mind. And I’m definitely still burned about her

shooting me down. It's not something I expected. And definitely not the response I'm used to when it comes to women.

"Will Willow get to come to the game this weekend?" We're playing our biggest rivals, and if we beat them, we should be a shoo-in for the playoffs.

"Yeah, she'll be there. Thankfully, Torrin and her have become really close, otherwise, I don't think Willow would be able to handle the games. She's not a fan of crowds."

Yeah, I picked up on that the first time I met Willow at the kick-off party. The poor girl was stuttering as we spoke and shaking pretty hard. It was obvious from her red cheeks that she was embarrassed by it, and it made me feel so bad for her. I finally asked her if she'd come outside to chat, claiming I was getting a headache from all the loud noise. Once we were away from the crowd, she started to relax and open up, her voice smoothing out, and Bren seemed to relax too, telling me after the fact how much he appreciated it.

It's another reason I like him so much. Most guys would prey on a girl like her and make fun of her speech impediment, or they'd manipulate her into sleeping with them then discard her like damaged goods. But Bren accepts people as they come. And now he's got himself an amazing girl.

"I'm glad her and Torre have become close." Torrin's a sweetheart. But I will say, her and Luke butt heads at every turn. I guess that's par for the course between siblings. Or stepsiblings in their case.

"Yeah, me too," he agrees. "With how much we're gone for practice, I'm glad she has some good friends to keep her company." And then when he gets home, he has her to keep him company.

The beautiful face of the fiery girl who showed up for office hours today drifts into my thoughts. I've never met anyone like her. Someone so determined and tenacious, or so beautiful. I was mesmerized by the entire package. Sophie's long, dark, wavy brown hair; those crystal blue eyes shimmering with irritation when she was talking to me about her grade; the cute little dimple on her sweetheart cheeks, which was determined not to make an appearance when I asked her to the party tonight. And then those curves.... Man, I could sink my teeth into her and take a bite.

"How'd you and Willow meet, by the way?" I take a sip of my drink, swallowing down the need clawing its way through my system. It's been quite some time since lust has burned low in my gut, and even longer since I've been interested in pursuing a girl. But she shot me down, didn't she?

"I was in a freshman chat room online, looking for kids from my area who were coming here in the fall, and she chimed in. At first, I thought it was a guy I was chatting with." He chuckles at the memory. "Her handle was Will2025TE, so I didn't even think twice. We were going back and forth for a few weeks before I learned the truth. It felt like I was shooting the shit with a bro. We were cuttin' up and were into all the same things: video games, the same type of music and action movies. She even loves watching football, and her fantasy team crushed mine. When I found out she was a girl..." He shakes his head on a whistle. "I couldn't get over it. I'd met my perfect match. It was just too fucking good to be true. But when I started asking if we could meet up in person, she got skittish and ghosted me. So, I pretty much turned into a stalker."

I bust out laughing. I bet he did. Finding someone that you can be real with is hard. Then finding someone as beautiful who likes all the same things, that's rare. After my encounter with Sophie this afternoon, I already creeped on her social media, but she has no public accounts. Which I have to say intrigued me more. Most girls are so wrapped up in that shit, it's all they care about. But unless her name in the system isn't accurate, she's not online.

“That’s priceless, dude.” I give him a fist bump. “So, how’d you finally get Willow to go out with you then?”

His cheeks turn as red as an apple, and he starts shaking his head with a sheepish grin. “Let’s just say, I can be very persuasive.”

Interesting. Maybe I should’ve been more persuasive and made Sophie come to the party tonight as part of her grade. Forced her into the date so she could get to know me better. I had three girls come up to me before class trying to get an invite, but the one girl I wanted here couldn’t get out of my office fast enough. She practically ran from me. And man, did that make me want to give chase.

“Well, you got yourself a good one.” I tip my chin to him.

“Yeah I did.” He nods. “Actually... I think I might go spend the evening with my girl. Would you mind if I dipped out?”

He doesn’t have to stay on my account. If I had a girl like that waiting for me at home, I’d be rushing off too.

“Of course not, man. Thanks for stopping by.”

“I’ll see you at practice tomorrow.” He gives me a pound on my fist then leaves, and I go grab another bottle from the cooler before going in search of Lukas. I’m not surprised to find him swarmed by a flock of girls who are all singing his praises over our last game. He shoots me a look as I approach, wanting me to save him. Have to say, it does get old. As soon as a girl learns who we are, they want to latch on. Wouldn’t phase them if we were alphaholes or not. They’re all about notoriety. They want to be able to brag to their friends how they scored with the great Travis Hunt or Lukas Williams. It’s like it gives them some sort of clout.

I'll admit, back when we were freshmen, it was fun getting all the attention. Plus, with how crazy our schedules were, easy was good. But now that I'm a senior, I've outgrown that shit. I no longer want someone to warm my sheets at night. I want someone who I can snuggle up with on the couch and vent about my day to. I want someone who I can wake up with on a Saturday morning and make love to before we go grab some brunch. I'm done with the shallow. And I know Lukas is too.

"Yo, man!" I hold out the beer for him. He uses the opportunity to squeeze through the pack of lionesses who are now giving me googly eyes, too.

"How's the keg?" He asks, taking the bottle from me and taking a long swig like he's trying to wash down the aftertaste of those girls. "Do we need to change it out yet?"

"I had Teck do it. So, we're set for a few." Though, with the way everyone's drinking tonight, we may run dry sooner than we expected.

"What's that? Number four?"

Yeah, I think it is. "We may have to start calling cabs soon to haul these guys back." Last thing we want is for someone to get into an accident and for us to have an arrest on our hands for serving alcohol to minors.

Lukas turns, scanning the room, surveying the crowd. His eyes suddenly stop, narrowing a glare toward the door. "You've got to be kidding me. Who the fuck let her in?"

I turn my head, wanting to see who's crashing the party, and smirk when I see his little sister strutting over. "You need to turn around and march that stubborn little ass back to your dorm, Torrin."

Torre crosses her arms, refusing to budge, and I'm fighting back my chuckle. She

really loves poking Lukas's buttons. And man, does he get riled. Gotta admit, it's funny to watch the two go at it, bickering about his controlling ways, her being pissed that he's so overbearing and treats her like a kid. Though, right now, I'm siding with Lukas. There are too many drunk bastards in this room, and Torre is too young, pretty, and naïve to fend them off. Lukas and I will have to play babysitter all night, and that's not what either of us is in the mood for.

"Come on, Torre. We should probably go," says the girl who told me she didn't like parties. Now, I'm the one tensing as one sexy-as-hell Sophie steps up to Torrin's side. It looks like she doesn't have a problem with parties, after all. She just didn't want to come to mine.

A feeling twists in my gut as my heart rate starts to kick up.

"I wanted to come celebrate with the team. But if I'm not wanted here, I guess we'll just have to go to the Pike party instead."

And now Torre's asking for trouble. She knows those Pike fuckers are no good.

Lukas tenses at my side, cracking his neck. "You and I are going to have a little chat, sis," he grits through his teeth as he takes her by the arm. "Travis, need you to keep an eye on this one for me." His head tips toward Sophie. I'd be happy to watch after the girl who's staring at me in shock. She and I need to have a little chat of our own.

He drags a protesting Torrin back to his room, and I close in on the girl who's backing away from me. When her body collides with the wall, her chance of escaping is foiled. "Don't like parties, huh?" I stare down into her radiant blue eyes which are glimmering with a hint of nervousness. She's even more beautiful from this close distance.

"I don't like parties. I just didn't want Torre to come by herself."

That's a fair response, and one that makes me like her even more. A person who looks out for their friends says a lot about them. And so does the fact that she would drop a class over a B.

"So, how do you and Torrin know each other?"

"We're roommates."

So, this is the Sophie Lukas is always talking about. He's always talking about how he couldn't have picked a better roommate for his sister, and from what I've already learned about the girl, I'd say he's right.

"Damn, had I known you were Torre's roommate, I would've insisted on tagging along with Lukas every time he went to your place."

A shiver visibly rocks through her shoulders, and I love the shade of pink that's blushing her cheeks. I don't think she's completely immune to me. And it's not like I haven't seen her checking me out during class. I figured she was like all the other girls, wanting a date with the great Travis Hunt, but it turns out, she didn't even know who I was.

"Would you like a drink, Sophie?"

Her shoulders tense at my question, and she shakes her head. It's like she's worried I'm going to hand her something with a roofie in it. That's something that would happen at a frat house but not here in my house.

"No thank you. I'm okay. I don't think Torre will be that much longer."

I'm not so sure about that. Lukas looked really pissed. And that comment about the Pikes definitely struck a nerve. I'd never want either of these two girls to step foot in

that place. Sophie and Torrin are way too pretty and far too naïve to understand that the charming smooth-talking frat boys are only after one thing.

“They may be a moment.” I look towards the hall leading to Lukas’ room. “I’ve witnessed their arguments, and they can go at it for a while. Torrin is definitely a stubborn one.”

“Tell me about it.” She rolls her eyes. “In her defense, though, Lukas does treat her like a little kid. He kind of acts like a strict father at times, not a stepbrother.”

“Yeah, he does. But he’s just protective of her. If I had a little sister, I would be too. I know how guys can be, and I wouldn’t want her to get taken advantage of...or hurt by some drunk asshole.” Her eyes widen at my comment, but she’s quick to shake her head.

“She just wanted to have a little college fun. ”

“Says the girl who doesn’t believe in fun.” My brow narrows in. “I seem to recall asking you to come to this same party tonight. Yet, I got shot down.”

I know it’s a bit hypocritical given the fact that I invited her to this party tonight yet I don’t think Torre should be here. The difference is, I wouldn’t have been able to keep my eyes off Sophie. I’d probably have locked her in my room all night so I could talk to her and get to know her better. But Lukas doesn’t want to have to babysit his kid sister while he’s trying to let loose.

She’s shaking her head at me again, just like she did this afternoon. That glow of fire burning in her eyes. “I do believe in fun. It’s just that my kind of fun isn’t getting drunk at a kegger and playing beer pong.”

I’m not a fan of that stupid shit either. Though, when I was her age, I was.

“Okay, so what’s your kind of fun then?”

“I don’t know.” She shrugs. “Just the typical girl stuff I guess. Shopping, painting my nails, going to the movies. I love to go out to eat, and have cooking competitions with Torre. And I love going to those painting places where you get to make your own artwork and drink mocktails.” I have to bite back my chuckle. If I didn’t think this girl could get any cuter, she just did.

“How on earth do you manage to have cooking competitions in a dorm? Have they added kitchens since freshman year?”

Her cheeks tip right up. “We have a Crock-Pot and a toaster oven. So, there’s only so much we can make. But it’s fun to see how gourmet we can get with our limited resources.”

Clever. When I lived in the dorm, I lived off deli meat and a loaf of bread. And like she mentioned this afternoon: pizza and beer were staples for that first semester. But as soon as Lukas and I got this place our sophomore year, we cleaned up our diet, and I started eating organic products.

“Okay, so then how about tomorrow night you let me take you out to dinner and then a movie? Does that sound fun?”

There’s a shimmer of interest that flickers in her eyes, but just when I think she’s going to say yes, she shakes her head, shutting it down.

“Sorry, I don’t date football players.” Her eyes drop down to my jersey, and my stomach twists with that foreign feeling again. I don’t fucking get it. All the girls I’ve met seem to only want to date me because I play football. This girl...she’s blocking me out at every pass.

“Why? Because you think we’re all dumb jocks?” I can’t even help my offended tone. The rejection really isn’t sitting well.

“No, of course not. It’s obvious you’re smart, seeing as you’re the TA of our class. I’ve just had enough experience with guys like you to know that I’d rather not compete with an entire fan club of eager groupies wanting to spread their legs for you.” To her credit, she has a point. But in my defense, I don’t want any of those girls. And the longer I stare at the girl in front of me, the more I’m thinking I just want her.

“So, what if I’m different? What if I don’t like it when girls eagerly throw themselves at me? What if I’m interested in finding someone who wants to be with me for my charming personality and my brilliant mind and not because I’m the quarterback?” Looks like she didn’t know that fact as her eyes just got bigger. “I’m not like them, Sophie. Believe it or not, there are a few of us football players who are actually looking for something real and are not just interested in fucking as many girls as we can.”

That glimmer of interest is back for the briefest moment, but then it’s gone again, and she’s trying to move away from me.

“I’m sorry. I’m just not interested. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’m going to go make sure Torrin is okay.”

She slips past me, heading back towards Lukas’s bedroom, and I have to tuck my shock down between my legs before I go after her. How is it my luck that the one and only girl who’s piqued my interest is the only one shooting me down? The irony of that is crazy.

“Hey, Torre!” she calls out, knocking on the closed door. “Are you almost ready to go?”

It's like she can't get away from me fast enough, but I fail to believe she's not interested. I'm going on a hunch to say that some football alphahole fucked her over in the past, and that's the motive to her no-dating-football-players rule.

"You know I've seen you sneaking looks at me during class." I step up to her back. "And just so you know, the attraction has been mutual since day one, but I never approached you because I thought you were like all the other girls." Another shudder ripples through her and it has a contagious effect. "I thought you were only interested in me because I'm the quarterback. So, it looks like we're both guilty of passing judgement. How about you let me take you out tomorrow night, and we can see how wrong we both were about our assumptions?"

She turns her head, looking up at me. My eyes are drawn to her ruby-red lips, hoping she agrees to go out with me so I'll have the opportunity of kissing them.

"I don't think it's a good idea, Travis. You're my TA, and..."

The door opens behind her and a frazzled-looking Torrin comes walking out.

"I'm ready," Torre states, walking right past us and straight toward the front door. "I'll meet you outside."

Sophie turns and chases after her, and I'm left staring at the cutest backside of the girl who refuses to give me a chance. She doesn't even give me a backward glance. She's just as eager to get out of here as Torrin is. Maybe I need to play this a different way. Something Bren said earlier comes to mind. Perhaps I need to be a little more persuasive and force the issue.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 2:46 am

3

Sophie

The email pops up in the corner of my screen as the economics teacher drones on. As soon as I see the subject line— Regarding your extra credit —I open it.

To: Sophie Adams

Just wanted to let you know that Professor Maxwell has approved an extra credit opportunity. Please come by during office hours to discuss the instructions for the assignment.

Regards,

TA Travis Hunt

The formality of it strikes me. The indifference ringing loud in his tone. Every word is void of emotion or interest. Though, what did I really expect? I shot him down more than once yesterday. He probably doesn't like me much anymore. And after I made my stance on how I feel about dating football players, he may be truly offended. As soon as I got back to the dorm last night, I did a little digging and learned that he just earned the Heisman last year, which is indicative of the fact that he's one of the best players in the country. It also proves that football is much more than a hobby to him. It's going to be his career. Not marketing as I assumed—and was hoping.

Though, after scrolling through his social media, I didn't get the impression he's the typical jock. He didn't have pictures posted of himself with girls. Or a ton of selfies showing off his ripped body. He mainly posts pictures of cool marketing designs he's come across in public: products, billboards, things that have caught his attention. It all painted a very different picture than I expected. There's also the fact that he has no real reason to be a TA with his football career on the horizon, but he still worked for the position. And I've already researched what it takes, so I know TA positions aren't easy to come by.

But even if he is different from the typical jocks I've come across, it still doesn't make him safe for my heart.

As soon as class is dismissed, I head straight to Travis's office, feeling more anxious with every step I take. I approach the open door, getting a flutter in my stomach when I see him sitting behind his desk, typing away on his computer. He looks so professional in his khaki pants and button-down shirt with his sleeves rolled up to his elbows. Such a striking contrast to the guy who was dressed in his jersey last night with a beer bottle in hand.

