

Friday, December 18th
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"Are you sure you won't come with us?"

Mom hangs out of the passenger window and wraps me in a fierce hug for the tenth time in the last ten minutes. The pleading tone in her voice is doing its job. I'm an inch away from the first bit of freedom I've ever known, yet I'm only seconds from caving and jumping into the backseat. I hug her back, tighter than usual.

Dad leans forward, his face washed in the soft blue light from the dash. "Sophie, we really hate leaving you here for Christmas. Who's going to make sure I get those fork marks in the peanut butter cookies just right? Not sure if I can be trusted to do it alone."

I laugh and duck my head. "I'm sure," I say. And I am. This saying good-bye part is hard, but there's no way I can suffer through the next week and a half at Margot's house, staring at bloated appendages.

My parents are driving to Breaux Bridge, a small town in

south Louisiana a little less than four hours away, to be with my sister and her husband. Margot is six weeks away from having her first baby, and she's developed superimposed pre-eclampsia, whatever that means. All I know is that it's made her feet swell to ridiculous sizes. And I know this because Margot is so bored out of her mind while she's been stuck in her bed that she's sent me pics of them from every conceivable angle.

"It's not like I'm going to be by myself," I continue. "I'll have Nonna and Papa and the other twenty-five members of our family to keep me company."

Dad rolls his eyes and mutters, "Don't know why they all have to hang out in one house all the time."

Mom pokes him in the ribs. The size of our extended family is no joke. Mom is one of eight, and pretty much all of her siblings have several kids of their own. My grandparents' house is always full of people, but around the holidays it turns into Grand Central Station. Beds and spots at the table are awarded based on age, so when my cousins and I were younger we always spent Christmas Eve stuffed into one big pallet on the floor of the den like sardines and every meal was a balancing act between your plate, your red Solo cup and your lap.

"Are you sure you don't want to stay with Lisa? It'll be quieter at her house," Mom asks.

"I'm sure. I'll be fine at Nonna and Papa's."

It *would* be a lot quieter at my Aunt Lisa's. She's Mom's twin, older by three minutes, but because of that she watches me as closely as Mom does. And that's not what I'm looking for. I'm looking for a little freedom. And some alone time with Griffin. Both are in short supply when you live in a small town and your dad is the chief of police.

"Okay. Dad and I should be back the afternoon of Nonna's birthday party. We'll open presents then." Mom fidgets around in the front seat, clearly not ready to leave. "I mean, if Brad's parents weren't already going to be there, we wouldn't have to go. You know how his mom always tries to rearrange Margot's kitchen and move her furniture around. I don't want Margot all worked up, wondering what that woman is doing while she's stuck in bed."

"And God forbid, *his* parents take care of *your* daughter," I tease. Mom is overly protective of her children. All Margot had to do was mention that her husband's parents were coming in and Mom started packing her bags.

"We could wait and go in the morning," Mom suggests to Dad.

Dad's shaking his head before she finishes. "We'll make better time if we drive tonight. Tomorrow is the Saturday before Christmas. The roads will be a nightmare." He leans forward once more, meeting my gaze. "Get your stuff and head straight to your grandparents'. Call them to let them know you're on the way."

That's my dad—all business. This is the first time in years Dad will be away from the station for more than a few days.

"I will." One more hug from Mom, and I blow a kiss to Dad. Then they're gone.

The glowing red taillights of my parents' SUV disappears down the road, and a flood of emotions roll through me—thrilling anticipation, but also an ache that settles deep in my belly. I do my best to shake it off. It's not that I don't want to be with them—just thinking about waking up on Christmas morning without my parents has my stomach twisting in knots—but I just can't spend my entire break trapped in Margot and Brad's tiny apartment.

Once I'm back in my room, the first thing I do is I call Nonna to tell her I'll be there in a few hours. She's distracted; I can hear the customers at the flower shop she owns talking loudly in the background, and can guess she's only hearing about every third word I say.

"Drive carefully, sweetheart," she says. As she's hanging up, I can hear her shouting poinsettia prices at Randy in the greenhouse, and I smother a grin.

It's six o'clock, and it's just a short drive from Minden to Shreveport, where my grandparents and the rest of my family live. Nonna won't look for me until around ten.

Four glorious hours to myself.

I fall back on my bed and stare at my slowly turning ceiling fan. Even though I'm seventeen, my parents don't like for me to stay home alone. And when I do manage to pull it off, there's usually a parade of deputies doing drive-bys—*just to check on things*. It's all sorts of ridiculous.

