

BLINDSIDED

A College Sports Romance

T. Christensen

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T. CHRISTENSEN

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The following story contains mature themes, strong language and sexual situations. It is intended for mature readers.

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Pinterest Board Message

When I start a manuscript, I create a Pinterest board and pin various items (outfits, cars, rooms, etc...) that I use for inspiration. What follows is my Pinterest page information with the Blindsided Board, if you are interested in seeing some of the pins I used.



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Thank you for reading Blindsided

ONE

Kirsa

Four Years Old

I'm playing in the sandbox at the park, doing a good job of ignoring his stupid boy noises until one of his explosions destroys a part of my sand castle.

I whip my head around, giving him my mean face and yelling, "Stop it!"

Brock grins at me and lifts his plastic toy inches from my face. "It's not me. My tank is doing it!"

I swat at it, but he moves it out of the way before I can hit it. I make fists with my hands when he taunts me by moving it back and forth in front of my face.

"Stop it, you big, fat meanie, or I'm going to tell!"

Brock's grin fades as he looks over at his mom, who is sitting on the same bench as my nanny, a few feet away. I'm just starting to gloat when he reaches over and knocks the rest of my sand castle down.

That does it! I jump up, pushing him into the sand and running away with his stupid tank. I'm going to bury it where he can't find it.

TWO

Kirsa

Eight Years Old Summer Before Second Grade

I inhale the new wood smell and twirl around. After two years of begging, my dad finally relented and hired someone to build me an actual treehouse. It's like a tiny home, and I will never leave. Well, I'll have to leave to eat because there isn't a kitchen.

I already like it here better than at my house. When it gets dark at home, I can't see to the top of our tall ceilings and it kind of scares me.

I don't like my bedroom either. It looks like a princess lives in it. I don't mind the white canopy bed with the sparkling lights surrounding it. It's the bubblegum-pink walls and all the silver, pink, and glittery stuff I hate.

My mom was so excited as we picked out everything to make a Princess Kirsa room. I didn't have the guts to ruin her excitement and tell her I would have liked any color other than pink.

Ever since I watched the movie *The Sandlot*, I've wanted my own treehouse. Ms. Cagle, my nanny, pulled up pictures of treehouses online, and as soon as I saw this one, I knew it would be perfect.

My parents are *important* doctors at the hospital, so I don't see them much. But when they were home, I was begging and pleading with them to get me this treehouse.

Once you get up the stairs, there's an actual porch in front of it. I'm thinking about stealing one of the lawn

chairs from the house to put there. Inside, the best part is the loft with room for a twin mattress. Underneath, there is a hammock hanging up by blue and green clips. There is even a small desk where I can do my homework if I want.

A knock stops my twirling, and I stare at the door. I know it's not Brock. He would just barge in. I sneak to the windows by the door and peek out, spotting a girl I've never seen before. She would fit perfectly in my Princess Kirsia bedroom.

The front of her long, wavy blonde hair is pulled back in some sort of intricate braid. The rays of sun shining through the trees make her earrings look like diamonds. She has on a long pink maxi dress and a jean jacket. The only time I would dress so fancy is if Ms. Cagle made me.

I open the door cautiously, and then I'm staring at her sky-blue eyes and tentative smile.

"Hi, I'm Victoria Ellis." She gives me a little wave.

"Hi," I say slowly. Is it a regular thing to have strangers knock on treehouse doors?

Her smile fades, and she twists her hands together while she rambles, "I just moved here, and I saw people building your treehouse, and then I saw you going up the stairs, and I wanted to know what it was like, so I decided to come over and look."

I smile and step back. Anyone who is a fan of my treehouse is welcome.

Victoria looks around in awe. "This is so cool."

I stand like a proud mama bear and watch her wander around the space. She stops when she comes to the loft.

"Are you going to sleep up there?"

"My nanny said no, but me and my best friend agreed to sneak out and do it anyway."

"That would be so fun!"

I nod vigorously. I'm so excited someone else gets it. "I know! You can come, too."

Her eyes get big. "I can?"

The door bursts open and hits the wall.