"Are you going to just stand there and stare, Ms. Adams? Or would you like to come in?" His head lifts from his screen and that anxious excitement tingles down my spine as our eyes connect. There's no denying the attraction. It pricks over my skin like a spark of energy. Temptation raising the hairs on my arms. But the heat will burn me alive. And I've already been burned once.

I step into his office and take a seat. "You said Professor Maxwell agreed to let me do an extra credit assignment?"

He shifts forward on his desk, and his cologne teases my senses. A hint of pine with a splash of rugged masculinity. Dominant. Sexy... Tempting.

“Are you usually this friendly with everyone who tries to help you out, Ms. Adams?”

The air retracts inside my lungs. He’s right. Just because I don’t want to date him, doesn’t mean I need to be rude.

“I’m sorry. I’m not trying to be rude.” I’m just trying to get out of here before your charming smile lands its attack.

“That’s okay, pretty girl. You’re forgiven. I know you’re just mad because you’re attracted to me.”

“Wow. You really are presumptuous, mister.” I cross my arms, annoyed at how spot-on his assessment is. He’s unreasonably good-looking, and it’s hard to keep my guard up when his dimples make an appearance like they are right now.

“We’ll see if I’m wrong on my assumption.” He tips his chin. “After you spend the evening with me tonight, you might change your mind about us ‘football players,’ after all.”

I’m not sure what he’s talking about, but if that’s his way of asking me out on another date, my answer is still no.

“Your assumption is wrong because I’m not going out with you. I’ll be home studying tonight.”

“So, I guess you don’t want the chance of earning extra credit?”

He can’t be serious. Now, he’s going to hold my grade over my head to get what he wants?

“Are you trying to blackmail me into a date?”

“It’s not blackmail, Ms. Adams.” His smirk has me calling his bluff. “I think the best way to learn is by real life experience, don’t you?”

It sounds like there’s a much different motive behind his smooth voice and the mischievous look burning in his dark eyes.

“I think you’re trying to manipulate me into going out on a date with you.” And I will not date someone based on coercion.

“I’ll tell you what.” He shifts closer. “If you can sell me on the fact that I shouldn’t take you out tonight, we’ll consider your assignment completed and you’ll get your A. Now, you have one minute to give me your pitch, Ms. Adams. So, do your worst.”

This should be easy. And I don’t need a minute. Ten seconds is all it will take for him to realize I’m not worth his time.

“I’m not going to sleep with you, Travis. I’m not easy like the girls you’re probably used to. So, sex is off the table.” The next time I sleep with someone, I’m going to know that he’s the one I’m spending the rest of my life with. I don’t think I could give myself over to someone until my heart feels completely safe. And Travis...he’s graduating at the end of the year and moving on to bigger and better things.

“Told you last night, Sophie, I’m not interested in a one-night stand, nor do I want easy, so you’re going to have to do better than that.”

It’s hard for me to believe a guy as good-looking as him who’s probably used to sex on the regular would be okay with waiting, but fine. I’m sure my emotional baggage will have him running scared.

“I’m broken, Travis.” The words almost get strangled in my throat, as the raw feeling twists in my stomach. “My wounds run so deep you wouldn’t even be able to dig

your way past my insecurities. I don't trust easily, and by the time I believe you could actually be interested in me, your patience will have run dry." And my heart will be left in pieces again.

The smile is no longer lighting up his face. I think my pitch was a success. Though, I kind of wish it wasn't that easy to chase him away. No amount of bracing myself for the impact actually stops the blow from hurting.

"Hate to break it to you, but you failed the assignment. If you think that scares me, you're wrong. I don't want perfect, Sophie. I want real and honest. Not a plastic smile covering up the truth of what lies beneath the surface. You may see your insecurities as flaws, but I see them as beauty marks. And the fact that you just shared that with me, proves just how strong you are."

His handsome face is now a blurry mirage of hope and kindness. I'm desperately clinging to every word, wanting it to be the truth. Wanting to believe this isn't a tactic. Some kind of ploy to get me into bed. But my trust meter is broken. I no longer know what's a line or what's real.

"Just give me a chance, Soph. All I'm asking is for a chance to get to know you better."

A tear finds its escape and slides down my cheek before I can catch it. Maybe this emotional break will finally have him changing his mind. Most girls don't start crying when a gorgeous guy asks them out. But I'm a mess.

He rises from his chair, walking around his desk, and crouches down before me. "All I'm asking for is a dinner." His strong hand cups around my chin, thumb swiping away the drip of my pain, and the soft caress is almost my undoing. "You can trust me, Sophie."

Since the night that Maddock broke my soul, I've felt like I was dead inside. I've been walking through my days clouded by darkness. My heart feeling cold and numb. But there's a tiny ray of excitement trying to peek its way through the clouds and I'm so desperate to grab onto it. What if this is real? What if he's truly interested in me and I'm letting someone amazing slip through the cracks? It's just dinner. In a public place. And a girl needs to eat.

"Your pitch was perfect." I smile. But it's still to be determined if he can deliver on his brand promise. Only time will tell to know whether I can trust him or not.

"So, does that mean you'll have dinner with me tonight?"

I nod, and his dimples ignite a pitter-patter inside my chest. I can honestly say I'm excited about our date tonight. But I need to be careful not to let that feeling run loose.

4

Travis

It's the strangest feeling: getting nervous for a date. Something I'm definitely not used to. But my stomach is actually buzzing as I knock on her door. I just really want to make a good impression tonight. She's different from anyone I've ever met. It usually isn't until I'm a couple months in that I start seeing the facade start to peel away and glimpses of truth are revealed. Then I learn that the girl I was falling for was nothing but a lie.

"Torre, can you get that?"

The sound of Sophie's voice from within already has me smiling. She sounds nervous, too.

"Hey, Travis!" Torre greets me with a smile as she opens the door, but then her voice drops to a whisper and her smile smooths to a thin line. "If you hurt her, I'll have Lukas kill you in your sleep." I have to bite back my laughter. She and her brother are two peas in a pod. He practically gave me the same warning on my way out the door. Neither of them has anything to worry about though. It's different with Sophie. My goal isn't to get her in my bed. My goal is to see if that crazy spark I'm feeling could actually ignite a future together.

"I like her, Torre. I promise my intentions are honorable." For the first time, I'm vested in my heart's interest and not just what my dick wants. Although, my dick is definitely in want of the girl. It gave me a hard time all afternoon.

Torre steps to the side, finally allowing me to enter. “I’m not sure how you got her to agree to this, but I’m rooting for you, Travis.”

That makes two of us.

The bathroom door opens and out walks the most beautiful girl I’ve ever seen.

“Wow, gorgeous. You look hot.” Torre whistles, nodding her approval. I’m feeling mine right between my legs. “I’m heading out to meet Willow. You two have fun tonight.”

I barely get my “goodbye” out as my attention is stolen by my date. Red is definitely Sophie’s color. And those skintight jeans... All I can think about is having those full, thick thighs wrapped around my waist. But I need to keep those thoughts tucked between my legs. Sophie has made her stance on sex very clear, and I want to make sure she knows I respect that.

I step up to her, struggling to keep my hands at my sides. I’m itching to grip onto her curves and pull her in for a kiss. “The packaging you’ve chosen for tonight’s date, Ms. Adams, has definitely gotten my attention.” I smirk. “So that’s three points earned on your assignment for choosing the perfect color to draw in your audience.” I’m sold on looks alone. Now I want to know every little detail about the girl.

Her brow lifts, and I can see the sparkle twinkling in her eyes. I’m ready for her pretty mouth to open up and give me her sassy retort because it’s already dancing on the outskirts of her smirk. “Only three? I feel insulted, Mr. Hunt. A three out of twenty is a failure in my eyes, so maybe you can explain your grading scale .” God, she’s incredible.

“You actually scored a three out of zero, because what you wear doesn’t matter to me. But you certainly exceeded any expectation I could’ve had.” My heart rate is

picking up speed. She's already getting to me. Hooking into me with those soulful eyes.

"Maybe you should explain your grading rubric upfront, so I know what's expected of me for this assignment." In truth, her grade isn't riding on this date. That'd go against school policy and I'm very much a rule follower. But it was the only thing I could think of to get her to agree to go on this date with me. I intend to tell her the truth over dinner, but I'm rather enjoying this game.

"You just received three points for your product packaging. If you explain your brand's history, where you came from, and what makes you uniquely you, that will be another four points. The last three will be given for effort and time spent. The longer the date, the more chance you'll have of earning all three points." And the smile she's giving me now has earned her all twenty.

"That's only ten points, Mr. Hunt." She steps in a little closer, stealing the air from my lungs as her soft scent wraps its way around my senses. God, she smells good. "Are you going to share exactly what it is I have to do to earn back the other ten?" The way she's looking at me, I think she's assuming I have nefarious motives, but that's not the case with this girl. I actually care what she thinks of me. And I respect her stance on sex more than she knows. It shows me that she's interested in getting to know me and not just interested in fucking the quarterback to earn a social trophy.

"The rest can be earned on subsequent dates, Ms. Adams."

Her pretty lips struggle not to rise, but she can't hide that cute little dimple or the blush now forming in her cheeks. For as much as she doesn't want to like me, she does. And I really hope by the end of the night she likes me enough, or I should say trusts me enough so I can give her a kiss.

"I may be okay with a ninety." She smirks. "We'll have to see how the night goes."

My pulse starts to race faster. It's already been the best date I've ever had and we haven't even made it out the door yet. I can't wait to see what the night has in store for us.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 2:46 am

5

Sophie

The butterflies are going crazy in my stomach. I can't wipe the cheesy grin from my face as he guides me to his car. He reaches for my door, and his mouth grazes across my shoulder, dropping a drive-by kiss on my neck before he pulls the door open.

"Sorry. I couldn't help myself. Your smile is just too tempting."

My smile has only gotten wider as he holds the door for me and gives me a hand to help me inside. He's definitely not making this easy on me. My guard has been coming down since the moment I walked out of the bathroom and he grabbed his chest like I'd taken his breath away. There's something about him that just feels different. I can't put my finger on it. But... I'm also not naive. Guys are capable of putting on any facade and making a girl feel special to suit their motives.

Though, I did drill Torrin about him this afternoon, and she said that according to her brother, Travis hasn't been on a date in ages, and that he told Lukas he's looking for something stable and real. It's the same thing Travis told me last night, so all signs are pointing to it being the truth. But I won't be diving headfirst into anything. I'm still going to tiptoe my way into the shallow end and see if I can trust him.

Plus, there's still one undeniable truth: no matter which way we spin it, there's a shelf life for any kind of relationship since he'll be graduating in the spring.

"Are you good with the Bistro?" he asks as his huge body climbs into the driver's

side, almost consuming all the space in the front. It's like watching a big bear squeezing into a vehicle. "They have a little bit of everything." He locks his seat belt into place.

"Sure." Though, the butterflies have taken over my stomach so I'm not sure how much I'll be eating tonight. "I'm good with anything. The only food I really won't eat are anchovies. They seriously stink. My dad once ordered an anchovy pizza, and his car stunk for days. I couldn't even ride in it without gagging. He finally had to take it in and have it detailed." I'm nervously rambling but at least he finds my story funny. His laugh is deep and rumbling, and it wraps me up in its warmth, smoothing out some of the wrinkles of my nerves.

"That's good to know. I'll be sure to order extra anchovies on my pizza next time. Let you relive that childhood memory."

I flick him in the arm, and he laughs even harder.

"Ouch!" He rubs over the spot. "That hurt."

"Says the guy who gets tackled left and right on the football field." I fail to believe he can't take a little flick. "Are you really that soft?"

The way his eyes narrow in, turning a darker shade of brown, takes the butterflies in my stomach for a loop. "There isn't a single part of my body that's soft, babe."

His insinuation isn't lost on me. I turn my head to face the window, trying to hide the heat in my cheeks.

"So, where'd you grow up, pretty girl?" He starts the car, and I appreciate the topic change because my thoughts are running straight down into temptation, and we all know where that's gotten me in the past.

“I grew up outside of Philly.” I can’t even get myself to say the name of the town I was raised in. Everything about that place triggers the memories. I’m just grateful my parents finally decided to sell the house and move out to the country. They finally grew tired of all the vandalism and eggings. Even after I transferred schools, it didn’t stop. My parents tried to file complaints and charges, but the cops just chalked it up to “kids being kids,” and all the surveillance footage showed were people in ski masks. Though, I knew exactly which kids were responsible—and the reason they were doing it.

“So, then how come you didn’t go to Penn State? That’s a good school.”

Because Maddock and all the monsters are going there.

“I wanted a change of scenery. Something new. Different.” I wanted to get as far away from hell as I possibly could and have a fresh start.

“What about your friends? Did they all stay in state?”

What friends? I had no friends. Torrin is the first person I can actually say genuinely likes me. “I went to a different school for my senior year, so I really don’t know where anyone ended up.” Which is a lie. I stalked everyone’s social media, checking to see which colleges they’d chosen before I sent in my acceptance letter. That’s why I ended up in Arizona. It seems no one from my previous school wanted to come down to the desert land.

“Wow, that sucks that you had to change schools your senior year. How come?” And this is where the conversation stops. I’m not getting into the details of what happened at Sarah’s party or the months that followed. It’s definitely not first-date material. Or even fifth. I’m not sure when it’s okay to reveal the fact that I was so desperate to be desired I fell for a player’s every line and ended up betraying a friend. Honestly, had I told Travis the truth this afternoon, he may not have wanted to go on this date with

me tonight. He may think I'm as evil as Presley does.

"I felt like the boarding school was a better fit. Now, it's my turn to get to ask a question. How come you're so invested in marketing if you're going to play professional ball?"

He glances to the side, and I know he can sense my avoidance, and he's not letting me off the hook. "Why did you think it would be a better fit?"

Because I needed to get away from all the people who made my life a living hell. I couldn't breathe inside those walls, and every time I'd look at Presley, a gut-wrenching pain would slice through me.

"I just thought it would give me a better chance on my college application," I state, hoping he backs off before my thoughts get consumed by the nightmare of my regret. "Now, can you answer my question?"

His curious stare locks onto mine and I can see the question burning on the tip of his tongue. My stomach is twisting up, praying he doesn't ask.

"My interest in marketing started because I get asked to sponsor products all the time. I wanted to learn how to choose the right companies and brands to represent, as well as how to market them. If I was going to put my name behind the product, I wanted to make sure I liked the image that was being sold. But now, it's become a second passion of mine. I even get asked my input by companies as they're coming up with new designs, which is seriously cool. Plus, if something happens with my career or I get tired of playing ball, I want to be able to have something to fall back on. And not just have to become a sports broadcaster." He smirks.

I think this is the first time I've ever met a football player who actually has depth beyond the game, and interests beyond girls. It's painting an entirely different picture

than the one I'd conjured in my mind. He's surprising me at every turn.

"That's really awesome, Travis. I think you're the first guy who doesn't just care about how much the sponsorship pays. It's cool that you only want to represent brands that are in line with your beliefs." I don't think it's just responsible, I think it speaks to his character.

"So, tell me, Soph. For your personal branding assignment due on Friday, what are your three branding pillars?"

I was hoping we could talk about this. I didn't want him to think I was trying to get insider information on how to get an A on the assignment, but since he brought it up.

"I've been struggling with these. Color is easy because my favorite is magenta. I was debating between going with my love of painting and my love of flowers, so I was trying to marry both and was planning to make my initials look like pieces of floral artwork. And for my tagline...." I hesitate on telling him, but if I decide to use it then he'll see it anyway. "It's going to be: A broken stem doesn't make a flower weak. It only makes the roots grow stronger."

When his eyes turn in my direction, I know he sees it. The pain I so desperately try to hide. My fear that deep down I will always be broken.

