

The Grand Prize

A TIOS Tale

Part Two: Raising the Woof

“Hey, it’s Conner, right?” said the girl settling into the desk on his right. *The girl*, not that he didn’t know her name. He’d known Maggie Bray since forever, and besides, he’d made editor-in-chief in large part because he made it his business to know his classmates. It was only that he hadn’t needed to use her name, to her face, since their leaf scrapbook partner project in Mrs. Chirila’s class in fourth grade. The last time, that is, discounting roll call during his brief stint as a substitute teacher.

The memory of the lithe brunette naked, legs crossed, ample breasts peeking out behind a curtain of warm brown hair, rushed to his mind all too readily. That she was wearing overalls cut off into shorts with her bulging sports bra very visible at the sides only made it harder to remember she’d said something to him a moment ago, and was now looking increasingly worried that he hadn’t responded. He should respond. Why was she talking to him? Really pretty. Stop thinking about that! Naked boobs. *Reply, stupid!*

“Um, yeah. Conner. Is my name. Maggie.”

Her bright smile returned. “You Conner, me Maggie,” she said with a little giggle. Around them, peers were taking their seats. There were no assigned seats in Mr. Oliveri’s class, but still, people generally took the same ones every day. John Lee looked puzzled at having his usual spot usurped, but shrugged it off. Pretty girls could steal seats.

“I’m only joshing ya. Didn’t mean to sneak up on you like that. I was only teasing since we don’t talk as often as we used to, Conner.” They used to talk? “Right, so... Look. This is a little embarrassing, but whatever. So you know how my parents run Raise the Woof?”

Conner blinked. “Uh, no?”

“Oh. Well they do. You know where it is? The strip mall over on Quarry Road, by Joann Fabrics?”

“Um, kinda, I think, yeah.” He remembered getting a chuckle out of the pet store’s name at some point, though he’d had no idea who owned it until this moment.

“Well they’ve been trying to do kind of an ad campaign thing, and so I thought, why not do an ad in the yearbook? And somebody told me that was kind of your thing, so I figured maybe... you know. We could help each other.”

“You want an ad?” Suddenly, at the mention of yearbook, his brain kicked into gear. Sudden approaches by pretty girls were unusual, but yearbook questions? Forget

about it. “Were they thinking full page spread, half page, something smaller? I don’t have a pricing sheet on me, but I know what the rates are if you wanna write them down. We do still have a few inset spaces for sale, but—”

Maggie laughed, putting a hand over his to quiet him. “Look at you, Mr. Salesman. Me, I don’t really know anything about all that stuff. Or even how to design an ad. Say, maybe that’s a good starting off point. Do you think maybe you and I could put our heads together on it?”

Conner’s professional smile shined through. “Sure. It’s really pretty easy. All we’d really need is a size and your logo. If you want to customize it, fine, but we do a lot of the small scale stuff in-house. I can swing by after school and drop off the sheet with your folks. It’s not too far out of my way home.”

Why had she not removed her hand? Why was her thumb moving like that? She couldn’t be... stroking his hand, could she?

“Um, actually, I was sort of thinking maybe I could spearhead this thing? You know, take some of the load off for them. But since I’m not really experienced with this, maybe you and I could, I dunno, meet up sometime and work together on it?”

Her fingernail grazed back and forth on his wrist. “Oh. Sure, I guess we could. I’d need them to sign off on it, but we could sketch out a mock-up for them. I can probably get you a pass seventh period, if you want.”

“You know, why don’t you stop by the store? My sister and me cover it after school some days, and you and I could just... go in the office and... talk.” Right then, by what had to be coincidence, she crossed her legs in his direction, her foot gently coming to rest against his calf. Maybe she just didn’t notice? No, her foot was moving, rubbing. She had to notice. Didn’t she? Did girls notice things like that?

“Oh. Um... yeah. I guess we could, um, do that. If that’s OK with your parents.” Years of going unnoticed by girls like Maggie had rendered him incapable of interpreting all this as anything but him being an unbelievable idiot for daring to imagine she might actually be flirting with him. She was just affectionate. And wanted hands-on attention. Away from school. From him.

“They won’t even be there. It’d just be us.” She leaned in slightly. Was she wearing perfume? It had to be. Girls didn’t smell that good on their own, did they? “Do you have any pets?”

Conner shook his head. “My mom’s allergic.”

“Oh, that’s too bad. You strike me as a cat guy. Do you like kitties, Conner?”

“Uh, they’re fine, I suppose. I haven’t really, I dunno, known any, really.” Where was Mr. Oliveri? Why was her hand *still* on his? Was that something normal and he was just too dumb to know about it? It couldn’t be, could it?

“I’ll introduce you to mine. She’s *so* friendly. You’re going to *love* her.” She leaned in closer, then closer, then *oh my god was she going to kiss him?!*, then went past his

lips and whispered his ear, somehow every bit as intimate as a kiss. “Though I should warn you, once somebody pets her, she just falls in love. My kitty clamps down and never ever lets you let her go.”