"I'm not staying out anymore."

Brock has arrived. His dark-brown hair, which reminds me of coffee, is sticking up all over. Streaks of dirt cover his face, arms, and legs. His mutinous expression leaves me and lands on Victoria.

"Who are you?" he demands.

With wide eyes, she takes in Brock's post-football practice appearance. "I'm Victoria."

"What grade are you in?"

Shyly, she tells him, "I'm going to be in second grade."

"Us too!" I clap my hands, and Victoria smiles at me.

Brock isn't as excited as I am. He just continues his questions.

"Where did you come from?"

When Victoria doesn't answer fast enough, he turns to me. "Why is she here?"

"She wanted to see my treehouse, and I like her, so don't be a big, fat meanie!"

Brock scowls at her, but I grab his hand and pull him farther into the room.

"Come look at the treehouse, Brock!"

He'd been just as excited as me when my parents had finally agreed to build it, but had been worried it would be too girly. I couldn't blame him, considering my room. I point out everything he should love, and he begrudgingly agrees it's cool.

"It will make a great clubhouse and a fun sleepover place. Let's go play football."

That is as much excitement as I ever get from Brock if it isn't about football or video games, so I let him pull me back to the door.

Victoria stands uncertainly in the middle of the treehouse, so I look back and tell her, "You can play with us."

She follows me down the stairs and whispers, "I don't know how to play football."

I shrug. "Brock says I don't either, but he still makes me play with him."

Victoria follows all of his bossy orders, but it soon becomes clear she and balls do not get along. After she flinches from the football for the hundredth time, Brock decides to switch to baseball. When Victoria gets hit in the face, she tells us she'll just watch until we are done playing.

It takes a couple of weeks for him to warm up to her, but it isn't long before our duo becomes a trio.

THREE

Brock

Eight Years Old – Second Grade

As soon as I open the door to the treehouse and see Kirsa and Victoria, I tell them what we're doing today.

"I want to practice throwing long-distance passes. Grab the football."

Every day after school, we meet in the treehouse and decide what to do. Well, Kirsa and I decide what to do. Victoria just goes along with whatever we want. Today, she turns her big, blue eyes to me and sweetly says, "We played football yesterday, and I got hit in the face again. Can we do something I want to do today?"

I really want to play football, but then she whispers, "Please, Brock." Her wide eyes are begging me, and I crumble.

"Fine." I ignore her squeal and warn, "But just for a little while. Then we're going to play football."

"I want to play house!"

"No!" I'm not going to play house like some sissy!

We both turn to Kirsa, who hasn't said anything.

"Oh." She looks at me, silently trying to persuade me to change my mind. After I glare at her so she knows there is no way I'll play house, she turns to Victoria.

In a fake cheerful voice, Kirsa asks her, "Maybe we could play a game?"

I'm ready to jump on board, but before I can say anything Victoria yells, "You guys never do what I want to

do! I don't want to do boy stuff today! I want to play house!"

As soon as Victoria says *boy stuff*, Kirsra scrunches up her face.

"What do you mean?" she asks.

Kirsra and I have been like glue since we were four years old. I don't think it ever occurred to her most girls don't like to look for toads in the pond or play sports and video games, though I have to do a lot of convincing to get her to play video games.

"Kirsra, you're a *girl*. How come you never make Brock do girl things? Why should he always get what he wants?"

"Hey!" That makes me mad. I don't make her do anything.

I can tell by the look on Kirsra's face her feelings got hurt. "Oh, I didn't know they were boy things."

I don't like seeing her hurt, so I cave.

"Fine," I snap. "But I'm not going to pretend to be a girl or play with dolls." I shudder at the thought.

Every day after that, Victoria and I clash over what we're doing after school. We meet in the treehouse before Kirsra gets there to decide. Most days, we end up arguing. As I get older, I realize Kirsra purposely drags her feet so she won't have to be our referee.

FOUR

Brock

Ten Years Old – Fourth Grade

“Why does Kirsia *always* have to play with us? Every time we ask *you* to do something, *she* always tags along,” Jake sneers, and I tense. He doesn’t wait for my answer.