"So, what do you think?" I force the smile. "Is it A-worthy? Or should I still work on it?" I'm hoping he doesn't dig right down to the root of my pain and ask me why I chose the tagline.

"I think it's brilliant."

There's suddenly a shift in the air. Like the sun coming out on a cold winter's day, promising that the ice is going to melt and the flowers will bloom again. My heart is

starting to beat faster. His eyes drop to my lips. All I'd have to do is lean forward and I'd be granted a taste of his warmth.

The honk of a horn has his attention snapping back to the road. The light turned green and neither of us realized.

"So, what's your tagline?" I ask trying to get back to neutral ground.

"Mine is: Everyone can play the game. But you can only win with honesty."

My heart starts ticking as fast as his turn signal. All my preconceived notions are starting to fade. His foundation is truth. From the moment Maddock opened his mouth, I should've known he was lying. But I chose to ignore all the little red flags, wanting to believe he could actually want me. He didn't stand on truth; he stood on hatred.

"I really want to kiss you, Sophie." My thoughts clear as his words settle over me. The car has stopped again. We're parked in the restaurant parking lot, and the way he's looking at me... The walls are crumbling fast. The doubts turning to dust, and blowing away as he inches closer. It feels like the temperature has risen in the air. A nervous sweat breaks out across my skin.

"If you don't want me to, tell me now, babe."

My mouth stays closed. Any protest I should have is locked behind iron bars of hope. Hope that I'm not falling into a trap again. Hope that this gut pull that's drawing me toward him isn't leading me astray. He makes his final descent, and I'm swept right up into his warmth. The rays of heat prick over my skin as his lips slowly part the seam of my reservation. I melt right into the kiss. Every sweeping pass of his tongue parting another cloud in the sky, and I bask in the feeling.

His hands grip the back of my head, tugging me closer, clinging to me like he doesn't want me to slip away. The only things slipping away are the handcuffs of my fears. He's teasing me back to life. His tongue igniting a hunger that has been suppressed for so long.

"We have to stop, babe. My willpower is only so strong." He pulls away and I nearly groan at the loss. But I should be grateful that one of us has the strength to put the brakes on. "By the way, that's two points deducted for putting me in a painful state." He cuts me a look.

I smirk at his ragged voice, excited that I'm having that effect on him. "I'll be sure not to make the mistake again, Mr. Hunt."

"But you get five bonus points for it being the best kiss I've ever had." He winks, and then he's turning and exiting the car, coming around to my side to let me out. I take a deep breath, trying to lock down the giddiness before I step out of the vehicle. I need to be cautious. The chemistry may be electric and the banter may be fun, but he hasn't seen beneath the surface yet. My truth just might scare him away.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 2:46 am

6

Travis

I don't want our date to end. This night has been one of the best I've ever had. She's incredible. All night, the conversation flowed, and the spark was sizzling like a current between us, making it difficult to concentrate. Flirting with her is fun, and I love that she gives me shit. She's witty and goofy—and absolutely breathtaking. That kiss we shared earlier is still lingering in my thoughts, tingling in the base of my sac. I'm hoping she'll give me another one.

She stops in front of her door and turns. I really don't want our night to come to an end.

“Can I see you again tomorrow, babe?” I'd ask to take her to breakfast, but I think that might be coming on too strong.

“I'd like that, Travis. But...” She swallows hard, and I don't like the nervous tinge to her voice or that three-letter word she's left hanging in the air. Those three little letters feel like a defensive line that I'm going to have to tackle my way through. “The fact that you're graduating in the spring is still a concern for me. I don't want to get wrapped up in something that I know will be ending soon. I...”

I hold my finger up to her lips, cutting her off. She doesn't need to waste any more of her precious breath because casual is definitely not what I'm looking for with this girl. I've never felt anything so right. But voicing that to her might just scare her off.

“You don’t have anything to worry about, Sophie. I wouldn’t be pursuing you if I didn’t see a potential for a future. At this point in my life, I’m looking for something real. I’m not interested in playing the field anymore.” The football field is the only one I want to play on. “But if long distance isn’t for you, you better break my heart now rather than string me along.”

Her pretty smile triggers my heart to boom in my chest. It’s crazy to think that after just one date I could already be starting to have feelings for the girl. But from the moment we collided yesterday, I felt it. That electric spark. Like there was something different about her. Something special. And after tonight, I know there is.

“I’m not opposed to long distance.”

Oh, that shy little smile has my cock starting to rise. Her eyes drop to my mouth, and I take it as an open invitation to move forward. I lower my head, pressing my lips to hers, and feel the impact on my nerves the moment we connect. Her little fingers cling to me as I pin her up against the door, turning her head to an angle so I can drive in deeper. Her taste is addictive and the little sounds she’s making are resonating right between my legs.

“Do you want to come in?” Her breathless whisper hits my lips, and my hands grip her tighter.

“Are you going to hold it against me if my answer is yes?”

Her answering smile gives me another good thump in the chest.

“I wouldn’t have asked if I didn’t want you to say yes.”

“I’d love to come in, pretty girl.”

She turns, opening the door, and I follow right in after her, my eyes glued to the curve of her backside. Admiring how full and round it is. I could sink my fingers into it—and my tongue if she'd let me.

“I still meant what I said, Travis.” She turns, raising a brow as she catches me checking her out. I can't help it. No hot-blooded male could help themselves. The girl was gifted with quite an asset. “I'm not ready for sex.” And I'm not expecting anything more than what she's already given me. Honestly, I just want more time with her.

“We can just cuddle in your bed and watch a movie, babe. All I want is to spend time with you. And maybe steal a few more of those kisses.”

The way her eyes light up does something to me. I'm already feeling protective of the girl, so even if she suddenly changed her mind and told me she was ready for more tonight, I'd shut it down. I actually want to wait with her. Make it a special moment. And make sure she trusts me with that special gift.

“I'd like that.” She goes to her dresser, pulling out some clothes before she heads into her bathroom. I turn to get settled, knowing exactly which one is her bed. The magenta comforter is the first giveaway. But there's a painting hanging above it that I know is hers. A beautiful rose with a broken stem. Its blossom drooped toward a snowcapped ground with the petals falling like raindrops—or tears. It's incredible. The detail. The realism. The beauty...and sadness. She's going to be amazing in marketing design one day. She really is talented.

I sit down on her bed, running my fingers over the place she lays every night, fighting the urge not to bury my nose and breathe her in. Knowing this is the place where she strums her needs has me groaning. I climb into the spot, propping myself against her pillows. Right here. Just like this. Her fingers sneaking down under her pink comforter. Rubbing her sweet pussy.

“Are you going to make room for me?” My eyes clear, seeing her staring at me from the foot of her bed.

I spread my legs. “There’s plenty of room right here.” The look she gives me sends a current up my shaft. There’s a fire in her blood that makes mine burn for her.

She climbs onto the bed, crawling toward me slowly, testing the strength of my willpower with every inch she draws closer. She’s intentionally teasing me. The wicked gleam in her eyes taunting the cum right from the end of my dick. I tug at my collar, trying to loosen the tightness around my neck, but it’s the tightness between my legs that is being strangled.

“If you’re going to hog my bed...” She stops before me. “You better pay the toll.”

I grip her chin, licking my lips. This girl has no idea what she’s doing to me. “Gladly.”

She lets out a whimper as I pull her in, allowing me to slip my tongue right past the sexy sound, taking what I want from her. Giving her what she needs. It’s a steep price to pay considering the current state I’m in. The pressure in my balls is almost to the point of pain and only amplifying as her little tongue grows more insistent. She shifts between my legs, climbing onto my lap. I take things deeper, grabbing onto her waist, clinging to her as she grows restless.

I’m in sweet hell right now. Burning alive under her heat. She’s grinding down, seeking the friction to help soothe her ache, but mine is growing more incessant. I grab onto her ass, thrusting upward. Giving her what she needs. A soft moan slips between my lips and it glides down my shaft, curling up in my sac. I feel like I could do better. Make her first orgasm with me one that she’ll always remember.

“Can I touch you, baby?”

“Yes,” she breathes into me, and my pride swells, taking it as a win.

I sit up, wrapping her in my arms and carefully place her down onto her back. Seeing the red in her cheeks, her pink lips swollen from our kisses, the glazed look in her eyes... It's a sight burned into memory. Knowing she trusts me enough to let me touch her... That's something I don't take lightly. As brash as it may sound, I never cared with the other girls I was with. I was always rushing to the end game, trying to get to my release. But with Sophie, I want to take my time with her. I want her craving me so deeply that she nearly loses her mind.

I shift back, slowly working to remove her flannel pants. When I get a glimpse of black panties clinging to her folds, the hunger nearly rips from my throat. I swallow it down on a gulp, trailing my eyes lower. Her thick thighs...creamy porcelain skin...all her smooth softness...have me thirsting to run my tongue up every inch. To sink my fingers in and squeeze. I toss her pajamas to the side, before I'm back at her lips, needing another taste. When her hips try to seek the air, begging for pressure, I run my fingers down, rubbing over the wet satin. She's soaked through and moaning for more.

I roll my thumb right over her clit and her body arches up into my touch. Her tongue driving deeper in my mouth.

She's so sensitive. So starved for the release. It's not going to be long before she's tipping over the edge, but I'm going to draw this out for as long as I can. “I need to see you, pretty girl.”

Her eyes flutter open as I slowly pull away from her mouth. Her pupils are even darker now. Her lids barely able to stay open from the weight of her need. I shift back on my haunches and rub my thumb over her again. Watching the fluttery feeling wash over her face. She sucks in on a gasp as I pinch her swollen clit. I'm going to learn every single thing that drives her crazy and become an expert in servicing her.

I keep stroking and teasing, studying until my need to see her becomes unbearable. I reach for her waistband, slipping her panties down and watching as her dark curls come into view. I can't wait to run my fingers through her coarse hair as my mouth is suctioned to her clit. I tug her panties lower, and that swollen bud has my mouth watering. She's a goddess. A temptation even the devil couldn't resist. Her thick, glistening folds are causing an obscene mess inside my pants. I'm desperate to lick up every drop of her and feed her body's cravings.

"I've never seen anything so pretty." I brush my fingers up her thighs, trailing over her silky skin. "You're so perfect, Soph."

"Please, Travis." The longing in her voice has me reaching between her legs. Rubbing over her swollen, wet skin. Exploring every inch with my touch. Studying every crease around her eyes as she watches my movement. Every gasp and whimper as I build her up. Learning what causes her body to tremble. What has her panting for a release.

I run my fingers down, circling her entrance, and her mouth parts on a moan. She's ready for more. Desperate for it. Her fingers cling to her comforter as I start to push inside her, gripping it tight like she's holding on for dear life. I run my thumb over her clit again, and she thrusts against my touch, taking me deeper.

"I'm trying to go slow, baby. I want to savor every second, but you're an impatient little one, aren't you?"

"It just feels so good, Travis. I didn't know I would like it so much."

Her words give me pause. She's making it sound like she's never been touched before. "Are you a virgin, Sophie?" When her body tenses, her walls clenching me from within, I think I know the answer.

“No. I’m not,” she says, proving me wrong. “But nothing’s ever felt like this.”

I like that answer. I want everything to be better with me than it was with all the rest. I don’t ever want her walking away feeling less than satisfied. And I certainly don’t want anyone from her past showing me up and making her long for what they once had together.

“If you give this body over to me, Soph, I promise to give you pleasure beyond your wildest dreams.” I’ll be majoring in her orgasms, studying her thoroughly and teaching us both new things. I crook my finger up inside her, wanting to back my words, looking for the spot I know she’s never felt before. When she lets out a gasp, her pussy bucking against my palm, I know I’ve found it. I rub over her G-spot again, using my other hand to focus on her clit. She starts to pant. Her little hips wiggling into my touch. Her eyes closed tight. Body nearly shaking.

“That’s it, baby. Give yourself over to it and come for me.”

And she does. Her pussy floods me with her release as she thrusts against my fingers, demanding I pump her through every shocking pulse that rocks through her system. My cock is nearly on the brink of my own release. Just a few strokes and I’d be shooting my load all over her pink comforter. Marking it with my scent so males for miles keep their distance. But it will have to be another day. This moment is about her. This is my gratitude for her trusting me with her body.

I lean forward, kissing her gently. “You really are something special, Sophie.”

I’ve never met anyone like her.

“I’m beginning to feel the same about you, Travis.” She snuggles into her pillow, looking sleepy now. After that intense release I’m sure she is. Plus, it’s close to midnight and I know she has to get up early for class.

“Let me tuck you in, babe. Then I’ll head out so you can get some sleep.” I stand and get her all nice and snug under her blankets, then place one last kiss on her lips. “Good night, my sweet girl. Dream about me.”

I flick the lights off, turning her lock on my way out. And as soon as I’m outside, I pull out my phone.

Me: I had the best time tonight, Ms. Adams. Can’t wait until I see you again. Btw, we still need to discuss your grade. Though I will say, you have far exceeded any expectations. You have made a devoted customer out of me and I’m sold on the entire package.

7

Sophie

“Did you really think I’d give up the most beautiful girl for a fat loser, Sophie?” Maddock’s harsh voice is at my back. I don’t know why he just won’t leave me alone. Presley forgave him. And everyone hates me. All should be right in his world. But he won’t stop.

“After that lousy fuck you gave me, I’d be stupid to leave my girl. She knows how to rock my world.”

“Then why did you even do it, Maddock? If Presley is so good, why’d you even waste your time on me and risk losing her?”

I usually let him say his nasty piece and then walk away, but I still want to know the answer. I want to know why he used me if he had no intentions of breaking up with her. Because it doesn’t make sense to me. He knew he could’ve gotten caught, yet he still risked it, almost losing the girl he claims to “love” so much.

“I was drunk. She was passed out. And my cock wanted to have some fun. I knew you wanted me, so I figured I’d throw you a bone.” His eyes drop to my chest and the ick feeling crawls over my skin. I no longer want to be in this back stairwell with him. I want to be where there are teachers nearby who will hear me scream for help. “I will say, I did enjoy sucking on those fat tits.”

I take a step back from him, ready to turn and run up the stairs toward the front office.

I'm done with his harassment.

"Tell you what, since I'm such a nice guy, I'd be willing to pity fuck you on the side, Sophie. If you kept your mouth shut, I'd let you ride my cock any time your pussy needed a fix."

You've got to be kidding me. For the last two weeks, he's made my life a living hell. Everyone is calling me horrible names, accusing me of taking advantage of him in his sleep, and now he thinks I want to fuck him? He must be mentally ill. Or he thinks I'm stupid. Probably both. "If you ever try to touch me again, Maddock, I'll report you to the police. And if you truly cared about Presley, you wouldn't be trying to cheat on her."

I wish she'd broken up with him. She deserves so much better. But he managed to lie his way back into her arms again. And I know if I told her what he just said to me, she wouldn't believe me. She doesn't trust me. And I can't say I blame her.

"Threatening me was a big mistake, loser. You're going to regret your decision."

The only decision I regret is giving him my virginity and hurting someone I considered a friend. I turn and rush down the stairs, feeling myself tumbling forward when I'm pushed from behind.

"Better watch your fucking step, loser."

I scramble to my feet, struggling to get out into the hall and away from the monster. I'm going straight to the office to tell the principal about him pushing me when I refused to fuck him. But I can't even get there. Everyone is blocking my path. Shouting in my face.

"Loser."

“You fat whore.”

“You couldn’t get anyone to fuck you, so you waited until he was too drunk to know it was you.”

“Poor Maddock. He got used by the whale.”

“Fucking pathetic.”

“Pervert.”

I try to push past them, but they’re coming at me from every angle. Circling me like sharks.