Suddenly, somehow, his ear lobe was between her lips. Maggie gave it a gentle nip, then sat back up. Before Conner could say anything – or simply faint – again – their teacher clapped twice at the front of the room. “All right, gang, open ‘em up to page 588...” Like that, Maggie was facing forward and opening her book and not at all looking like someone who had just whispered suggestively in his ear before turning him rock hard in a room full of classmates.

The rest of the period, Maggie didn’t look at him. Almost conspicuously so. Had he imagined it? It had taken him years to wear down Heather, the devil’s own luck to cross paths with Amanda, and raw magic for Kristy.

What on earth could he have done to make sweet, sexy Maggie Bray take note?

Conner bargained with himself all period long. He should say no. He had more than enough girls in his life as it was. He’d politely say no. Only, how? There was no polite way to turn down someone who sucked on your ear before class. Maybe he could simply play it off like nothing happened, insist on working out the ad with her mom and dad. Was there even an ad? Best to be sure. He’d still have to go to the pet store, though. Hopefully that didn’t make things awkward for Maggie. Her legs looked so fine in those cutoffs. He should apologize. He must have misled her somehow, given the wrong impression. He should apologize. Only it would be even more awkward to apologize in class, where someone might overhear and misunderstand. He could show up at the pet store, like she asked, apologize in person. That was the gentlemanly thing to do. Yes. Just show up, meet with her in her parents’ business office, pet her kitty, and absolutely refuse to let it fall in love with him. Clamp down on him.

“So I’ll see you after school, right Conner?”

“Um, sure!” People were packing up their things, filing out the door. “Wait, I mean–”

“Great! Muah, you’re the best!”

As the room emptied, Conner hurriedly gathered his books and made for the door. He had to catch up with her. He had way too good of a thing going, and way too *complex* of a thing going, to risk–

THUD.

As he tore around the corner, he ran face-first into none other than Sydney Genovese. She was also in Mr. Oliveri’s fourth period, and although he’d lost many a stray minute admiring the comely blonde cheerleader this year, today, he’d forgotten she was there. At least until now, as she helped pick him up off the floor.

Conner tried to pretend he hadn't been able to see right up her dress from down there. And that he didn't notice she wasn't wearing panties. She must not have realized how she was standing.

"You OK?" the slender blonde asked with a wry grin, plainly pleased with herself for being the one to keep her feet. Conner Fishers, knocked down by a hundred and twenty pound girl.

"Oh crap, Sydney. Yeah! I'm so sorry. I wasn't looking, and... are you OK?"

"I'm fine, dude." She patted his arm.

"Good, good." This being the longest interaction he'd ever had with Sydney, he flashed an apologetic smile and tried to squeeze past her to head off to lunch. To his surprise, she fell in beside him.

"So, not that it's my business, but I couldn't help seeing you chatting up Maggie before class," she began.

"Huh? No no! That was just about an ad for her parents' pet store. I wasn't... We're not..." If this turned into a rumor, and it got back to Amanda or Heather...!

(Kristy would doubtless congratulate him.)

Sydney giggled away his protestation. "Hey, it's OK, man! Who could blame you, right? She's a looker. Heck, I'm a hundred percent into dudes and even I notice a dish like that. Dude," she added almost pointedly, though he sure didn't get her point.

"I, um, I'm not into Maggie. Why, did someone tell you I was? Because I'm not," he insisted. He picked up his speed towards his fourth period class, but she kept pace effortlessly.

"Yeah? Sorry, and maybe it's none of my business, but tell that to that huge boner you were trying to hide."

"What?!" he stopped, but that only let her get past him and position herself right in his path. "I didn't have..." He glanced around, dropping his voice to a hiss. "I didn't have a *boner!*"

"It's nothing to be embarrassed of, dude. I mean, I'm a cheerleader. I've seen my share of boys hiding boners around me. You don't have to feel weird about it."

"I wasn't! I mean, I didn't!"

Sydney merely shrugged. "Suit yourself, but I was looking, and if that bulge is you soft, I almost feel bad for your girlfriend." She cocked her head to the side. "Unless... I mean, do you, you know, have a girlfriend?"

"No," he said. He had three, actually, though Heather wanted to pretend it was all casual, and Amanda preferred to keep it between the two of them. (As for Kristy, they'd agreed it was for the best if she didn't get fired and go to prison.)

"Oh, cool!" she answered brightly, bouncing on her heels. "Though... if you're thinking of going out with Maggie Bray, I didn't want you to just blunder into that nightmare unawares, ya know? As a friend."

They were friends? Wait, also, “Nightmare?” Conner’s head snapped back. Maggie Bray was assuredly the girl of more than a few of his classmates’ dreams, he was sure. Sweet as honey, almost dangerously approachable for a girl so attractive. At least until last period.

“Yeah. You don’t think they call her Slaggie Bray for nothing, do you? All the Way Bray? That one’s from back in like freshman year, when she was sleeping her way through the wrestling team, but sometimes stuff just sticks, ya know?”