“She’s not a guy, so I don’t know why she’s always hanging around us. She should be by Victoria, cheering us on.” He nods to where Victoria is sitting on the swings and watching us play.

I look for Kirsia to make sure she didn’t hear Jake. Luckily, she is still getting the football from the basket on the playground.

I turn back to him and the other five boys, who are all nodding in agreement.

“Because she’s better than all of you,” I tell them.

It’s true. The teachers won’t allow us to play tackle football, so we play 500, and Kirsia always wins. Well, she wins if I’m throwing the ball. Otherwise, I’m the winner.

“Only because we take it easy on her because she’s a *girl*.”

I take a step closer to Jake, warning him without words to shut his mouth. Kirsia appears with the football tucked under her arm and confusion on her face.

“What’s going on?”

I never thought about not telling her. “Jake thinks he’s better than you at football.”

Kirsia looks over at him. “Then why do I always win?”

My grin breaks free with her matter-of-fact response. She lifts her chin as she dares him to disagree with her.

Jake straightens up and puffs out his chest. "Because we take it easy on you since you're a girl."

Kirsa's pop-bottle green eyes darken to forest green, a sure sign she is pissed. Without breaking eye contact with Jake, she flicks the ball over to me.

"First person to 500 wins."

I walk about twenty yards from them and throw a high arching pass, yelling, "One hundred points!"

Sure enough, Kirsa jumps higher than the six guys and catches the ball before landing on her butt. Still holding the ball, she springs up and around.

"You can't push me, Jake!"

He shrugs. "That's how the *boys* play, Kirsa."

"Not after the ball is caught, jackass!" I yell as I stalk over.

Kirsa intercepts my path to Jake, throwing the ball back to me before gritting out, "Just throw it again, Brock."

Sparks are coming from her eyes as she stands there determinedly. I throw a warning glance at Jake, who glares back at me.

I walk back as all six of them gather around Kirsa.

This time, just as I release the ball, she sprawls forward. Kirsa hits the ground before the ball is even close to the group. Her hands can't stop her in time, and the side of her face lands on the unforgiving black asphalt of the playground.

Toby stuck his foot out as Jake pushed Kirsa from behind. I see red as I stalk toward the group. Jake is high-fiving Toby and doesn't see me coming. I don't hesitate. I raise my arm and punch him in the face.

Ignoring the teachers' whistles, I turn and punch Toby in the stomach. Both of them are on the ground before the teachers can come between us.

"Brock, go to the office now." I look over at my fourth-grade teacher, Mrs. Handle, and then turn to make sure Kirsia is okay.

Victoria is beside her, helping her up. She looks dazed, and the scrape on her cheek makes my red haze return. Mrs. Handle steps closer to me before I can go after Toby and Jake again.

"Office. Now, Mr. Moreno."

I stride to the office. My punishment is in-school suspension.

FIVE

Kirsa

Twelve Years Old – Seventh Grade

“Hi, Mrs. Moreno!” I greet Brock’s mom as she opens the door.

“Kirsa, how many times have I told you it’s okay to call me Gaby?”

I shrug. She’s been telling me that for years, but I can’t do it. Mrs. Moreno is like a second mom to me, and it feels weird to call a parent by their first name.

She shakes her head, but she’s still smiling as she steps back from the entry. “Can you help me carry the snacks into the living room?”

My mouth waters. “Did you make chocolate-chip cookies?” I ask hopefully.

Mrs. Moreno laughs as we make our way to the kitchen. “It’s the Super Bowl. Of course I made your favorite cookie!”

I look at the rest of the food on the counter. “Holy cow, how many people are coming?”

My gut twists. Brock told me a couple of the guys were coming, but all this food makes me realize it’s more than two.

“Well, at last count, it was twenty.”

I don’t comment as I pick up a bowl of chips, the cookies, and a couple dips. Brock is easily the most popular guy in school. The other guys worship him because of his mastery of every sport offered in middle school.

The girls are in love with him because of how he looks playing those sports. He isn't a gangly middle school kid. He has lean, defined muscles set off by his deep tan skin.