“Sophie!” I hear another shout of my name and I scream. I can’t take it anymore. I need it to stop. “It’s okay, Soph. You’re safe. Wake up! Please.”

My eyes fly open, and I see Torrin sitting on the side of my bed. “You’re okay, Soph. They will never hurt you again.”

I take a deep breath, wiping the tears from my cheeks as I sit up in bed. I breathe in slowly, trying to calm my panicked breath as I remind myself I’m safe. It was just a dream. It wasn’t real. I’ll never have to see them again. The monsters will never get to me again.

“Are you okay?” Torre reaches out and squeezes my hands. “That one was a bad one, huh?”

It was. It’s been a while since it’s felt so real. Usually, I know I’m dreaming and can make it stop. But this time, it felt like I was right back within those walls.

“Sorry if I woke you, Torre.” I look over at the clock, seeing that it’s already seven. It’s time for me for me to get up anyway.

“You didn’t wake me. Lukas just dropped me off.”

“Lukas? I thought you hung out with Willow last night?” They were supposed to be going over to Willow’s apartment and baking cookies together. Having a girls’ night.

“Lukas and Brennon ended up showing up and totally bogarted our entire evening.” She rolls her eyes. “Lukas claimed it was payback for crashing his party.”

“So, did you and Lukas make up?”

A look crosses her face that I can’t quite decipher. Her cheeks are turning red as if she’s recalling their argument and getting fired up again.

“Yeah, we’re good. So, tell me. How did the date go?”

I guess I’m not going to get any details, but that’s okay. I’m more than happy to talk about Travis.

“I’m going out with him again tonight.” I feel the butterflies rise in my stomach. Just the thought of him shoos all the bad memories away and makes me feel calm.

“Aww. Yay.” She claps her hands. “So, I take it the date went well since he got you to agree to a second?”

It went better than well. It was the best date of my life. Not that I have anything to compare it to, but it’s better than anything I could’ve dreamed of. Travis was sweet and fun, and such a gentleman. All throughout dinner I wanted to pinch myself and make sure it was real. It seemed too good to be true.

“It was pretty amazing, Torre. We clicked on every level. It’s so easy to talk to him, and he was such a gentleman.” And the way he made me feel... For the briefest moment, I was nervous about letting things go so far; I was worried I was setting myself up again for mass destruction. But it felt right. There were no red flags or alarm bells going off inside my head telling me I should put the brakes on. And to be honest, I wanted him to erase the memory of Maddock. I wanted Travis’s touch to make me forget.

“Oh, I love that so much. You deserve a nice guy, Soph. And Travis is such a sweetheart. So, what are you two going to do tonight?”

“We haven’t decided yet.”

Whatever we do, it doesn’t even matter. I just want to spend time with him.

The message pops up in the corner of my computer screen and the spark of giddiness floods in when I see Travis’s name.

Ms, Adams,

Please see me during office hours. We still have the matter of your extra credit assignment to discuss.

Sincerely,

TA Travis Hunt

I glance over my shoulder, but his head is locked on his screen. His hands typing away, transcribing Professor Maxwell’s lecture to post online later.

Dear Mr. Hunt,

I was under the impression that I had earned back all of the points. I thought I'd exceeded all expectations.

I've been rereading the text he sent me all morning, feeling the pounding in my chest every time I read over the word devoted . I chance another glance over my shoulder and see the smirk on his face. I'm eagerly waiting to see what he comes back with.

Ms. Adams,

You certainly did exceed any and all expectations, but only half of your assignment has been submitted. There's still another part, which needs to be completed in person. If you come by during office hours, we can arrange a time tonight for completion.

Tingles run down my spine as I think about the way he touched me. It was like he knew exactly what I needed. The pressure. The pace. I'd give anything for another date... another round. But what fun would it be if I gave in so easily? Then our little game would be over.

Mr. Hunt,

Thank you for the opportunity, but my schedule is a bit booked for this evening. Could we make arrangements for another day?

I smirk as I hit send, this time refraining from looking in his direction.

Ms. Adams,

Booked? Would you mind telling me what it is that is taking priority over your grade?

Mr. Hunt,

I do not think it's something I wish to discuss over email. I'll be sure to come by during office hours and we can discuss the matter in person.

I look back up at the front of the room, not having a clue as to what Professor Maxwell is discussing, so I'll be one of the many students reviewing Travis's notes later on. When my phone buzzes with a text, I'm distracted once again.

Travis: You better not be trying to cancel on our date tonight. What don't you want to discuss over email?

I'm biting back my grin, feeling the blush hitting my cheeks as I begin to type out my message.

Me: I didn't want to discuss that I had plans to make out with my boyfriend tonight and am unable to complete the assignment.

As soon as I hit send, I regret calling him my boyfriend. One date doesn't mean we're in a committed relationship. But my worrying is all for naught as soon as I read his response.

Travis: God, I love the sound of that. Does that mean I can officially call you mine?

And I love the sound of that.

Me: I'd like to be yours.

The pitter-pattering in my chest is almost terrifying. My feelings are growing at an exponential rate, and I know I shouldn't be diving headfirst into the deep end so quickly. But I can't even stop myself at this point. The giddy feeling has taken over. The butterflies rioting in my stomach.

Travis: I wish I could kiss you right now.

Me too.

Me: I like your kisses.

God, I like them so much. And his fingers. His magical fingers that made me nearly pass out from the pleasure. I shift in my seat, trying to get comfortable. The panties I'm wearing need to be unglued from my skin, but I can't exactly do that without people noticing. They may think I have an itch. But that's not the kind of itch that needs to be scratched right now.

Travis: I can see you squirming in your seat, babe. As soon as class is over, I'll make the ache stop.

Oh God. There's another gush between my legs. I'm not sure I can wait until class is over. Not when he says things like that.

Me: How?

I know I'm a glutton for punishment, but I still press send.

Travis: I'm going to lick that pussy until the throbbing is gone.

I bite back my whimper, feeling the heat burning over me. If I don't put my phone away, I'm going to come right in the middle of Professor Maxwell's lecture.

Travis: Will you let me, Sophie? Will you let me put you up on my desk and kneel between your legs? Will you let me spread those sexy thighs wide and lick you right between your folds? Let me suck on that clit until you're screaming my name?

I quickly grab my computer and my bag and rush out the door, unable to breathe inside that room. I take in a deep breath as I head toward the restrooms. Splashing some cold water on my face might help cool the fever.

There's suddenly a force at my back, and I gasp out a yelp as an arm wraps around my waist, stopping me in my tracks. "I've got you, baby. I'm gonna make it go away." I tremble in his arms, feeling him catch my weight. "Fuck, babe."

It's almost too much. The craving is consuming my strength, trying to take me down. I'm suddenly lifted from the ground and being carried, but not in the direction of his office. He takes us into an empty, dark lecture hall and places me right up on one of the desks.

"Travis, what if someone comes in?"

"It's okay, babe." He works to push my skirt up. "This room is under construction because of a leaky ceiling. No one's coming in here."

His fingers pull my panties to the side, and I moan as the cool air hits my flaming skin.

"God, you're so swollen." His thumb rubs over my clit and my body convulses to his touch. My head falls back on my shoulders as a cry of his name comes tearing from my throat, echoing out into the empty room. "It's okay, angel. I'm going to make it better."

His warm lips are suddenly on me, wrapping around my clit. I cling to his head as the intense rush hits. I've never been so sensitive. So desperate for a release. When his tongue licks through my folds, I soak the tabletop. I hope they'll assume the water dripping from the ceiling is what caused the mess. This is so different from my first time. The feeling is expanding, tightening in my gut, and I have no control over it.

It's rising fast, forcing me to come whether I'm ready or not. It feels too good. I don't want it to be over yet. I want it to last for hours.

"That's it, baby. God, you taste so good."

Another gush and he groans in kind, driving his tongue deeper. The fact that he's so into me is heightening the pleasure, pushing me straight into the heat at full speed. When his lips wrap back around my clit again, his fingers pumping into my body, crooking right to that magical little spot, my back bows. The orgasm tears through me. Mind numbing pleasure scorching me from every angle. Disintegrating every thought with its flames. I hang on for the ride, rolling through the pulses until they coast to a stop. My body goes limp, and I catch my breath. Letting the oxygen return to my lungs.

"Is that better, pretty girl?" His deep voice is right above me. His fingers running through my hair. Softly brushing across my cheek. My eyes flutter open and meet his eyes. The look in them has the hope expanding inside my chest. He's looking at me like he cares.

"Much better," I breathe. "Thank you."

He shakes his head. "You never need to thank me, babe. Touching you is a privilege."

He's acting like he was the one on the receiving end, when I did nothing other than take from him. I need to rectify that before he thinks I'm a selfish lover. Because that's twice now where I haven't reciprocated.

"Can I return the favor?" I sit up, feeling a bit light-headed. I think all the blood is still pulsing between my legs.

“It’s not that I don’t want it, because believe me when I say I do, but this moment is about you.”

There’s no way this guy is real. He’s unlike any male I’ve ever met. Maybe that should be the red flag. The fact that he’s too nice, too considerate. He’s good-looking, an amazing lover, and sexually unselfish. I feel like I’m missing something because guys like him don’t exist.

“Is there something I should know about you? Do you have some weird fetish? Or a raging temper? Or is there something you haven’t told me yet about your family?” He told me that his parents waited until they were older to have kids and that he’s an only child, which seemed normal, given the fact that I’m from an almost identical background. But maybe he left out the fact that he can’t go to sleep at night without his baby blankets and sucks his thumb. Or he has a crazy porn addiction. There has to be something, because nobody is this perfect.

“No,” he chuckles. “I don’t have any strange secrets or weird fetishes. And I certainly am not hot tempered. Why are you asking?”

“I don’t know. You’re just too good to be true.”

He shifts between my legs, his hands coming up to grasp my chin. His touch is so gentle. Caring. So impossibly real. “I’ve been thinking the same about you, babe. I just can’t wrap my head around how incredible you are. It makes no sense to me that someone hasn’t snatched you up yet. But that makes me the lucky one, doesn’t it?”

“See.” I poke him in the chest. “That’s what I’m talking about. You say all the right things and make me feel special.” His brow creases like he doesn’t understand.

“You should feel special, babe, because you are.”

And at any moment I'm going to wake from this dream. Yet...when he leans forward, kissing me softly, sweetly, holding me like I'm fragile, it feels very real. And when he arranges to pick me up at seven for a painting date, it does feel like I'm special. He took the time to plan one of my favorite things to do. There has to be something I'm missing.

8

Travis

I turn my painting around to show her my masterpiece and she bursts out laughing.

“It’s not that bad,” I say, tilting my head to see if it looks any better from a side angle. Nope. It still looks like crap, and hers... Her painting looks like a true work of art. She painted the vase perfectly and the flowers look like a beautiful blooming bouquet blossoming under the sunshine. And my vase looks like a slanted fishbowl with colorful sticks coming out of it. It’s safe to say painting will not be in my future as a career option.

“No.” She shakes her head, trying to stifle her laugh, but failing. “It’s not horrible. But how did you get that from that?” She looks over at the instructor’s example, which he walked us through step by slow step, and yet mine looks nothing like what’s sitting up on his easel. Or hers. But no one’s looks like hers. It’s a masterpiece.

“I just wanted mine to have some flare to it. That”—I point to the instructor’s painting—“would’ve been easy to draw. But this”—I hold mine up proudly—“was a challenge.”

She’s laughing even harder now. “Come on, Picasso. It’s time for us to go.”

“By the way, I made this for you, so I hope you’ll put it up on your wall.” I smirk, looking at the hideous thing one more time.

“Aww. I will cherish it forever.” She grins as I open the door for her. I take her hand and lead her to my truck, placing the two paintings in my back seat so they can dry.

“All right. Where to now, babe?” I shut my door and turn to face her. God, she’s stunning.

She rests her head back on the headrest, and there’s a glowing smile on her face. “I had so much fun with you tonight.” I did too. Hands down, it was the best date I’ve ever been on.

“Me too, babe. I know you’re probably tired, but I don’t want this night to end.”

“Me neither.” She grins. “Do you want to come back to my place and watch a movie? Oh wait. Lukas and Torre are having a Halloween movie marathon tonight.”

“We could go to my place instead?” I offer.

I’ll do whatever she wants, but being alone with her is definitely what I’m hoping for. After this afternoon, I can’t wait to get another taste of her. I’m eager to have her thighs wrapped around my head and that little pussy grinding down on my mouth. I need her coming on my tongue again. Only this time, I want to be on my back, watching her from below. Her tits rocking in time with her hips.

I turn to start the car, the tension tightening between my legs as we get closer to my place. I look over and see it in her eyes. She feels it too. If I kiss her now, I’ll be pulling over into a parking lot, and for what I have planned with my girl, I want to be home in my bed, worshipping every inch of her silky perfection.

I pull into the driveway and park. Coming around to open her door. When she climbs out, standing before me, her beautiful face glowing under the light of the moon, I suck in a breath. She’s looking at me with that same need that was trembling through

her during class. It nearly took her down this afternoon. I barely got to her in time. And it's pressing down on her now.

"Need to get you inside, angel." Her little whimper has the cum dripping from the end of my dick.

I take her hand and turn, entering the house through the garage door. When the sound of the TV blares from the other room, I come up short. We're not alone. I thought Lukas was supposed to be over at Torre's place.

"Fuck, Torre." Lukas groans, sounding exasperated. "That mouth of yours is going to get you into trouble." It sounds like the two of them are arguing again. "It's about to be washed out."

Okay, I think it's time for us to let them know they have company. I doubt they want us eavesdropping on their family feud.

"Honey, we're home!" I call out, trying to lighten the tension that's settled in the house. I look at my girl and she's rolling her eyes, obviously knowing how much the two of them bicker.

"They need step-sibling therapy," she whispers.

"Yes, they do." I nod. "Would you rather we go back to your place?" I'm about to shuffle her back out the door. I wanted her all to myself tonight, and it sounds like the Bickersons could use some privacy as well.

"Hey, guys!" Torre walks in, sounding out of breath and looking red in the face. She must've been yelling at Lukas for a while. She's always blowing smoke about him being too overbearing and protective and not letting her live her life. He's just trying to keep her safe. Look out for his little sister. Now, can he act like an ass sometimes?

Yes. Does he treat her like a kid? I think wanting to wash her mouth out for saying swear words is a testament to the fact. But I know it only comes from a place of love. He doesn't want to see her get hurt. And college guys aren't exactly trustworthy.

"Sorry. We didn't mean to intrude," Sophie says. "I thought you guys were going to be at the dorm, so we came here. We can go and let you guys have your privacy?"

"We don't need privacy," Torre rushes out, shaking her head emphatically. "We're just watching the movie. There's nothing going on. You guys should stay."

She must not realize we heard them arguing when we came in. I'm guessing she wants us to stay so she and Lukas have a referee.

Lukas walks into the room, looking like he's been going rounds at the gym. His muscles are tense. The veins in his neck are strained and there's a sheen of sweat on his forehead. I'm so glad I'm an only child and that I don't have to deal with any step-sibling rivalry. I know they love each other, but there's definitely an underlying tension that's always lingering between them and you can feel it whenever you enter the room.

"So, how was your date?" Torre looks to Soph. "What'd you guys do?"

"We went to Sip and Paint and painted a floral canvas. You should see Travis's." Sophie gives me a look, biting down on that plump pink lip. "It's really something." Her giggle slips free, and I reach for my cheeky girl, wrapping my arms around her waist and pulling her right to me.

"I just save my talents for other things," I whisper in her ear, feeling the shiver rock through her shoulders.

"Oh, I want to see." Torre smiles. "Where are they?"