“They do?”

Sydney nodded sagely. “Yeah, it was this whole big thing. When the team started having this big chlamydia outbreak they couldn’t figure out why for a while? So then when Coach Suplee caught her, ahem, practicing a few takedowns, if ya know what I mean, with Tubby Teddy Thompson, he had to ban her from practices and meets. It was this whole big thing.”

“No freaking way! Maggie wouldn’t... with the whole wrestling team...!”

“I’m sure it wasn’t the *whole* team, ya goober! Probably just the JV, since the varsity jocks already have girlfriends. Girls like me. “The whole team!” Sydney laughed, though, and gave him a playful shove, but then her eyes widened. “Wow, you’re strong! Do you work out?”

“Um, I do push-ups, sometimes...” Not any time in the past month, he was pretty sure. Lots of sex, though, which was a workout of sorts. Nothing he could admit out loud though.

“I bet you do. Say, speaking of, would you maybe wanna work out with me sometime? I could always use a spotter, and maybe we could teach each other a few things.”

“Uh, sure.” Wait, what? Had he just agreed to... what?!

“Awesome. How’s this afternoon? We have a home gym at, um, at home obviously,” she giggled, rolling her eyes at herself. “That way we don’t have to wait in line or deal with other people or anything. Wait by the south athletics exist and I’ll... give you a ride.”

Had he imagined that pause, that emphasis? Or were two conversations with pretty girls enough to turn his brain into oatmeal?

Either way, some warning instinct was beginning to kick in. “Sorry, I sort of promised Maggie I’d help her with that ad thing after school. Nothing else, though. Just an ad. Maybe some other time.”

“If you say so. And look, not to tell you your business, but maybe be careful who sees you talking to her, yeah? Ever since she got caught posting all that racist stuff online last fall, there’s some people who are pretty uptight.”

“She posted *what*?” Did he really know that little about Maggie? Man, he really was behind the times in gossip!

“It’s nothing. But hey, let me get your number, we’ll text. Figure out a time. OK?”

“Oh. I guess, yeah. I mean, sure. Sure.” She snatched her phone out of her purse and copied down his number into her contacts as he recited it.

“Thanks!” she chirped, patting his cheek. Why was Sydney Genovese touching his cheek? “All right, guess I’ll see you around soon.” This time he was sure the pause was real. She even took a half-step closer, voice lowering. “Dude.”

He was almost to the cafeteria when his phone buzzed. Unknown number.

btw its cool you looked up my dress and I don't care that you saw my pussy. nothing you haven't seen already right?

He was still re-reading that when a second message arrived. *sometimes I like to work out au natural anyways, so it's a good start on our workout date. ;)*

Conner added the number to his contacts, then promptly deleted the message before one of his girlfriends could see it.

From Kirsten's vantage point at her lunch table, it was plain from the look on Owen's face that he didn't believe Conner's story, the one he thought he was sharing too softly to be overheard. Good. She didn't believe it either, but moreover, she didn't *want* to believe it. If there was one thing Kirsten Vaughan was sure of, it was that your reality was what you made it. There were no such things as victims.

She had no idea how that priss Maggie, who still blushed sometimes during partner tongue warmups, or that slutbag Sydney, probably the only girl in sex ed who hadn't learned a new position, had found out she was into Conner Fishers. That fucking dolt Olivia, no doubt, flapping her stupid lips again. Kirsten would put her in her place for it. Again.

Kirsten didn't even remember telling Olivia, honestly, but it was the only explanation for the others' sudden interest. A tale as old as time. Girl meets boy. Girl falls for boy. Way hotter girl also falls for boy. Hotter girl makes him forget whatsherface. Jealous trolls try to steal what she'd already rightfully stolen.

Not that she'd stolen him. Not yet.

This could be tricky, after all. She was in a semi-committed relationship with Conner's best friend, a relationship that held way too much cultural collateral to consider abandoning. On top of that, she was also having the best sex of her life with Conner's step-sister Angelica.

Still, tricky didn't mean impossible. One simply had to know how to manage one's assets.

"Would you like to sit with us, Conner?" she asked, smiling sweetly. It was the smile she used on her grandparents when they were visiting for her birthday, right before Grandpa reached for the checkbook.

Owen scrunched up his face. "Um, what? You said class mixing in the cafeteria was bad for your brand."

Kirsten laughed indulgently. "Owen, you goober, if you understood my 'brand' at all you'd realize I was kidding." Inwardly, she pictured his head mounted on a pike in her back yard. "You're so funny. As if! Have a seat, Conner. Please."

No. Front yard. *Don't you dare fuck this up for me.*

Kirsten brushed Olivia aside and patted the spot beside her. She'd picked a small table today deliberately, only big enough for the four of them. (Technically it seated six, but what was she supposed to do, leave her purse on the floor like a dog? And you always needed at least one vacant seat so you could tell the hopefuls it was saved for someone else.) Hayleigh and the rest were on the far side of the cafeteria, well out of eavesdropping range. Ergo if they saw her sitting with a nobody like Conner Fishers – a handsome, very appealing nobody, but still – she could simply say she was being a good girlfriend, doing a charitable deed.