Feeling around on the bed for my phone, I call Griffin to let him know I'll be staying, but after eight rings it goes to voice mail. I send him a text, then wait for those three little dots to appear. I hadn't told him I was trying to convince my parents to let me stay—no reason for both of us to be disappointed if it didn't work out.

I stare at the blank screen for another few seconds then throw it down on the bed and move to my desk. There's a clutter of makeup and colored pencils and nail polish bottles scattered across the surface. Almost every inch of the bulletin board hanging on the wall in front of me showcases crisp, white index cards for each college I'm considering. There's a color-coded list of pros (green) and cons (red) on each card, plus all of the application requirements per school. A few sport a big green checkmark, meaning I've already met every requirement and been accepted, but most I'm still waiting to hear from. I call this my Inspiration Board, but Mom calls it my Obsession Board.

My eyes move to the first card I tacked up at the beginning of freshman year—LSU. Once upon a time, I thought it was

the only school that would make the board. But then I realized I needed to keep my options open.

My phone dings and I glance back toward the bed. It's just a notification that someone liked my last post—not Griffin texting me back.

I glance at the blank cards stacked on my desk and, for half a second, consider making a Griffin list. We've been together for over a year and school is usually our biggest focus, but with the two-week break ahead and no midterms or papers to worry about, the idea of being here alone with him is exciting. Even though we've been taking things slow, I'd be lying if I said I hadn't thought about taking our relationship to the next level.

Green: *Together almost a year*
We're seniors and almost eighteen

Red: *Haven't said "I love you" yet*
Not sure if I'm ready to say "I love you" yet

Mom would definitely have a problem if she sees that list hanging there so I resist the urge.

My phone chimes again. I feel my heart lurch when I see the text icon, but when I check the screen, I see another pic from Margot.

I open the image and stare at it for a few minutes. Someone needs to take the phone away from her.

ME: ?????? What is that???

MARGOT: That was a close-up of my toes. There is zero space between them. I can't wiggle them or separate them. They're like little sausages.

ME: What if they never go back to normal?? What if you're stuck with sausage toes forever? What if you can never wear flip-flops again because you can't get that little plastic piece between your first two toes? You're going to humiliate your kid with those feet.

MARGOT: I guess sausage toes are better than sausage fingers. Maybe I'll have to wear those really ugly orthopedic shoes like Aunt Toby used to wear.

ME: You could bedazzle them. And maybe write your name in puff paint along each side. They would be adorable sausage toe shoes.

MARGOT: Now you made me hungry for sausage.

ME: You're disgusting. And you've scarred me for life. I'm never getting pregnant for fear of sausage toes and bedazzled orthopedic shoes.

It's a few minutes before she texts me back.

MARGOT: Mom just texted me that you're not coming!!! What in the hell, Soph??? You were going to save me from the tug-of-war between mom and Gwen. You know how those two are together!!

ME: You're on your own. I really hope they fight over who gets to clean out the lint between those sausage toes. Maybe they'll have to use dental floss.

MARGOT: You've given me a mental picture I'll never be able to get rid of. I curse you with sausage toes for the rest of your life!

ME: I'll come when the baby's born.

MARGOT: Promise??

ME: Promise

MARGOT: So has Griffin gotten there yet?

ME: None of your business.

MARGOT: Give it up. No, wait . . . don't give it up.

ME: Ha. Ha.

I scroll through all the social media sites, wasting time waiting for Griffin to call me. My phone finally rings, and his name flashes across the screen. I don't even try to stop the smile that breaks out across my face.

"Hey!" he screams over the loud music and noise in the background.

"Hey! Where are you?" I ask.

"Matt's."

I've already seen several posts from people hanging out in his backyard and pool house, including Addie, my best friend since the third grade.

"Are you on the way to Margot's?" he asks.

“Change of plans. I’m staying with Nonna and Papa. But I don’t have to be there for a few hours.”

“What? I can hardly hear you,” he says in a loud voice.

“Change of plans!” I scream. “I’m staying here.”

I can hear the steady beat from the bass but can’t make out which song is playing.

“I can’t believe your dad didn’t make you go,” he says.

“I know, right? Want to come here? Or I can come to Matt’s.”

He’s quiet a second before saying, “Come to Matt’s. Everyone’s here.”

I feel a pang of disappointment. “Okay, see you in a few,” I reply, then end the call.