“They’re in the car. I’ll go get them.” I plant a kiss on my girl’s cheek and head outside to grab them. When I come back in, the two girls have vacated the kitchen and are talking in the living room. Torrin asking all about our date tonight. I take in our paintings, smiling when the girls bust out into a fit of giggles as they look at mine.

“That’s definitely something,” Torrin says through her laughter. “And I’m guessing Sophie’s is even better than the instructor’s?”

“It is.” I admire hers again. “This is going on my wall. And when my girl becomes famous one day, I can say I have an original.”

Sophie smiles up at me and there’s that gleam in her eyes again. She kept looking at me all night, and every time it hit me in the chest. I’m falling fast for her. Two dates in and I’m already envisioning a future. One with many nights of painting and love-making. Hearing her laughter, kissing her soft lips, making her scream for me. Sounds fucking perfect.

“I’m going to go put it in my room.” I leave the girls and head to my bedroom. Lukas is coming out of his, looking calmer now. “You good?”

“Yeah, why?”

“Because five minutes ago, you looked like you wanted to strangle someone. What are you guys fighting about this time?”

He shakes his head. “We aren’t fighting. Just watching the Halloween movies.”

Is he really going to deny the fact that they were going at it again? Guess he doesn’t realize we heard them. Fine by me. He and Torrin can settle their issues amongst themselves. I certainly don’t need to be involved in this one.

I place the paintings up against the wall then go into my bathroom to make sure it looks decent for my girl and that I haven't left the toilet seat up. When I come back out, she's sitting on the side of my bed. My bedroom door is closed...and locked.

I step forward, feeling the current already charging the air. The temperature has just risen in the room as my pants have grown tight in the crotch. I stop before her, reaching for the side of her cheek, my thumb brushing over her soft skin. "You're so beautiful, babe."

She nuzzles into my hand, practically purring for me. I want to make her purr for me in other ways. I reach for her waist and scoot her further back onto the bed, but she sits back up.

"This time, I want to touch you, Travis."

Just the thought of her soft fingers running across my skin has my cock dribbling. But I need to taste her first. "Then you better come for me like a good girl, or else I won't give it to you." I push her back, spreading her thighs wide and pressing my cock right between them. Her hips thrust up against me as the ache starts to take over.

"You drive a hard bargain, Mr. Hunt." Her words are breathed on a moan as I begin to rub over her clit. "But I'll concede to your demands."

"You don't have a choice." I shift back, practically tearing her pants from her body. My hunger for her is nearly making me insane. As soon as I get them off, I'm diving headfirst between her legs, rubbing my mouth all over her swollen wet lips, licking every drop of her honey, groaning when her sweetness hits my tongue. Her fingers grip my hair and she starts working her pussy against me. Rubbing her clit against my tongue. Her little whimpers getting louder. Her thighs quaking as they squeeze around my head, locking me in place.

I suction around her clit, desperate to suck the pleasure out of her. And she comes for me just like a good girl. Her hips buck up, thighs locking tighter, and I hold on, letting her ride it out. Licking up every drop she feeds me. Her sexy moans sounding like praise for doing a good job. When her body goes limp, I ease off, not want to overload her sensitive system. I crawl back over top of her and brush her hair from her face.

“God, you’re good at that,” she breathes, still trying to catch her breath.

“I aim to please.” I smirk.

I run my fingers through her hair, stroking lightly, watching as her eyes flutter closed. This is what I’ve been wanting. Someone soft and sweet to cuddle up with at night. Someone to laugh and flirt with. She’s really getting to me. The feelings are rushing in fast. She nuzzles into my chest, and I hold her closer, savoring the moment. Hoping this will be one of many with this girl. When her breathing becomes quiet. I realize she’s fallen asleep. I smile, loving the fact that I shatter her little body to the point of exhaustion.

I shift out from under her and reach for the blanket, tucking her in for the night. I hit the lights and then go into my bathroom, needing to ease the pressure that’s been building in my balls all night. As soon as the air hits my throbbing cock, more cum drips from the end. I wrap my fist around my shaft and begin my steady stroke, thinking of my sweet girl trembling against my mouth. Her juices running down my chin. I still taste her on my tongue, and it drives me toward my peak. My hand stokes faster. My grip tightening. And then I come, shooting my load straight into the toilet, feeling the tension finally leaving my body. God, I needed that.

When I come out from the bathroom, my girl’s still sound asleep. I climb in beside her and pull her right into my nook. The feel of her backside up against my dick has me stiffening again, but I close my eyes and let the comfort of having her in my arms

lull me to sleep.

9

Sophie

“Hey, Sophie! If you need some dick, I’ll give you a pity fuck.” Cameron’s voice has me picking up my pace, but he’s right by my side even though the cafeteria is in the other direction. The guys won’t stop. They keep cornering me with their lewd comments. I just want them to leave me alone. It’s been weeks since the party. Why can’t anyone let it go? Because Maddock is still trying to prove his lie to Presley. He’s still trying to make me the scapegoat to his evil ways. Make sure no one believes he’s a cheater.

“You’d really touch that fat skank?” Sarah flanks me on the other side, giving me a sneer as she talks to Cameron. “She’s pathetic.”

I know I am. She doesn’t need to constantly remind me. I pick up my pace and take off in a run, hearing their voices from behind, echoed by cackles. “Run, you loser! Run!”

I turn the corner, trying to get to the library as fast as I can. It’s the only place the monsters leave me alone. The librarian would have them all suspended if she heard a peep out of any of them. I wish I could spend my days in there. Life might be a little more bearable.

I reach for the door, but a hand comes out, keeping it from opening.

“I was trying to be nice, Sophie.” Maddock blocks my path, glaring down at me with

his evil eyes. I take a step back as the fear shudders down my spine. There's a rigid line to his ticking jaw. I know the onslaught of his disgust is coming. "When I offered to fuck you, it was out of the kindness of my heart, but you went and told the principal that I was sexually harassing you." I start to back away from him but find myself up against the lockers. "You should've kept your mouth shut, Sophie. Now you're going to pay."

It's like a warning from the devil himself. I'm terrified of what more he'll do. How much worse will it get? I don't want to find out. I don't think I can take much more. I don't even bother using my locker anymore because it's always filled with trash and graffitied with hateful words. And when I woke up this morning, I saw that my car had been egged and the word whore was painted on the windshield.

"Please, Maddock. I'm sorry." I hate begging, but I can't take anymore. "Please. I'm sorry."

"Your apology means nothing. Prepare to feel my wrath." He shifts back, cracking his neck before he turns and stalks off. The panic sets in and I rush to catch up to him.

"Maddock, please." He keeps going, ignoring my pleas. "I'm sorry. Please. Maddock. Maddock!"

"Baby!" The sound of a voice has me stopping in my pursuit. "Sophie, wake up."

My eyes flutter open, and I realize it was all a dream. I'm in Travis's room. In the safety of his arms. The monster is nowhere in sight.

"Are you okay, Soph?"

I hug him tighter, clinging to him for safety as I try to calm myself back down. "Just had a bad dream."

“Yeah, I’ll say.” He squeezes me tighter. “What was it about?”

I don’t want talk about it. I don’t want to relive the nightmare. Because Maddock made good on his word. He made my life a living hell. But I have to give Travis an answer, because he looks so worried.

“I was back in high school,” I tell him. “And kids were being mean. The details are vague,” I lie, but I don’t want to go into it. I don’t want his opinion of me to change. “Thank you for saving me from the evil monsters.” I lean forward and press my lips to his. His lips are soft and sweet. And warm. Safe. I tease my tongue against his skin, begging for entrance, desperate for a taste. His kisses can make me forget everything.

He opens up, and I slide in, feeling the fire light between us. “I owe my savior my gratitude,” I whisper, running my hands down his bare chest, rubbing right over his thick bulge. “I want to show him how much I appreciate him for saving me from the bullies.” He lets out a groan as I squeeze around his girth, feeling the weight of him in my palm. “I want to show him how much I need him.”

“Fuck, baby.”

My hand slides right into his boxers, taking hold of his firm dick. He’s bigger than I expected. But then again, I’ve only ever seen one cock before. And Travis puts Maddock to shame in the size department. Which makes me secretly ecstatic.

“What are you smirking about, babe?”

I sink my teeth down into my lip, sliding under the covers. “I think my boyfriend has a huge dick.” He gives me a wink, sucking in a breath as I lean forward and swipe my tongue across his slit, licking up the drop of cum that was sneaking out. “And you taste good too.”

I wrap my lips around him, craving more of his flavor. His groan is the encouragement I need to know that I'm doing this right. I've never given a guy head before, but when his eyes roll back, I know I'm making him feel good. I sink lower, taking him down until he hits the back of my throat. Another groan of praise comes from above and I can tell he likes it deep. I slide back up his shaft, licking around his crown and go right back down, taking him even deeper this time. His grunted curse of approval has me repeating my rhythm, over and over. Steady and tight. Picking up my pace as I find my groove. Suctioning harder as he starts to pant.

His body is tensing beneath me. His grip in my hair tightening. I think he's close, and I can't wait to make him tip over the edge.

"I'm almost there, babe." His ragged words are gritted between his teeth. "Don't stop. That's it. Oh fuck... Oh fuck..." His panted grunts are like a drumroll right before the pleasure crashes into him. I hold on to his thighs, sucking down every drop as his hips buck up against me. His cock thrusting deeper down my throat.

I'm soaked between my legs. My pussy contracting as the convulsions rock through him. Giving him head is just as fun as receiving it. And when I open my eyes and find the satisfied look on his face, it makes me want to do it again. And again.

"That was amazing, babe."

I slide back up his body and nuzzle into him. His strong arms wrap around me, pulling me in close. I feel safe with him. It feels like he really would protect me from the monsters. I just hope he doesn't hate me when he learns what I did to Presley. For as much as Maddock was a monster for what he did, it took two that night. And I chose to betray a friend.

10

Travis

“Did you get enough to eat, babe?”

She swallows down her bite of bacon, nodding. “Yes. Thank you. Breakfast for me is usually a bagel, so pancakes were a real treat.”

I lean across the counter, kissing her nose. Waking up with her wrapped in my arms was a treat for me. “Well, anytime you want to stay the night, you’ll get a full home-cooked meal.” I’m aiming to tempt her into my bed again tonight.

“Mmm... You better be careful what you’re offering. Before you know it, I’ll be moving in.”

I wouldn’t be opposed to the idea. Getting to wake her up with my tongue every morning is definitely something I could get used to. God, her pussy purred for me so sweetly. And when she returned the favor... All I can say is her mouth is another one of her hidden talents. Her tongue is like a secret weapon. She could ask anything of me while she’s giving me head and my answer would be yes.

“I’ll be sure to cook waffles for you tomorrow then.” I wink.

She leans in closer, pressing her lips to mine and I savor every lick of her sweetness. She tastes like syrup and sex, and it makes me want to carry her back to my room and go another round. But as much as I want to keep her locked in my bed all day and

play with her body until she's exhausted, she has classes to get to. And knowing her, I don't think she'll skip.

"Are you asking me to spend the night again tonight?" she asks as she slips her tongue away from me. God, I could kiss her all day.

"I think you should. In case those bullies start chasing you in your sleep again, I can be there to protect you. By the way, who's Maddock, babe?" She kept calling his name in her sleep. I was going to ask her about it last night, but then she distracted me with her magical little tongue, swallowing all my thoughts away as she took me all the way down the back of her throat, constricting the cum right out of my dick.

When her shoulders tense at the mention of his name, the breakfast in my stomach churns. The look on her face has me worried there's an ex in the picture whom she still has feelings for. It's the one thing we really haven't discussed yet: our past relationships. There's not much to say on my end, because no one ever made it past a few months before their true colors showed through, but I'm not sure I can say the same for Sophie. She said she was broken. She could've been insinuating that her heart was broken. And I can't forget about the part of her being anti football players. I wonder if this Maddock guy was one.

"Why do you ask?" And that right there has me worried. She's evading the question.

"Because you were calling for him in your sleep."

"It was just a dream." She shrugs, but with that worried look shadowing her features, I'm not buying it.

"I know it was a dream, but who is he?"

"Just a guy I went to school with."

“A guy you liked?”

“No!” she practically shouts. “I did not like him.” It didn’t sound that way in her sleep. It sounded like she wanted him to forgive her for something. There’s something she’s not telling me and I don’t understand why. But I need to know. I’m in deep with my feelings here, and I don’t want to find out that I’m falling for a girl whose heart belongs to someone else. “Would you mind taking me home now? I really need to get ready for my class so I’m not late.”

Those pancakes in my stomach are now turning into a batter of dread. She clearly doesn’t want to talk about him. And now I feel like this perfect relationship has just been fractured. She’s hiding something, and that’s a bad fucking sign.

The silence lingered the entire drive back to her place, and by the time I dropped her off, it felt like there was an island of distance between us. When I kissed her goodbye, I felt it in the way she rushed to get away from me. I’m not sure what the fuck is going on, but I know one person who may know.

When I get back to my house, I find just the person I’m looking for rummaging through the pantry, looking for her favorite cereal. Lukas shoved it on the top shelf for her so no one would eat it. I walk in and reach for it, handing it over.

“Who’s Maddock?” I ask.

Torrin’s eyes shoot up to me, the thanks dying on her tongue. It’s almost the same reaction Sophie gave me. There’s definitely more to this guy than the fact that they were high school classmates.

“Why are you asking, Travis?”

“Because she was calling for him in her sleep.”

Her shoulders tense even more. “She had a dream, didn’t she?” I nod. “Look, it’s not what you think, Travis.” What I think is that there’s some guy that my girl is still in love with and no one wants to tell me otherwise.

“Did she have a relationship with him?”

“Please, Travis.” She shakes her head, pleading with me to drop it, but I can’t. “She’s my best friend and I don’t want to break her trust in me. Just ask her about it.”

“I did. And she didn’t tell me anything.” Then she gave me the silent treatment the entire way back to her place.

“Then maybe she needs more time.”

“More time for what?” To work through her feelings? To get over him? What exactly does she need more time for?

“To trust you. You’ve been dating for all of three days. It took us talking for the entire summer and then moving in together before she told me about her past.”

Fine. Point taken. I can accept that things just started between us, but with how rapid my feelings are growing, it feels like we’re on an accelerated track here. I don’t want Sophie holding things back and keeping secrets from me. I want to know everything, especially if we’re working toward a future together. At least, that’s what I’m working towards.

But if I push too fast, I might just push her away. Right back into the arms of this Maddock, and that’s the last thing I’m aiming to do. I can see myself with this girl. All the way to the end of life’s road.

“Just tell me this, Torre. Does she still have feelings for someone else?”

“No.” She shakes her head, looking like the idea of that is unfathomable, and finally the tightness in my gut loosens up a bit. “Believe me, Travis. You aren’t competing with anyone else. But, yes, he left scars. Just please be patient with her. I know she’ll come around.”

I hope Torrin’s right. I thought with the way things were that I’d already earned Sophie’s trust, but it looks like I have to work harder. I pull out my phone and shoot my girl a text. I’m going to plan something special for her tonight. Make her a quiet dinner in, just the two of us. No distractions so we can talk.

Me: Hey, baby. Are you free at seven?

Sophie: I just realized how behind I am on everything with school. I’ve been having so much fun, but I can’t let my grades slip. Rain check?

I look up from my phone, feeling like I’ve been sucker punched right below the belt. She’s running. But I’m not gonna let her go that easily.

“Hey, Torre. I have a favor to ask.”

11

Sophie

I push the door open with my hip, juggling my shopping bags and my backpack. One of the plastic handles breaks on the grocery bag and all of its contents go falling to the ground. My pint of blueberries spilling out everywhere. Little berries rolling across the floor, disappearing under my bed. “Oh no!” I hang my head and sigh. This day just keeps getting better and better.