“Oh. You’re sure?” Conner looked nervous. Why hadn’t she ever been nicer to him? Every so often, her carefully crafted image came to bite her in her exquisitely sculpted butt.

“Of course I’m sure. Come on, take a load off.” She gestured again. “Olivia, move your purse out of his way, for gosh sake.”

Owen took his place on her right, Conner on her left between her and Olivia's new seat. Kirsten kicked Olivia’s purse aside to make space for him. “You know, I didn’t get a chance to tell you, but I thought you looked so handsome at prom. I told Owen to tell you, but I know how he is with delivering messages.” She patted both of their thighs chummily. Owen looked baffled, but she didn’t let that put her off her game. “Didn’t I, Olivia?”

“We both did, actually,” Olivia replied, nodding earnestly. “Like, I know Miss C is a teacher or whatever, but I gotta say, there were more than a couple jealous ladies watching you two get your groove on on the dance floor.”

The spectacle of one of their teachers stripping to her underwear and grinding like a total skank on one of her students had not actually risen to the level of meriting Kirsten’s attention, but in hindsight, she should have paid more attention. She’d never really found that much appealing in the male form, but Conner’s? Somehow, he did it for her. Big-time. More than any woman ever had, even Angelica. Maybe there was something feminine in his delicate features. She couldn’t put her finger on it, but ever since her aborted climax in sex ed this morning, she hadn’t been able to put the boy out of her head. Just sitting next to him like this was making her the slightest bit light-headed.

“You saw that, huh?” he said, cheeks coloring slightly. Why was he embarrassed to have been seen dancing with a teacher? It was lame, but not *that* lame. Like she and Hayleigh had told Jordan the other day when he’d said something stupid about swapping dates, nobody cared who anybody danced with. He’d laughed weird and stuff when she’d said it, but that was Jordan for you, the only creep creepy enough to teach that new-age sex ed class.

“Sure we did. Who were you actually there with? Or were you going stag? Conner Fishers, on the prowl for babes?” Kirsten laughed her second-most ingratiating laugh. No need to oversell it.

Owen answered for his now fully blushing friend. “He went as a group with Heather and Amanda Carpenter.”

“Who’s Heather Carpenter?” asked a puzzled Olivia.

Kirsten let her mask slip a moment to show a measure of her disdain for her airheaded stooge. “Heather Blake, dummy.”

“But he said—”

Kirsten continued over her; Olivia fell dutifully silent almost immediately. “How fun! A little triple friend date, huh?”

Conner shrugged uncomfortably. “Yeah. We, um, had a good time. How about you two? We sort of left early, so I didn’t get a chance to see everybody.”

“Oh! My outfit was just the worst, but my hair... you know what? I have pictures. Here, lemme just...” Her phone slid into her outthrust hand as Olivia recognized her cue. Kirsten leaned in towards Conner as she brought up her photo gallery. It was nothing especially interesting, just her and Owen and some of their friends.

“I think your dress looks really nice,” Conner assured her as she showed him the photo of Kirsten, Olivia, Angelica and Hayleigh with their corsages freshly applied. They’d taken it on Olivia’s deck, for the lighting. The photo wasn’t great – blame idiot Olivia’s idiot dad – but the dress had been killer. It was simply gauche to proclaim as such – always better for people to arrive at the conclusion in contravention of your own stated opinion.

“Aw, thanks. Then here we are in the limo...” This one showed four dutifully half-smiling boys in the background. In the foreground, Olivia’s dress was peeled down to her waist, Angelica’s already pooled on the floor leaving her in only her bra and panties on her bench, and up close was Hayleigh, bent over in a thong as she removed her own. Conner looked a bit embarrassed as she narrated. Small wonder. Owen wasn’t even trying to look like he was having a good time. It was so awkward.

Moreover, it was such an embarrassment that this ass-backwards joke of an institution had imposed that no-dress code. (Oh! Had it been weird for him to see his stepsister in her underwear? Another casualty of stupid rules run amok.) Anyway, as for Kirsten, she would have looked amazing. Instead...

“And here’s corsages round two.” Here were the girls and their dates standing in front of the limo. Hayleigh, Olivia and Stacy were in bras and panties, the latter two of them strapless and the former a thong. Flower arrangements were now pinned to their cups. Those strapless bras had really struggled with the added weight and imbalance. They’d been struggling to keep them up all night.

Kirsten, however, had planned to go sans bra for the evening. It had been a tight dress with its own lift, own squeeze, so she’d thought a little jiggle would make it pop. Instead, there she was in nothing but a pair of royal blue panties, fake diamonds studding the thin straps over either hip. Her corsage was pinned to the front of her panties, a red rose on a blue field. Not as good a look as her dress, but it was still pretty solid under the circumstances.