I would never tell anyone else this, but Brock gives me goose bumps when I watch him play sports. There's just something so appealing about watching his confidence and prowess when he's playing.

His grades come as effortlessly to him as his athletic skills. He studies, but not as much as I do, and we get the same grades.

He's nice to everyone, which would explain why there are so many guys coming over today. Unfortunately, most of his other friends don't like me. They want Brock to themselves and do their best to *discourage* me from hanging out with them.

I've stayed home while Brock's gone to some of his guy friends' houses before, but he always complains they don't play football or whatever activity they're doing as well as I do and drags me with him the next time he goes. I don't argue too much. It always gives me a warm fuzzy feeling, knowing Brock prefers my company over theirs.

Ever since he punched Jake in the face, the guys have learned not to insult or slight me in front of him. They still do it, but it's subtle.

They say hi to me when I arrive and then ignore me the rest of the time. If Brock isn't around, they don't even bother acknowledging my presence. I never tell him because he gets upset when he thinks someone is disrespecting me. Ever since he got in-school suspension in fourth grade, I make sure to fight my own battles out of his sight.

I breathe a sigh of relief when I get to the room where the Super Bowl party will be. No one else is here yet. I place the snacks on the table, walk over to the couch, and

plop down next to Brock to tear his attention away from the pre-game show.

“Hey, how come you didn’t tell me your mom was making chocolate-chip cookies?” He grins, and I feel like I’ve been sucker-punched.

I call it his movie-star smile. It’s so carefree and happy. And with the way his whisky eyes shine, it’s hard not to be in awe of his looks.

“Because I knew I wouldn’t get any if I told you.”

He grabs the uneaten cookie out of my hand and stuffs it into his mouth.

“Hey! That was mine!”

He just laughs, and as always, Mrs. Moreno has my back.

“Brock, be nice to Kirsia.”

“Yeah!” I stare at him with a smug look.

He rolls his eyes but doesn’t say anything.

“All the food is on the back table, Brock. I’ll send everyone in as they get here.”

“Thanks, Mom!”

I turn my shoulders so I’m facing him. “Your mom said at least twenty people are coming. When did it get so big, and why didn’t you tell me?”

Brock grasps my hands and untwists my arms from out in front of me. “Guys just kept asking if they could come, and the more the merrier for a football party. If I told you, I knew you would try to weasel out of coming.”

I can’t deny it. I’ve learned to pretend the dislike thrown my way doesn’t bother me, but it’s hard to do that with them all in one room. In fact, it’s not too late to leave. I look toward the door, but Brock squeezes my hand, bringing my attention back to him.

“I want you here. Why don’t you want to stay?”

I give him a partial truth. "Brock, it's twenty guys and me! I know you consider me one of them, but they don't."

"Are they mean to you?" His eyes darken, and I have his full attention.

I look down. "They just don't get our friendship."

He lifts my chin with his finger and captures my gaze. The fierceness makes my breath catch.

"I don't care that they don't get it. I want you here."

I don't reply, but I can't look away. The air becomes charged as Brock's eyes soften. He flicks them to my lips and starts to lower his head. I don't breathe, scared to ruin the moment.

He brushes my lips, and static electricity runs through me. Brock pulls away, just enough to look at me with a question in his eyes, and I slowly nod. As he lowers his head back down, the doorbell peels. We both freeze and then break apart.

Our backs are ramrod straight against the couch, and we stare at the TV. For the first time I can remember, there is a feeling of awkwardness between us. As soon as we hear murmurs coming from down the hall, Brock jumps up to greet the two guys coming in.

I let their voices drift over me as my muscles collapse, and I throw my head back on the couch with my eyes closed. Holy shit! Brock Moreno just kissed me and I . . . I want to do it again.

My mouth is still tingling. I bite my lip to stop the sensation. My body is on pins and needles, waiting for something to happen. How am I supposed to be *one of the guys* after that? How am I supposed to act? I take a deep breath to settle my sensitized skin and racing heart. I stand up and pretend my world wasn't just knocked off its axis.