I should just call him. I should ask him if he still wants to have dinner with me and spend the night together. But I can’t. I’m terrified he’ll ask about Maddock again.

“Let me give you a hand, babe.”

His deep voice startles me as he kneels to the ground, gathering all the little blue berries and putting them back in their container.

“What are you doing here?” I ask, finally noticing all the candles lit around my room, and the coffee table covered with a tablecloth and a giant vase of magenta roses sitting in the center of it. “You did all this?”

“Yes, babe. You said you had to work tonight. But I figured you had to eat so I made you dinner.”

“You did?” No one’s ever done something so special or romantic for me before. He’s too good for me. I don’t deserve his kindness, not after lying to him this morning.

“Here. Let me take those from you.” He stands, grabbing the bags from my hands, and places them on my desk.

“How did you get in here?”

“Torrin gave me her key. She’s staying at our house tonight.” And that means we’ll have the place to ourselves . “Are you hungry?”

I nod, still too overcome by the gesture to speak. I’m terrified that once he learns the truth about me, he’ll realize I’m not the one for him.

“You didn’t have to do all this. You already made me breakfast. This is too much.”

“It’s never too much. And I can’t help it. I wanted to spend a little time with you. But I promise I’ll take off after dinner so you can do your work.”

I don’t want him to leave. And I already got my work done. I spent the entire afternoon locked in the library, trying not to think about Travis and how my past might destroy my chance with him.

“I want you to stay, Travis.”

He walks to me, pulling me in close. His hand cupping around my chin. Those eyes make me melt. The way he looks at me...

“I missed you today, pretty girl.”

God, I missed him too. His lips press to mine and every thought drifts away. I don’t know how he does it, but just from the touch of his lips, he can right all the wrongs. I let him take me to that place where everything feels warm and tingly. And safe.

“You’re so incredible, Sophie.”

I pull away, feeling unworthy of such an amazing man. I’m not incredible. Far from it.

“Baby, tell me what’s wrong.”

“Nothing’s wrong.” I shake my head, feeling the sting behind my eyes. “I’m just hungry.” I pull away and turn. “So, what are we having?”

“You know you can trust me, right?” His body is at my back, voice deep and tender.

“I know I can.” I just can’t trust that he’ll still feel the same about me once he learns the truth.

“I’m really trying here, babe. I’m trying not to pressure you to talk to me, but I’m falling for you, Sophie.” The air gets locked inside my lungs as he steps in front of me, forcing me to look at him again. My heart is thumping wildly in my chest. “I don’t want to find out two months down the road that I never stood a chance. That there’s someone else you still have feelings for.”

“I don’t.” There’s never been anyone else. A drunken hope saturated in lies, but that’s it. I’ve never felt this way about anyone. “I promise, Travis. There’s no one else.”

“Then what is it that you’re keeping from me? Why won’t you tell me who this Maddock guy is?”

Because you won’t feel the same anymore .

“If we’re going to give this a fighting chance, you can’t keep secrets from me, baby.”

He's right. I know he is. And I know he deserves the truth. I'm trying to safeguard myself from getting hurt, but that's a selfish choice. I need to tell him. Whatever the outcome is, I'll have to face it. And it's better now than two months down the road when it will shatter me when he walks away.

"Can we sit down?"

He nods, taking my hand and leading me to the couch. I look at the pretty roses. The twinkling lights on the table that are now blurred streaks. The magenta tablecloth that he went to the trouble of finding. He spent so much time making it special for me, and now I'm about to prove that I'm not as special as he thinks.

"I was at a party." I swallow the lump of nerves as the memory floods in, capsizing my calm. My voice is unsteady. My nerves rockier. "We'd all been drinking." I'd had too much to drink. But so did everyone else. The memory of Presley passed out and lying beside us makes my stomach hurt. I never thought in a million years she'd wake up. But she woke up to a nightmare. "At some point, we all crashed in Sarah's basement. All of us just sleeping on the floor. I remember being woken up by Maddock." He stiffens to his name, but I keep going. "He wanted me to kiss him."

Travis's jaw clenches as his hands squeeze mine tighter. They feel clammy, like he's just as nervous as I am.

"At first, I thought he was confused because his girlfriend was laying on the other side of him. But then he told me it was me he wanted." I should've listened to my gut because I knew it was too good to be true. That there was no way he could be interested in me. "I wasn't as pretty as the other girls." Travis squeezes me again, his eyes narrowing like he doesn't like my comment, but it was the truth. "They were all thin and perfect, and I...I was the chubby one."

"You're not chubby, baby. Your curves are sexy as hell. They're what drew me in.

Not every guy is into thin chicks.” I know he thinks I’m sexy. It’s in the way he looks at me. The way he makes me feel. It’s funny how I haven’t once been insecure about my weight with him or questioned his attraction for me. But I questioned everything that night with Maddock, and I should’ve listened to my gut.

“The guys at my school never looked at me twice. So that night when Maddock was telling me how beautiful I was and how much he wanted me, I wanted to believe him. I wanted it to be true.” But I found out it was all a ploy to get me to sleep with him.

“He told me he was breaking up with his girlfriend, but I still didn’t think we should do anything until they were officially broken up. Presley, his girlfriend, was my friend. But he fed me another lie, telling me she hated me. And I stupidly believed every word.” Every thickly layered lie worked its way around my insecurities and made me believe he wanted me. “It was the biggest mistake of my life. I wish I could go back and tell him no. I wish I hadn’t been so gullible.”

“What exactly happened, babe?” There are creases around his eyes. Little lines of concern that are tugging at the strings of my heart. He’s concerned about me, but I’m not an innocent victim in this story. I’m a villain just like Maddock.

“We started to make out. I was getting nervous. Second-guessing things. But I so desperately wanted to believe that he could actually be attracted to me that I didn’t stop it. And when he asked me to have sex with him, I...”

The tick of Travis’s jaw causes the words to get stuck in my throat. My mind is suddenly distracted by the irritation already pulsing in his cheek.

“You what, babe?” The kindness in his voice is such a contradiction to the angry look in his eyes. I don’t know how to read him...but I need to tell him.

“I gave him my virginity.” His grip on my hands is almost painful, but the memory

hurts worse. “But as we... As he...” I can’t even say it. “I kept second-guessing myself. Wanting to stop. Not wanting to let him down. Wanting to feel desired. But then Presley woke up and he shoved me off and went after her.” And then the truth broke me. “I went after her too, wanting to apologize, and that’s when I heard him telling her that he’d been passed out and I took advantage of him. He told her he thought it was her fucking him and he was so grateful that she woke him up or he’d have never known what I’d done.”

“I’m going to kill him.” My eyes shoot up from our gripped hands and I see the hatred that’s icing over his handsome features. “Tell me his last name, baby. So, I can hunt him down and break his fucking neck.”

If I wasn’t so shocked by the sincerity rolling off him, I’d laugh. But he’s dead serious. And I’m almost afraid to tell him what happened in the weeks that followed.

“He didn’t force me into it, Travis. I was aware of the decision I was making. I knew it was wrong. Even if Presley truly hated me, I shouldn’t have hurt her like that.” I can’t even blame it on the alcohol because I was coherent through every choice. And I chose not to stop it.

“I’m sorry, babe. You may have thought you were in the driver’s seat, but he manipulated you to get what he wanted. And then he tried to cover his ass. The fucker needs to pay. He took my girl’s virginity for fuck’s sake.”

He stands from the sofa, cursing as he starts to pace in front of the coffee table. His fists are clenched at his sides. His entire body rigid. Like a warrior ready to take prisoners. If Maddock were here, I think Travis really would kill him. And that terrifies me. I don’t want him going to prison over that monster. I don’t want him to ruin his career or have his life taken away over an asshole who got pleasure in bullying me. If anyone is going to pay, it’s Maddock.

“What happened next, babe?” He seethes his question. “Did the girlfriend break up with him?”

“No.” My eyes drop back to the flickering candle. The look on Presley’s face every time I passed her in the halls will forever haunt me. “She believed him.”

“How the fuck could she believe that asshole?” He shakes his head, putting his hands on his waist. “Was she dumb?”

Presley was one of the smartest girls at our school. Sarah was the one who always came to me to do her homework. “No. Maddock made it believable. He verbally attacked me in front of her, accusing me of trying to ruin his relationship. He had everyone at school calling me a whore. They iced me out. Made my life a living hell. It went on for weeks. I begged my parents to let me transfer schools, but they thought I needed to show my strength and get a thicker skin. But then the attacks started happening at my house. Our home was egged. The yard was toilet-papered. Hateful words were spray-painted on our garage. My parents reported it, but the cops did nothing. Finally, my parents realized how serious things were and they sent me to a boarding school. That’s why I went to the new school.”

He stalks forward, kneeling in front of me. His angry stare peering right into my eyes. “You need to tell me his last name so I can make him pay, baby.”

I reach for his cheeks, wanting him to calm down. “Travis, please. The day will come when I will destroy him. But I want it to be when it matters most.” The rise of his career. The day before his wedding. I’m not sure when, but I will make him pay. And I will make it hurt. “I want to look him in the eyes and have him know that I was the one who took him down. That I hold the power.”

He lets out a sigh. I know he doesn’t like that answer, but it’s my war. And I want to strike on my terms.

“You have to know this is killing me, babe. No one should be able to get away with that. He deserves to be locked up.”

“And we tried, but he always told the same lies.” And everyone believed him. So now, I plan on making him pay with more than just his freedom. I’m going to make him lose his dignity. I’m going to make it to where everyone hates him and all he’s ever known crumbles right before his eyes. His money. His popularity. One day, I will rip it all from him. “I promise he will get his, Travis.”

“I don’t like it.” He shakes his head. “But I definitely respect your decision. I understand why you need to be the one to handle it. Just know that when the time comes, I’ll be there to protect you. And if he or anyone else tries to hurt you, they won’t live to breathe another day.”

“Thank you.” I wipe away a tear that has made its escape. It’s the first time I feel like someone has my back.

“Babe, why wouldn’t you talk to me earlier? I get that it’s hard for you to share something like that, but I’ve been worried all day there was someone you still had feelings for.”

With the way I clammed up, I get how he could draw that conclusion, but I froze in my fear. “I thought you’d think less of me.”

“Why would I think less of you? Some asshole fed you lines and you wanted to believe it. I don’t blame you for that.”

I may have believed it, but Maddock’s lies aren’t an excuse for my actions.

“Because I cheated with my friend’s boyfriend, knowing she was in the same room. I knew they hadn’t broken up yet, and I still did it. I can’t forgive myself for what I did

to Presley, and I don't expect anyone else to be okay with it either."

His hands grip the back of my neck, and the same look he had earlier has returned. Making my heart beat faster.

"I may live my life by honesty, Soph, but I don't subscribe to perfection. We all make mistakes. Babe, yours, I don't even consider one. Just the fact that even after what you went through, you could feel guilty for your choices in the situation, speaks to your character. I know you're a good person, babe. This one moment in your life doesn't define you. I hope you know that."

I've been harboring my guilt for so long, and with a few words, he's lessened the weight of my pain. "Ever since that night, I've felt broken inside. But when I'm with you... I feel whole again. You make me forget, Travis."

"That's good to hear, pretty girl, because I'm aiming to make you fall in love with me."

The butterflies in my stomach flutter, wanting to spread their wings wide and take flight after a long winter of icy fear and chilly regret. He doesn't know it yet, but I'm already falling for him. I know it's fast, but there's just no stopping the way I feel. It's out of my heart's control.

"Is that so?" I cock my brow, wrapping my arms around his neck. "What if I told you your wish was already coming true?"

The way his eyes dance with mischief stirs the tingles down below. Heat pricks over my skin. His hands trail up my thighs and I'm suddenly yanked to his body.

"I'd tell you that's good to hear, because I'm already in deep."

The feeling that settles over me has no words. Happy. Elated. Safe. Trust... That's the one that packs the biggest punch. I trust him. I know he isn't feeding me lines. I know that he's not on some mission to steal my virginity like Maddock. Travis's only mission is me.

“Make love to me, Travis.”

The whispered plea slips from my mouth. I want this moment, this night, burned into my memory. Instead of the horrified look shimmering in Presley's glossy eyes. I want to remember the candles flickering around my room. The pretty pink roses sitting on my table. The romantic gesture of this loving man making me dinner. I want to burn this feeling into my system, override everything that happened in my past and replace it with him .

“Please, Travis.”

12

Travis

That word is an attack on my offensive line, weakening my stance. That's not the reason I came here tonight. I didn't do all this to get into her pants. But after what she just told me, I want her more than ever. She just shared her secrets, pulled back the curtain to let me in, and now it's time to make sure she knows that nothing she just told me scares me.

I brush my fingers over her pretty pink cheeks, studying her eyes, making sure this is what she truly wants.

"Are you sure, baby?"

She nuzzles against my hand, seeking more of my touch.

"I've never been more sure of anything."

I lean forward, wrapping her thighs around my waist, and lift her from the sofa. I carry her over to her bed, laying her down. The rose petals I'd placed on her pillow in the shape of a heart were only meant to make her smile, but they're the perfect silhouette for her pretty head. I sit back, memorizing every detail of this moment. Feeling a thump in the left side of my chest.

"I love you, Sophie." The words come out. Probably way too soon. But I can't hold them in anymore. "I probably should've waited until our tenth date to tell you that,

but I don't want to hold back with you." It may be crazy, but it's like that old adage~ when you know, you know. And I know she's the one.

"I love you, too, Travis."

I reach forward, pulling her to me, sealing my mouth to hers. Infusing my soul with the rush of her words. I'm in love with this girl. And I want everything with her.

I trail my fingers down her neck. Following the line of her curves. Slowly making my way down to the hem of her shirt. I peel it up over her stomach, pulling away from her lips as her arms raise in the air to let me slip it over her head. Her eyes are burning heavy, twinkling with the same need that's coursing through my veins. I let my eyes drop to her chest, gazing over her plump mounds, and she rocks with a shiver under my heated stare. The two peaks in the center tighten through her bra. I reach out and rub my thumb over the pebbled outline, circling the tight little bud, watching as her lungs draw in on a gasp. She's so sensitive. So hungry for every touch.

I keep exploring, running my fingers lower. Over and around her belly button. Lower to the waist of her pants. I work to remove her leggings. Shifting back to slide them off her legs. The spot between her thighs is soaked. Her wet panties clinging to her skin, molding over her plump folds. My cock responds in kind, making its own mess inside my briefs. I lean forward, licking over the satin, needing to taste her sweetness on my tongue. Every inch of her is swollen and sensitive, and oh so sweet. I wrap my lips over her clit, and she nearly bends back as the heat rocks through her. She's ready for more.

I unlatch my suction, shifting back. It's time to rid her of the rest of her clothes. I slide her panties down her thighs, watching as her little tuft of curls comes poking out, waiting for her pink little nub to reveal itself next. It's already so full of need. Eager for her release. I toss her underwear aside then lean forward to unclasp her bra.

The dark pink shade of her nipples is such a contradiction against her ivory skin. It's my new favorite color. She's a true piece of art. A masterpiece of sexual perfection. And now I get to make her mine.

"You're so beautiful, Sophie." I hover over her, staring down into her eyes. "You're the most beautiful girl I've ever seen."

"Kiss me, Travis."

I lower my head, kissing her until her lips are swollen, her body growing restless beneath my frame, then I start my descent. Kissing and nibbling over every inch of her lush body. Her neckline. Her collarbone. Her stomach. Across her pelvic bone. Circling her clit. Licking down the seam of her folds. Dipping my tongue right into her heat and stealing a taste of her honey.

"Travis."

I know what she needs. Her body is desperate for it. So, I begin my pursuit. Teasing her open with my tongue, fucking my way into her until she's nice and ready for me. Her walls start to contract, and I slip away, working my way back up her body again. This time, I want her coming on my cock. Then after I'm done claiming what's mine, I'll have her riding my tongue, rubbing her clit against my lips. Giving me another.