She flipped through a few more that were closeups of just her. Man, her nipples had been almost as hard as those fake diamonds. Breezy night. They were more under control for the pictures inside the dance, dozens of shots of her and her friends posing to show how much more fun they were having than everyone else. She grumbled about

how sweaty her tits had gotten during some of the faster songs, fawned over how amazing her date was for the pictures of her grinding her barely concealed ass on him, teased Olivia for how goofy she looked for the ones of the two of them close-up, Olivia's corsage buried in a mountain of Kirsten's perfect copper-toned tits.

The pretense for proximity continued, Conner occasionally nibbling at his lunch with the arm she didn't have pinned in place with her breasts. The longer she went, the more boldly she leaned into him. Gradualness was the key. She couldn't just ram her tits in his face, no matter how badly she wanted to. Jesus, there she went with the nipple hardons again. She adjusted herself, pressing one against his forearm, just to remind him that the stunning vision of sexuality on his right had nipples. Nipples that were hard. Nipples that would be touching him if not for her stupid top.

Play it straight. Be patient. He would touch them soon enough.

At the end of the reel was a little surprise she'd prepped for this exact circumstance. The segue to prom photos had happened organically, but she'd been prepared to broach the subject herself if needs be. Flipping through the photos, Kirsten "accidentally" swiped to a shot of her in a bathroom stall right before lunch. It featured her in the clothes she was presently wearing, or at least most of them. She had her top lifted up over her chest to show off the incredibly sexy bra she'd had Olivia ditch fourth period to go pick up from her house for her. Incredible lift, not that she needed much; incredible cleavage, not that her natural state was insufficient; incredibly low-cut to let her nipples come into view, not that they weren't every bit as hard right now pressed against the boy of her dreams.

"Oh wait, that's not... what is... oh my gosh!" Kirsten gaped, pretending shell-shocked just long enough to give Conner a tantalizing look while still giving Owen the impression she was genuinely embarrassed at the faux faux pas. She snatched her phone back hastily. "I'm so sorry, that was so embarrassing! That was supposed to be a little present for Owen – I completely forgot that was in there!"

Conner looked less scandalized than she'd expected, though perhaps that was simply because he'd been admiring it too automatically to remember to look shocked. Opposite Conner, Owen was preening like a peacock. Typical man. He'd probably walk her around naked on a leash to show her off if she let him.

"Pretend you didn't see that, and *please* don't tell anybody. You know how girls are at this school. You do anything the least bit sexual and they act like you're some total ho."

"Don't worry." Conner chuckled nervously. "Pretty sure nobody would believe those pictures existed if I told them anyway."

"Yeah. Stupid social media restrictions won't even let me upload most of the prom pics, so it's just you and me." With an effort of will, she managed to pull her body away from Conner's. Soon enough, he'd feel her again. She knew full well he'd seen way

more than in those pictures when he'd subbed for Mr. Lyons, but she wasn't about to bring it up outside of class. What happened in sex ed stayed in sex ed, after all. "Thanks. Owen, you have the nicest friends. Conner, if you want to sit with us more often, I think that would be really nice."

"Oh. Thanks, Kirsten. That's... surprisingly nice of you."

"Surprising?" She cocked her head to the side. "Why is that surprising? I can be very nice. Can't I, babe?"

"So nice, babe," Owen replied automatically, though she expected his answer was directed to the trollop Kirsten from the selfie. Ugh, in a *bathroom stall*! As if she'd ever send out a skanky selfie with such common atmosphere! Especially for such an important occasion as seducing her first ever male fantasy. When she'd seen the way Sydney Genovese was throwing herself at him in the hallway, though, she'd had to act fast. For the first time in her life, she was so turned on by a boy that he was making her make mistakes. Is this what her friends were always complaining about?

"You know, speaking of, we've been dating for such a long while now for me not to have gotten to know Owen's friends better. We're past due. What do you say, Conner? Is it time to expand the circle?" This one called for her school pictures smile, the one she'd never use organically but was good in official records to remind people how much prettier she could look than them when she felt like it. She could feel those bright blue eyes of hers sparkling in the fluorescent lights.

"You mean... like, hang out? The three of us?"

Damnit! Why hadn't she thrown in a *you and me* to make it clear that of course she hadn't meant all three of them! She couldn't very well seduce Conner with her boyfriend in the room! Why did he make her so flustered? Ugh, what would it even feel like to have a cock inside her when it was attached to someone she was actually attracted to? "Of course! Doesn't that sound fun, babe? How about the three of us, tonight, my place, movie night. Doesn't that sound fun?"

It sounded stressful as hell, in fact, but she was already making adjustments to the proposal in her head. This could still work. "Oh. I, um, I have... something... after school. Plus I'm supposed to work on my rough draft for Brit lit tonight..."

"Come on, are you going to make me beg? 'Cause I will if I have to. *Please* come hang out with us tonight?" Kirsten batted her eyelashes. It was a bruise to her pride, but from the way he couldn't resist the briefest of glances at her cleavage and the bra he could now picture underneath, it would be a haymaker to his resistance. Even if his best friend was there, any boy with descended testicles would accept just for the chance to add some footage to his spank bank.