"You have to tell me if it hurts, babe." I spread her thighs wide, positioning myself at the helm of her perfection. "If you need me to stop, I'll pull out."

Her answering "please" has me lining up with her entrance, slowly pushing forward, studying her face for any signs of pain as I breach her opening with the crown of my cock. She lets out a moan, arching into my touch, so I slide in further. Stretching her slick walls. Slipping through her warm, wet heat which is squeezing me like a glove. She's taking me so perfectly. Unhindered by my size.

“I won’t break, Travis.” My eyes snap up to hers, and the desperation is strained on her face; the thirst for more burning dark in her eyes. “You don’t have to be gentle.”

I’m not just going slow for her sake. I’m afraid that as soon as I start pumping my hips, I’ll come. And I’m not ready for this to be over. I want this moment to last. I want it to outstretch the painful memory from her past and to show her what true love making is like. It’s not just about sex; it’s about the connection.

“I just don’t want to come yet, babe. You feel too good. Just give me a moment to breathe.”

She thrusts up against me, ignoring my comment, her stare locked on. It’s like a challenge. Torturing me with her sweet cunt, forcing me to give into the feelings. I brace myself for the ride, letting her take the lead. She shifts up, her hands wrapping around my neck then her hips start rocking. Up and down she rubs her little pussy over my cock. It’s almost too much. My body is losing its stronghold against her attack. My thighs practically shaking as I fight to keep the orgasm from breaking through. I can feel the sweat over my skin. The pressure building in my gut. I need her to come. I won’t let go until she does.

I reach between us, pressing my thumb to her clit. Rubbing it in time with her rocking hips. Her head falls back, and I feel her walls constrict around my shaft. It’s the permission I was waiting for. My cock pumps forward, quick hard thrusts, grinding down to give her more, and her body takes it. Pulling me right into her storm. Shattering me into a million pieces and then putting me back together. My mind is racing as emotions plunder through. Pleasure, love, obsession, lust, and an incessant need to protect my precious girl. A need to avenge all the wrongs which were done to her.

I’m never going to let anyone hurt her again. And I’m going to make sure that everything that fucker did fades in her mind. I’ll replace every memory with love and

prove that I'm worthy of her trust.

I shift to the side, pulling her into my chest, hugging her close. "Are you okay, baby?"

"Better than okay." She breathes. "That was amazing."

My pride takes a bow, aiming to please, but she hasn't seen anything yet. Once her nerves have settled and she's gotten past any fears, I'll show her exactly how amazing sex can be.

"You're amazing." I kiss her nose.

Her finger comes out and flicks my arm, and I'm struck by the little sting. "Ow, what was that for?"

"I just needed to make sure I'm not dreaming."

I grab her neck, pulling her right to my mouth. Kissing her deep. "You're not dreaming, babe. But if you flick me again, I'm going to turn you over and give you a spanking."

Her eyes are big now, but judging by the blush forming in her cheeks, I don't think she despises the idea. By the time I'm done with her, she'll be craving it.

"You hungry, babe?"

"Starved."

It's time to feed my girl dinner so I can have my dessert.

13

Sophie

“Hey, babe. Do you know if I left a bag in the car? I can’t find the condiments anywhere.” That’s because I tucked them under the back seat so they wouldn’t slide out and roll around everywhere.

“Yep, they’re in the back. I’ll go grab them.” I grab his key and head out to the garage but pause my hand on the knob when I hear a strained voice coming from the other side of the door.

“You better behave this weekend or I’m going to ground this stubborn ass of yours.”

It sounds like Lukas and Torre are fighting again. I’m guessing with everyone coming into town this weekend, he’s worried she’ll sneak some alcohol and have a drunk fest. Torrin really doesn’t have an affinity for drinking, so he doesn’t need to worry.

“I’m always a good girl,” Torrin answers, sounding winded. She must be exasperated over him constantly assuming she’s going to get herself into trouble.

“Is that so? You’re being bad right now. Our parents are about to show up and look at you acting like a little slut.”

What the hell? How dare Lukas speak to her like that. Torrin is not acting like a slut. She may be in a skirt, but it doesn’t look slutty. I go to open the door, but it doesn’t budge. They must be right on the other side.

“Hey, guys! I need to get something from Travis’s car so can someone let me into the garage?”

I hear Lukas’s cursed whispers, then what sounds like a moan from Torrin. I’m about to shove open the door and break up whatever the fuck is going on, but the doorbell sounds in the background and I hear Travis call for me. “Babe! Can you please get that? I’m making the burger patties and my hands are covered in meat.”

I reluctantly leave the dueling duo and rush to open the front door. I’m going to have to have a talk with Lukas later and tell him he can’t speak to his sister like that. She is not a slut. I open the door and find Willow with a big football cake in her hands, and Brennon standing right at her back.

“Willow, did you make that?” I look down at the spectacular cake, admiring how perfect it looks. Her attention to detail is amazing.

“Yes.” She smiles, her word smooth.

“It’s awesome.”

“Thank you. I love baking cakes.” And I love that she isn’t nervous with me anymore. It makes me feel like I’m someone she truly trusts. When we first met, her speech was stuttered, but now she only struggles when we’re in large crowds or when she’s worried about something. I’m glad she isn’t nervous now.

“Come on in. I’m so excited to meet everyone.” Their friends from high school have come into town for the game, and it will be fun to finally put names with faces.

I step to the side and Brennon leans into me for a hug. “Hey, girl. Let me introduce you to my buddies.” He turns to the door and, one by one, huge guys walk in. “Soph, this is Ryeson.”

Ryeson tips his head, holding out his hand for a shake. He looks exactly as Willow described: tall, dark, handsome, and intimidating. But I know from what they've told me that even though he's quiet and has a resting brooding face, he's a sweetheart.

"Nice to meet you, Sophie."

"Same." I smile up at him.

The next guy to enter has to be Baylor. Blue eyes and a smooth smile. He's just as big as Ryeson. And just as hot. Talk about one seriously hot couple.

"I'm Baylor." He pulls me in for a hug. "Nice to finally meet you, sopapilla."

I shoot Willow a smirk. Her and her silly nicknames. She calls Travis the terminator. But that's exactly what he is on the football field. And I'm a sopapilla because she thinks I'm as sweet as the dessert.

"It's nice to meet you too, Baylor."

I shift back, looking toward the door, ready to greet the next friend coming in. When my eyes connect with the girl who haunts my dreams, an icy chill runs down my spine.

"Sophie?"

The memories nearly drown me as I stare at the one I betrayed.

"Do you two know each other?" Brennon's voice is like a distant echo to the dreaded feelings consuming my thoughts. The horrified look in her eyes. The pain as the tears ran down her cheeks. It all comes barreling in and I'm struggling to breathe. I think I'm having a panic attack.

“Baby.” Strong arms wrap around my waist, holding me upright. “Baby, look at me.” He’s right in front of my face now, but I can’t see past the pain. “Baby, what’s wrong?”

“I’m sorry, Sophie.” There’s her voice again. “Please don’t be afraid of me.” Afraid...afraid... The word spins around in my mind, dizzying me with confusion. I don’t know why I’d be afraid of her. She never hurt me. I’m the one who betrayed her.

“Presley,” another deep voice rings in my mind. This one unrecognizable. “What’s going on, babe?”

“Sophie, please.” Her pleading voice has me looking up. The tears in her eyes remind me of the hurt I caused.

“I’m sorry, Presley. I didn’t mean to hurt you.” The words come out stuttered and breathless.

She shakes her head. The tears in her eyes slipping free. “No. Please don’t apologize. I’m the one who’s sorry for never standing up for you. I should’ve stopped him. I should’ve told someone. I’m so sorry. God, I’ve been wanting to tell you that for so long. I can’t believe you’re here.”

I don’t understand why she’s apologizing. It’s me. I’m the one who needs to apologize.

“I never blamed you, Presley. You’re not the one who hurt me. You never said one mean thing. Though, you had every right to.” Out of everyone at that school, she was the only one who had the right to call me a whore and make me pay for what I’d done, but she didn’t.

“No. I should’ve stuck up for you.” She takes my hands. “I knew you weren’t to blame for what happened. I knew he lied and manipulated you into sleeping with him. But I didn’t want to believe he could do that to me. I thought he loved me, but he’s just a cheating asshole.”

I can’t describe the shift as her words settle over me, but the gravity of my pain is no longer pulling me down. Travis has been slowly gluing me back together, but hearing Presley’s words heals the wound that’s been gaping for so long.

“Can I give you a hug, Sophie?” She doesn’t even have to ask. I cling to her and the sobs wrack my body. Her arms wrap tighter around me, and I lean into her strength, drawing from her kindness. And it settles. The incessant pain. The broken fragments knitting back together.

“Baby.” Travis’s voice is at my back. I know he’s concerned, but he doesn’t need to be. I shift back, looking toward the boy I’m in love with, knowing that he’s worried.

“I’m okay.” I nod. “More than okay.”

He tips his chin, pulling me into his chest. “I’ve always got you, babe.”

I know he does, and that’s the reason I love him so much.

“I love you.” I smile up at him.

“What’d we miss?” I hear Torrin’s voice. “And why is my girl crying?” She comes rushing over.

I wipe my eyes. “Torre, I’d like you to meet Presley. Presley, this is Torrin. And the big brute behind her is her brother Lukas.” I never know whether I’m supposed to introduce them as step-siblings or not, but they’re so close, it doesn’t seem necessary.

Though, I'm still pissed at what he said about my girl.

"The Presley?" Torre looks to me, and I nod. "It's nice to meet you. I um..." She looks nervous. "I've heard um...so much about you."

"And I've heard so much about you guys from Willow." Presley smiles. "This is my boyfriend, Kyler."

Finally, I take a look at the guy who's been standing at her back, concerned for his girl. He's really handsome. Much better looking than Maddock. And I'm so relieved that she's moved on. She deserved better. And it looks like she found it.

"It's nice to meet you, Kyler." I smile up at him. "This is my boyfriend, Travis."

The guys greet each other, and the awkwardness slowly starts to dissipate.

"You guys want to come in? I'm just about to grill up some burgers," Travis offers.

Everyone makes their way into the house, and while they're busy getting acquainted, going out back to the grill, Presley and I take a seat in the living room, getting caught up on everything that's happened since we were locked in the walls of hell. It's crazy to think that all this time I'd assumed she was still with Maddock. It turns out she's not friends with any of them anymore. She saw through all their bullshit and transferred schools. She wanted out too.

"Hey, babe." I turn to the sound of Travis's voice. "Would you mind coming with me for just a sec?"

I look to Presley, and she nods. "Go. We have all weekend to catch up. I need to go check in with Kyler, anyway."

Travis leads me back to his room and shuts the door. He turns and wraps me right in his arms. “I just needed to make sure you were good, baby. That was a lot to take without warning, and you handled it so well. I’m proud of you, babe.”

I’m proud of me too. I didn’t succumb to the panic, and I was able to say the things I’ve wanted to say for so long.

“I can’t describe it, Travis. But I feel like that was the missing piece. I feel like I can move on with my life now and let the past go.” I’m not naïve to the fact that it will always be a part of me, the scars still imprinted in my memory, but they aren’t as dark, and the weight of it doesn’t feel so heavy anymore.

“That makes me really happy to hear, babe. Not that I would’ve let your past stand in our way, but I’m glad you got the closure you needed with her.”

I am too. Until seeing her, I never realized how much I needed it.

“I love you,” I say, looking up at my gorgeous man. If I hadn’t met him, I’d still be the broken flower, hoping for my roots to grow strong so I wouldn’t wither away in my depression. But now I’m blossoming right under his love, feeling like I can conquer the world.

“I hope you love me, because I’m going to marry you one day.”

My entire body grows warm from the impact of his words. That’s twice in one day that I’ve been hit with the feeling of elation.

“Is that so?” I raise my brow, teasing him a little. “That’s a pretty big assumption, Mr. Hunt.”

He tugs me closer. His warm eyes driving the sincerity in with every single word.

“It’s not an assumption, pretty girl. It’s a promise.” And knowing that he stands on honesty, I know it’s the truth.

14

Travis

The buzzer sounds and the crowd goes wild. My heart is pounding so hard in my chest, it feels like it's going to explode. This is the moment I've been working for. Winning the championship has been my dream ever since I was a kid, and now I'm going to have the ring to prove I did it. I turn toward the sea of people and start walking to the fifty-yard line where I told my girl to meet me. The cameras are chasing me down, but they won't get their interviews until I get my girl. When I see Sophie running towards me, I pick up my pace, scooping down and sweeping her right up into my arms.

"You did it, baby! You guys won!" Her beaming smile steals the air from my lungs, adding to the high of this incredible moment. Being able to share this with her is an indescribable feeling. One I won't ever forget.

"I can't even believe that last score you made. You were so amazing out there."

It was the game of my life. Like an alignment of divine timing. Every decision I made on the field was the right one. And my teammates were right there with me. Never leaving me hanging, always getting open for me. We really did earn the win. It wasn't luck, it was skill.

"I love you, too, angel. It was pretty incredible."

"Now, it's time for you to face the media." She looks around at all the flashing

cameras that are capturing our moment. “Everyone wants to interview you. Are you ready?” She knows this is my least favorite part of my job. I’d love nothing more than to carry my girl off into the locker room and ride this high out on her body, but duty calls.

“Yeah. I guess I should get it over with, so I can get you home.” I lean into her ear so the cameras can’t capture the words forming on my lips. “I’m dying to get my tongue between your legs, babe.”

She lets out a little moan, nuzzling in closer. I definitely need to get my interviews done so I can tend to my girl’s needs. God, I bet she’s soaking wet. I’d slip my fingers down her pants but I know one of the cameras will catch me and then I’ll be dealing with the aftermath of the media. Extra questions that I don’t have time for.

I give her one more kiss then reluctantly place her back on her feet. It’s time to get her back to our friends where I know she’s safe. I spot Kyler and the rest of the crew off to the side, so I lead my girl through the crowd, making sure everyone keeps their distance from her.

“Good game, man.” Brennon’s friends all cheer as we approach, giving me high fives. “You kicked some serious ass tonight.”

“Thanks!” I nod. “And did you see that play your boy made? If it weren’t for Brennon, we wouldn’t have won.” He’s definitely going to go pro one day. And from what Bren has told me, his friends are all just as talented. Who knows? Maybe I’ll be playing on the same team as one of them one day.

The reporters are starting to crowd in, which means it’s time for me to go. I lean down to give Sophie one more kiss but freeze when I see the look on her face. Her eyes are locked on something across the field. Her body is like an ice sculpture. Frozen cold, shivering in her stance.

I turn, wondering what could upset her, and when I see one of the players from the other team staring right at my girl, my body tenses. The look in his eyes is unnerving. And if he doesn't turn away and leave my girl alone, he'll be asking for trouble.

"Maddock."

Her whisper punches me right in the gut. It's him . The blood in my veins turns to rage. I see red in the place of his cocky smirk. I'm going to kill him. He's going to pay for what he did to my girl. I step forward, ready to charge him, but Sophie steps in front of me, blocking my path.

"No, Travis. He's mine. This is my war."

I crack my jaw, my teeth feeling like they may break under the pressure of my hatred. I know this is her fight and that she deserves her vengeance, but I seriously want to kill him. I'm her protector now. She's no longer alone in this fight. She deserves to be sheltered from all the assholes.

"Please," she whispers.

That one word is her biggest weapon against my defenses. If I don't let her do this, she may resent me for it. But I'll say this: once she's done with him, he's mine. I will make sure he suffers for every little thing he did to her. I'm going to be his biggest nightmare. Make him wake up every night terrified of what I'll do to him. From this moment until he takes his last breath, he will regret ever laying one finger on her.