"Um, sure. If it's cool with you, Owen." *YES!* She barely stopped herself from squealing in delight. As she hoped Conner would soon make her.

"Why wouldn't it be cool with me?"

Attaboy, babe. Play cool. “Then sure, Kirsten. That... sounds fun.”

“Of course it will be fun.” She patted his chest. Fuck, how she wanted to claw that dorky shirt right off his sumptuous, scrawny body. Now, only one last bit of business to tackle... “Oh, and hey. Unrelated, and it’s none of my business, but if we’re gonna be friends, I can’t pretend I didn’t overhear you two talking right then.”

Conner grimaced. “Oh, shoot. I’m sorry – I didn’t mean to be spreading gossip or anything.”

“No, no, your secret’s totally safe with me.” A shoulder squeeze this time. She really needed to stop touching him before Owen got suspicious. Physical affection was not her norm at all. It was hard to make herself stop, though. “So you know, there’s, well, sort of a rumor going around about you.”

“There is?” said Conner, Owen and Olivia in unison, respectively anxious, shocked, and intrigued. Conner tried to cover it with a hasty swig from his milk carton.

“Yeah, it’s sort of about you and Hayleigh. You know Hayleigh, right?”

He suddenly coughed up a mouthful of milk, spraying across the table. Some of it got on Olivia, who hastily began patting his back until he stopped. “Oh gosh, I’m so sorry. Um, anyway, yeah. We’re... friends.”

Kirsten shook her head. He must be thinking of Hefty Hailey. Man, did he deserve better than that skinny pinched-off she-troll. Kirsten meant to see to it that he got it. “No, I mean Hayleigh McKnight.” Hayleigh, who in fact hated Conner’s guts ever since that weirdness came out last semester where he’d been creeping on her yearbook picture in class. Never mind that; she simply had to tell the story in a way that he’d never check with her to find out. “Anyway, she saw you dancing at prom, and I guess she said something about how she thought you looked really cute, and... ugh, it’s sort of become this whole thing.”

“What kind of thing?” asked Owen, flabbergasted. “You didn’t tell me anything about this.”

“Because I didn’t want to freak you out. It’s no big deal. It’s just that Jayce – you know her boyfriend, Jayce Deacons, all-state football player? – he got all jealous about it and he can be so possessive and just *ugh*. His temper is so awful. Last year he punched a hole through a car windshield because he thought he saw Hayleigh checking a guy out but it turns out it was empty and he was only seeing his own reflection.”

Conner’s eyes widened. Not approaching Hayleigh: *check*. “Anyway, that’s neither here nor there. All I meant is that you know how high school girls are. A queen bee like Hayleigh says she thinks you’re cute, and suddenly all the little wannabees are popping out of their hive to try to cuck their queen.”

“I... I’m not sure I understand.”

“Those girls, Maggie and Sydney? They’re flirting because they think they can steal you from Hayleigh or whatever. Totally ridiculous, I know, but that’s where they’re

at. So immature, right? They think they'll get a little carnal knowledge, then blab it all over school to make Hayleigh jealous. Probably just to see if they can make her break up with Jayce to put him back on the market." She turned to Olivia. "Can you even imagine how furious he'd be?"

"Oh my gosh, *so* furious. He'd totally *kill* you."

Overdoing it, but point made. Kirsten granted her a curt nod.

Conner nodded slowly. Holy shit, some of the weakest, least-sourced bullshit in her career, and he was buying it. He really didn't know the first thing about hot popular girls. Putty in her hands. Putty that she couldn't wait to toss in the furnace and harden forever. "Thanks. I think. I'll make sure I give them a wide berth."

Kirsten threw an arm around his shoulder. Fuck, his *smell*. For the first time in her life she saw some small allure in burying her face in a boy's crotch. All she had to do was get her boyfriend out of the way, and then it was a simple divide and conquer job. This would hardly be the first friendship she'd demolished. Just follow the playbook, run up the score. Soon, she'd have the most sought-after boy in school as her boyfriend, the most fuckable boy she'd ever laid eyes on as her fuck buddy, and his stepsister quietly fulfilling all those annoying little needs that a boy never could.

It would be perfect.

"See? Look at us, already friends!"

The four went their separate ways after the lunch bell to go to fifth period. Olivia watched Conner's ass as he strode away, sighing longingly. The things she would do to that ass, if she could.

Kirsten was so smart. Olivia didn't even know what game she was playing, but there was obviously *something*. She didn't waste words on people she thought were losers. People like Conner. Was she buttering up Owen for something? Hard to imagine what – he was already doing whatever she wanted. Olivia couldn't make sense of it. Kirsten barely tolerated high school boys, so to see her making up all that ridiculous bullshit about Hayleigh... it was some kind of strategy, only she had no idea what.

Well, no. She had one idea.

Olivia didn't confide in Kirsten as a matter of survival. Kirsten wielded secrets like master chefs used their knives. Ultra-sharp, too fast for the eyes to track, and yet the only meat they never cut was their owner's. Still, they'd gotten pretty drunk after prom. Could she have told her how she felt about Conner? She hadn't felt this way very long, she was pretty sure, but lately, it was like that boy was all she could think about. Ever since Amanda Blake and Heather Carpenter – or was it the other way around? that moment of confusion had proven sticky – had brought him up this morning, it was like he was all she could think about. She must have said something to Kirsten, and now for once in her life, her friend was doing her a favor out of the goodness of her heart.

It had to be. What else *could* it be? Maybe all these years of being her friend, signal boosting her lies, reinforcing her place on the throne, being her fall girl... it was all finally paying off. She was going to deliver Conner to Olivia's lap. It was the sweetest thing Kirsten had ever done.

And it really pissed her off.

Olivia Snyder was no Kirsten Vaughan. There was nobody at Northside who was hotter, nobody colder. She had proven herself a brutally efficient leader of Olivia's social circle, all of their statuses elevated by her affiliation. Olivia lived in fear and awe of her; the balance of the two vacillated day to day.

That said...

Olivia was *hot*. The fact that it was all but universally agreed that Kirsten was hotter was because Kirsten had a goon squad to enforce her messaging. If their clique got together tomorrow and publicly agreed that Hayleigh was the Official Hottest Hottie™, suddenly sex characteristics like stringy hair and doughy waists and blemished freckled skin would be the sex symbols around campus.

Hotness, after all, was relative.

For all she knew, maybe Conner liked brunettes. Maybe he liked wavy hair instead of straight. Maybe he preferred girls who were long-legged and flexible, with slender necks and thick lips, soft green eyes and softer skin. Girls with just enough tit for cleavage without distracting, girls who laughed at whatever boys said because they

didn't understand it and it was easier to laugh than say that, girls whose pussies did the lion's share of their thinking.

Girls like her.

She didn't need Kirsten to take pity on her, throw her bitch a bone. She could do this herself.

"Conner!"

She had to run to catch up with him. The boy was plainly perplexed as he turned around, no doubt expecting anyone in school but Olivia Snyder to be chasing after him.

"Olivia? Did I forget my keys at the table or something?"

She giggled. What did that even mean? "No, silly. I wanted to talk to you." She wanted a lot more than to talk to him, but this wasn't sex ed where you just ripped off clothes, spread legs and wait for a boy to do whatever he wanted to you. This was the sucky-ass real world. You had to *work* toward that.

"Oh. Um, I have class down in the B wing this period, so... maybe later?" He made a sympathetic face.

"I'll come with! I have a class down there, too." Her class there was first period, but whatever. Like she cared if she was late to class if it was for a worthy cause like a Conner-full of cunt. No. Other way around.

She fell in beside him, a broad smile gleaming beneath vacuous eyes. It was the expression she was best known for, save perhaps for mirroring whichever one Kirsten was wearing. "So, um, about that stuff at lunch..."

"Yeah?" He glanced around, as if nervous to be seen with her. It would probably be weird for him. After all, Kirsten was clear that girls of their status were not to associate with their lessers in public spaces. Private friendships could be permitted, but the last thing her bestie wanted was to make losers feel like girls of her calibre could be approached by any loser in the halls. It was really mean, but she sorta got it sometimes.

"That was weird, yeah? All that stuff Kirsten said?"

"Which stuff?" Conner asked. "Wanting to hang out with me, or the stuff about Hayleigh and Jayce?"

"Like, all of it?" She shrugged. Analysis was not her forte.

They arrived at his locker, where he hastily grabbed his books. "Yeah, sorta. Not that I minded. She seemed like she was only trying to be friendly. In her way."

"Right? She's hella complex." Most things were hella complex to Olivia, but Kirsten was certainly no exception. "Look, I think she's trying to do me a favor."

"Do you a favor? How do you mean?" he asked as they hurried down the central corridor.

She gave herself a minute to summon her courage. What she was about to do was insanely risky, and had the potential to destroy her if Kirsten found out about it and decided to take offense. Even if Kirsten's plan was to pawn Conner off on her as a huge

huge favor, screwing up that plan by snaring him herself could still set her off. It probably would, knowing Kirsten, though it was hard to say with no official knowledge of what her plan really was. Why had she wanted that slutty bra this morning, and why had she shown it to Conner like that? Olivia didn't believe for a second that it was an accident. Still, her boyfriend was practically a legend; he could get any girl he wanted, and he'd picked Kirsten. She obviously wouldn't trade that for someone like Conner. It was super confusing.

"Olivia?"

Oh, right. She took a deep breath. "OK, so like, this is really embarrassing, but... Hayleigh doesn't like you. She didn't actually say those things. Kirsten said she did because there's a *different* girl we know who's super into you. The stuff about Sydney and Maggie, that's probably true about them being jelly, but not of Hayleigh. I think Kirsten was trying to cover for this other girl, the one who thinks you're really really cute. And I think that's why she wants to hang out with you, so she can do her friend a favor and butter you up for her, so you'll ask her out, because she's been too shy to do it."