"Fine. But I'm going with you."

She tips her chin then turns, striding smoothly across the field. When a smirk forms on his face, an evil sneer meant to intimidate, it takes every atom in my cells to keep myself from punching it off his face.

“Well, well, if it isn’t Sophie Adams.” His eyes cast down her body, ignoring the fact that I’m standing right behind her. God, he really is a punk. “You look exactly the same.” I swear I’m going to kill him, but the cameras that are zooming in are watching my every move, and I’m not losing my life or my spot on the team over this fucker.

“What do you want, huh?” He glances up at me then back down. “Did you come over here to beg me to fuck you again?” My fists clench at my sides, and I feel a hand grip my shoulder. Our friends have joined us, thankfully easing the blind rage so I can see rationally.

“Actually,” my girl says, with a cool confidence that I didn’t know she had in her, “I just came over to tell you that I forgive you for bullying me back in school. And for what you did the night of the party. I know you were only acting out because you have a tiny dick and were dealing with your own insecurities. It had to be rough living in your shoes. But I will say...” She cocks her head. “There’s really no excuse for how you acted. Coming after me at school. All the attacks and the verbal abuse makes you scum. Getting everyone to gang up on me and vandalizing my house and my car. Those are all criminal offenses. I’m actually shocked that the team would want you to play for them. They stand by honor and honesty, yet you’re the biggest liar I’ve ever known. But that’s right...” She nods. “You lied to the cops, denying you had any part in it.”

The cameramen are no longer even respecting our personal boundaries, they’re trying to capture my girl’s every word. I hope they have.

“Doesn’t it eat away at you?” She continues on. Her voice so full of strength. God, she’s incredible. “Knowing that you could be so cruel to an innocent girl who was just trying to survive high school.”

He shakes his head like she’s a joke, and I’m about five seconds away from making it

to where he can never laugh again. “Actually, it was funny watching you cry like a little baby. Your fat ass running down the hall, trying to hide in the library. You were so pathetic. I shouldn’t have even bothered with you at the party. I should’ve asked Sarah to fuck me instead. She wouldn’t have been so tough to convince. I thought for sure your desperate ass would be hungry for it, but you were too afraid of the pain. Haven’t you ever heard the motto, no pain no gain ?”

A faint gasp from behind my back has me glancing over my shoulder. Presley’s listening to every word. Not that she didn’t already know the truth, but he just spelled it right out for her. I look up at Kyler and he looks like he’s about to commit murder too. They all do. But unlike Maddock, we’re smart. Our attacks will come when the cameras aren’t rolling. But given that they’ve captured his every word, he just murdered his reputation himself. His football career is done. And once they air his little confession on tonight’s news, the entire world will hate him. He’ll be lucky if he can even find a job. Companies don’t like drawing bad press, and after this, he’ll be a magnet for it.

“Wow, Maddock. You actually sound proud of your actions. You don’t regret a single thing?” Sophie’s trying to give him a chance, though I think she knows exactly what she’s doing. She’s destroying him, just like she always wanted.

He smiles broadly. “Not a single one. Bet that kills you, doesn’t it? By the way, saw that your parents moved. Too bad. I was looking forward to leaving you a message for the holidays.”

Oh my fucking God. I want to pulverize his smug face. Bring him to within an inch of his life and pray that he stays breathing so he can live to see his demise. Two strong arms brace my shoulders, locking me in place. They can read my mind.

“It doesn’t kill me, Maddock. Nothing you do or say bothers me anymore. But I have to say, it does shock me that you would admit all that on national TV.” She looks

around, seeing all the cameras recording every detail of their conversation. “You never were a smart one, were you? You had to pay people to do your homework, which is the only reason you got yourself onto the team. Had you done it on your own merit, you never would’ve made it.” And another truth is revealed. God, she’s tearing his future to shreds, uncovering lie after lie. “I actually feel sorry for you, Maddock. Because someone so cruel and calculating must really be living a miserable life. I wish you the best. And I hope you’re happy with whatever hell you find yourself in.”

She turns on her heel to come to me and the reporters go nuts, wanting to question her, circling like vultures. Before they drag her into the frenzy, I scoop her up and turn to head toward the locker room. I give the guys a look and they move in, forming a wall at our backs and blocking the media from following after us. If the reporters want to talk to her, it’s not going to be until after she seeks legal advice to make sure she’s protected from any backlash. Besides, I’m the one who wants her attention right now. There’s something I need from her, and it’s a pressing matter.

As soon as I place her on her feet, she smiles. “Oh my God. Did you see the look on his face when he realized the cameras were recording? It was priceless.” She busts out laughing. If it weren’t for the tension running through my veins, I’d be laughing with her.

I close in, grabbing her by the neck and pulling her right to my face. She has no fucking idea how hard I am right now. My girl was a fucking warrior. She went straight into enemy territory and took no prisoners. She was phenomenal. And it was fucking hot to watch.

“You have no idea how fucking turned on I am right now, babe. I need you. Now.”

She cocks her brow, teasing my restraint. “Then what are you waiting for, Mr. Hunt?”

I sink down to my knees, jerking her around to face the lockers. I yank her leggings

down and land a spank on her plump ass, savoring her little squeal that echoes throughout the empty room. We've got a good twenty minutes before anyone comes in, which is plenty of time to make her scream.

"This ass is mine." I run my hands over her cheeks, giving her a squeeze. "Every inch of you belongs to me, Ms. Adams. Do you understand?"

I split her cheeks, earning another yelp, which turns into a groan as I rub my thumb over her puckered little taint. Brushing along her seam.

"Yes," she moans, melting right under my touch. "I understand." I love that she trusts me with her body. Giving into everything I want. And I always make sure she feels the pleasure all the way to her bones.

"Good girl. Now bend over and open up for me."

She bends forward and my mouth waters, desperate to feel her quivering on my tongue. I lean in, burying myself right between her crack. Kissing her puckered little diamond as if it were her mouth. She lets out a moan as her body melts against the lockers, feeling the weight of the pleasure already taking over. I start working her thoroughly, licking over her and easing her open. Making her squirm beneath my touch. I can tell she's building so I push in further, driving her to the brink.

"Travis!"

I know she's ready. I can feel her clenching up. I reach my hand between her legs and find the other spot that drives her crazy. Milking her forbidden little diamond, while I rub her clit with equal force. And she shatters in my arms. My name is screamed from her lungs, echoing like a thunderous applause from the stands. I gave her another first, and she shattered so sweetly for me. Letting down her walls so I could build them back up.

I ease up, giving her a reprieve as I place soft kisses over the spot. Working her down gently. She's breathing heavy. Her body still trying to settle, and I stand, pulling her leggings back into place.

"Wait. What about you?" she asks, still trying to catch her breath.

I sweep her hair off her sweaty face, tucking it behind her ear.

"This one was about you, babe. Me wanting to give you something no one ever has. But when we get home, I'm going to fuck you until you're begging for sleep."

"And now I'm ready to leave." She turns a smile on me. "Whose place are we staying at tonight?"

I lean forward, kissing her nose. "Mine. By the way, you're moving in with me."

"I am?" She looks shocked by the idea, but it's not like we don't stay at each other's places every night.

"You are. And before you ask, I've already cleared it with Luke and he's happy with the plan. So, we'll pack up your things this weekend."

Her eyes are shimmering with tears, and I pull her in closer, feeling the emotion swarm me. Finding her has been the biggest win of my lifetime.

"I never thought I'd find someone like you, Travis. I thought my broken soul would never be strong enough. But you've made me feel stronger than I ever did before."

"That's because you were never broken, babe. Fractured? Maybe. Hurting? Yes. But never broken. Your roots are too strong for that. Just like you said."

My beautiful fractured girl is stronger than I ever could've imagined. She's an inspiration. And now, I'm the lucky one who gets to call her mine.

EPILOGUE

Sophie

Ten Years Later

I stop in front of the shelf, my eyes drawn right in to the pretty light pink and purple cans with silver flowers on them. “Look,” I practically squeal, turning toward Travis. He comes walking over, tossing a few bags of chips into the cart then looks to where I’m pointing. The product design is eerily similar to what I designed back in undergrad. And it’s for an organic soda. Go figure.

“I seem to recall you telling me that pastels and flowers would never make for a good soda line, Mr. Hunt.” I cock my brow at him. “Looks to me like someone else thinks differently. Maybe my idea wasn’t so bad after all.”

A sexy smirk forms on his lips and my toes curl right up in my shoes.

“I didn’t think it was a bad idea, Mrs. Hunt.” He pulls me into his arms. “In fact, as I recall, you seem to have gotten a one hundred on that assignment.” I laugh. After I completed Mr. Maxwell’s extra credit, I did. “But I still stand by my opinion. I would never buy those.”

“Why not? They’re so pretty.” I shrug out of his arms and pick up a six-pack, taking a closer look at the packaging, reading the ingredients. “They’re better for you too. These aren’t going to burn the insides of your kidneys out.”

“I’m not going to serve frilly looking froufrou drinks to a bunch of football players, babe. Besides, I bet they taste like flowers.”

I think he’s wrong. I bet they taste amazing. Just like the real thing, but cleaner. I place the pack into the cart and reach for another flavor.

“Are you seriously getting them?”

“I think the wives will like them. Besides, these are better for the baby than that battery acid.”

He looks down at my small bump and smiles. “Okay. Whatever my pretty girl wants, she can have.”

I put one of each flavor into the cart and we keep strolling down the aisle, finishing up the rest of the shopping for the barbecue. It’s our turn to host the team and their wives today, so we need to be well stocked. Those guys can seriously pack down the food.

As soon as we get home, it’s time to prep. There’s a knock on the door, followed by Presley’s voice. “Hey, guys! All clear?”

I giggle at her remark. She thinks Travis and I go at it like rabbits. To her credit, she’s not wrong. But Travis is outside grilling up all the meat, while I get everything else ready.

“You’re safe!” I tease. “Come on in!”

“Where do you want these?” She holds out the trays of treats. I swear the baby kicks in delight, starving for some sugar. I need to crack open a soda, so I don’t dive into the sweets before the guests arrive.

“Just put them over there.” I point to the side counter. I go to grab one of the light pink cans and a glass of ice while she sets them down.

“Okay, so spill.” She turns, taking off her purse and making herself at home. “I’m dying to know what you wanted to tell me. Did you guys find out the sex of the baby? I hope you’re having a little girl like us so we can have playdates and tea parties and dress them like twins.”

I shake my head. “We’ve decided to wait to find out. But if we have a little boy, then we’ll just have to hope they become best friends like you and Kyler, and one day fall madly in love with each other.

“I like that idea even better.” She smiles. “Okay, so what’s the news then?”

I didn’t tell her what happened the other day because I needed to see her reaction in person.

“You know how I told you we’re trying to hire a new manager to run the marketing team. Well, you’re never going to believe who came in for the job.” Even I can’t get over the coincidence and how small of world we truly live in. “Remember Sarah Jeffers?”

Her eyes get big. “No Way!”

“Yep. As soon as I saw her, I told my VP I’d handle the interview myself.” Usually, I’m not called in until the final round, once my team has narrowed down the candidates, but I didn’t want to waste anyone’s time on this one.

“Oh my God! So, what did you do? And what did she do when she saw you?”

She was definitely shocked. Her eyes grew big and her cheeks turned bright red. Her friendly smile turned right down into a scowl, looking exactly like she did back in

school. And the funny thing is, it didn't trigger me. I didn't feel a sliver of the fear or pain. In fact, I was happy she was there. It reminded me that I still had some unfinished business to take care of.

"She walked into my office and told me that she thought it was best for someone else to handle her interview since we knew each other. She didn't want there to be any 'bias' with the decision." What she really wanted was to ensure I didn't ruin her chance of getting the job. Little did she know, I own the company. The girl should've done her research first.

"God, she's so ignorant. So, what did you tell her?"

"I told her that there was no way I'd have someone like her working for my company. And she pretty much went pale. It looked like she was going to piss herself over the fact that I owned the place."

"Oh, to be a fly on that wall." Presley shakes her head.

It was rather satisfying.

"She stomped out, telling me that she was going to get a job with my biggest rival and steal all of our clients." I smile at her idiocy. She has no clue the power I have. "I told her 'good luck,' then I made a few calls as soon as she left. She'll be hard pressed to find a job in the industry now. No one wants someone like that representing their clients."

Sarah should've thought about the consequences of her actions, but she never thought they'd come back to bite her in the butt. But she just got served her sentence. And I was the lucky one who got to deliver it.

"God, she's such a bitch. And go you!" Presley gives me a high five. "So, what did she look like? Please tell me she's frumpy and fat now."

“She is,” I state the facts. For all the times the girl made fun of my weight, Karma decided to pay her a visit. “She hasn’t weathered well with age.”

She bursts out laughing right as Kyler comes in from out back. “What’d I miss?”

Presley turns and repeats the story, while I work to finish up the platters. I open the soda, taking a sip to quench my thirst, but immediately rush to the sink to spit it out. The thing tastes like flowers with an after taste of dirt. Gross.

“Are you okay?” They both turn to me, looking concerned.

“The baby doesn’t like it.” I blame it on my morning sickness, but the drink is putrid. And as soon as everyone is distracted, I’m going to take all the frilly drinks out to the garage and toss them in the trash. There’s no way I’m serving those to our guests. Travis was right. But he’ll never let me live it down if I tell him so.

“Guess I stand corrected.” Travis follows me into the garage to grab another case of beer. The guys have been pounding them back. Thank goodness we got double the amount this time. “All your frilly sodas are gone already. Guess we’ll be switching to those from now on.”

God no! Those drinks are disgusting.

“I threw them out,” I reluctantly admit, but if I don’t say something, he’ll make sure our fridge is always stocked, and just looking at those cans will make me queasy. “They tasted like flowers and dirt.”

He drops his head back, busting out in laughter, and I can’t even help but giggle. But to my credit, the packaging had me thinking they’d be delicious which is why I bought them. So, the marketing worked. They just didn’t have a good product to back up the packaging.

“So, are you telling me I was right, Mrs. Hunt?”

“Maybe.” I smirk as he wraps me in his arms.

“I think you owe your TA an apology.”

The warmth runs right down to my toes, tingles breaking out across my skin. I already know what’s coming.

“We have guests, Mr. Hunt.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll be quick.” He drops to his knees, tucking his head up under my dress, and then it’s all a blur. His lips. His tongue. His huge fingers pumping into me. My body being hit with pleasure. Winding tighter and tighter. And I come. I come so hard he has to hold up my weight, so I don’t topple over. I swear I’m more sensitive now that I’m pregnant. But then again, Travis’s mouth is magic.

“That’s five points for being a good girl and coming fast for me.” He pulls my dress back in place and looks up with his glistening lips, smiling broadly. He’s still the sexiest guy I’ve ever met. And the most loving. Not a day goes by that I don’t pinch myself to make sure I’m not dreaming.

“And what about the other five points, Mr. Hunt?”

He stands back up, forcing me to crook my neck to look at him. And he’s still the tallest guy I know too.

“You’ll earn those later once our guests have left. I don’t want them hearing you scream as I make this little ass of yours come on my cock.” He squeezes my backside, and my body trembles. I cling to his shirt to steady myself. The anticipation is already trying to take me down. I wish the party was over now and that our guests would leave. I’m ready to be alone with my husband.

“Just give them each one of those sodas and they’ll all be running home to puke.”

He chuckles, and then leans in, nipping at my lip. Teasing me with a kiss that gets me riled again.

“I’m never going to regret giving you that B, pretty girl.” I don’t regret it either.

“Now, where are the sodas? It’s time for our friends to go.”