Conner suddenly stopped, but then a boy twice his size who Olivia had noticed following close on their heels – probably so he could admire Olivia's ass in these leggings – collided with him, knocking him to the ground. At least the boy helped him back up. Olivia escorted him to the side of the hall, out of the flow of traffic, and smoothed back his hair consolingly. It was so soft. He was so soft. She should fuck him.

"I'm sorry, you were saying... one of your friends has a crush on me?"

She nodded. "Yuh, huh."

Conner sighed. "Look, Olivia, I was nervous to get sucked into whatever game Kirsten's concocting, and I'm already regretting it. Whatever you're selling, I'm not buying. I'm perfectly happy being single, and even happier not having the crap kicked out of me by Jayce Deacons. So please, just leave me—"

"It's me!" Olivia blurted. A few heads turned, but she didn't care. "I like you. I *really* like you. Like, a *lot*." She smiled hopefully. *Oh please don't say no. Or better yet, say yes and then say we can find a janitor closet or something and fuck for the rest of the day.*

"Wait, you're saying... *you* have a crush on *me*?"

She nodded vigorously. "A big one. Conner, I'm just... I don't even know. I just like you so freaking much that I can't help myself and this is super duper embarrassing, and I wish it wasn't happening in the middle of the hallway, but if you say yes and go out with me because Kirsten tricked you into it instead of because I asked you to, I'm going to feel like such a freaking loser and I don't want us to start things off like that. You know?"

"I..." His eyes narrowed. "You know, I think I do know."

“So... what do you think? Can we, like, give it a try? I know we can’t talk about certain stuff outside of certain places, but I swear, I am really, *really* good at certain stuff. Like, *so* good. Just... say yes. Please?”

Conner stroked his chin deliberately as her body wilted on account of how her heart had stopped in her chest. “I tell you what. Let me think about it, and I’ll get back to you, OK?”

Oh no. Oh god no. She’d fucked it up. She’d come on too strong! Or not strong enough? She tried to use what she’d learned in sex ed. “I was trying to say you can have sex with me, and that I’m a super good lay! Even better than Kirsten!” she explained. Lord, she hoped he never told Kirsten she said that. She *was* getting a better grade in sex ed though.

“I... yep, understood that,” he replied, glancing around sheepishly. So too strong after all. “I’d consider myself lucky to take you up on that. You’re very pretty. Prettier even than Kirsten, maybe. OK? There’s just a lot going on right now, and I have to think. I promise, it won’t take long. Is that all right?”

Conner Fishers had said she might be prettier than Kirsten Vaughan. It was the hottest thing she’d ever heard.

She threw herself at him.

His tongue tasted exactly like she’d thought it would. Conner-flavored. Perfect. She wrapped her arms around him, held his face to hers. She waited for the feel of his hands on her, cradling her own head, or squeezing her ass. Finger her pussy. *TOUCH ME!* she screamed silently. She protected his head as their momentum carried them into a row of lockers, her body pressed hard against his. Her pussy straddled his leg, grinding against him softly. Was he kissing back, or was she doing it all? He’d kiss back soon enough. Just keep going. Never stop. Never ever stop.

“Ms. Snyder!” thundered a deep male voice.

Oh, fudgicles. They were making out in the hallway, weren’t they. Beside them, Mr. Coolidge glared sternly. Olivia pulled her face back from Conner’s; he gasped for air.

“Mr. Fishers?” The math teacher sounded far more surprised to see whose face had emerged from behind the curtain of her hair.

“Sorry, Mr. Coolidge,” she mumbled.

“To the office. Right now. Both of you.”

“But I—”

Mr. Coolidge held up a warning finger, silencing Conner’s protest. “Not another word. And if I see you so much as holding hands on your way down the hallway...”

“No. We won’t,” Conner stammered. Woodenly, the two about-faced and began the long walk to the principal’s office. A chorus of cheers went up from the witnesses, all of them for Conner. Because she was fucking *hot*.

Some said as hot as Kirsten Vaughan.

“How long have you had a crush on me?” he asked a short ways down the hall.

“I dunno. Not super long?”

“Since this morning?” he asked, glowering at nothing. A nice guy like Conner had probably never gotten in trouble before.

“Oh at least,” she assured him. It was hard to be sure.

“Whichever one of them did this, I’m going to...” He trailed off, shaking his head darkly.

She didn’t know what he meant, so she laughed. He didn’t.

Poor guy. She should cheer him up. “Wanna ditch school and make out?” she asked hopefully once they rounded the corner.

“No, Olivia.”

“Yeah, that’s smart.” She tried to take his hand, but evidently Mr. Coolidge’s threat had worked. “You’re a really good kisser.”

“Thanks, Olivia.”

“Do you think I’m a good kisser?”

He set his jaw. “Yes, Olivia.”

She sighed. They were in love.