"Hey, guys!" I wince at the overenthusiastic greeting.

I walk to the snack table where everyone has gathered and avoid looking at Brock.

“Kirsia,” Jake greets me flatly.

It’s the same Jake who Brock punched in the face. In typical guy fashion, all was forgiven as soon as his suspension was over. Not true with Jake and me. There’s no love lost between the two of us.

After a pause, he asks with interest, “Does this mean Victoria is coming, too?”

Instinctively, I look at Brock, and his eyes are sparkling. We laugh together. And just like that, the kiss is forgotten and we’re back in our rhythm.

“She’ll be here eventually,” Brock says.

“She doesn’t really like football, but she’ll come to hang out. Probably in time for the half-time show,” I add.

More guys trickle in, so I find a lone seat and text Victoria. I plead with her to get over here sooner rather than later. Unlike me, she has no trouble fitting in with the group of guys, and it will be a relief to not be the only girl here.

SIX

Brock

Fourteen Years Old – Ninth Grade

“Come on, Brock. I *really* want to see this movie.”

As usual, it’s Victoria and me in the treehouse, waiting for Kirsia. And as usual, we’re arguing. She’s trying to convince me with her pleading blue eyes and whining to do what she wants.

“No.” I’m standing firm. “I’m not watching a romance movie. If we have to watch a movie, it’s going to be *Guardians of the Galaxy*.”

Victoria puts her hand on my thigh, and I freeze at the unexpected move. Everything is white noise around me. All I can do is stare at her hand.

I’m acutely aware of how close it is to my dick. I alternate between willing her hand closer and telling my dick to stay down, which at this point is all but impossible. All I can do is pray she doesn’t notice my boner.

She slips her hand off my leg, and my breath whooshes out. Just as my brain is coming back online, Victoria moves, and my breath catches in my throat.

Instead of sitting next to me against the treehouse wall, she turns and sits on her knees, facing me.

“If I give you a kiss, can we watch *The Fault in Our Stars*?” She’s watching me intently while waiting for my answer.

I didn’t think my dick could get any harder, but thinking about a girl’s lips on mine has it swelling painfully

against my jeans. I've had several kisses, but this is different. This is Victoria.

I stare, searching her face to figure out if she's serious. She looks back at me and slowly leans in.

When our lips touch, I instinctively move mine against hers. After a few seconds, I realize I don't have the same rush of feeling as I did when I kissed Kirsia. Oh, my body is definitely telling me to continue this with Victoria, but I don't have the same urgency.

I've kissed plenty of girls since my very first kiss with Kirsia, but none has come close to what I felt with her. Not even this one.

Victoria leans back, and we look at each other, wide-eyed. When we hear the telltale footsteps jogging up the stairs, I curse under my breath. I shouldn't have let her kiss me, but it's too late now. Victoria hurriedly sits back down next to me against the wall.

Kirsia's usual peppy greeting causes guilt to flood my body.

"Hey, guys! I brought snacks."

She lays down Oreo cookies and bottled water on the desk and looks up. A crease appears between her brows, and she looks at Victoria's bent head. When she turns her puzzled gaze to me, I look away. I'm sure the guilt I'm feeling is written all over my face.

"Is something wrong?"

"No!" I practically yell. Shit, I have to get myself together. I breathe to try to loosen the tightness in my chest.

Kirsia jerks her head back. "Oookay."

She looks between us again and then turns to Victoria. "What are we doing today?"

"We're watching *The Fault in Our Stars*," Victoria pipes up cheerfully before turning to me. "Right, Brock?"

Kirsa looks at me with raised eyebrows.

"We are?" she asks, her disbelief evident.

Not once have I watched a romance movie with them. Victoria and Kirsa watch them when I'm at practice.

"Yeah," I finally choke out. Suddenly, leaving the treehouse and going to my house to watch *any* movie sounds like a great idea. I'll do anything to avoid Kirsa's confusion and Victoria's triumphant gaze.

Victoria and I explore a little more every day after that while we wait for Kirsa to get to the treehouse. And every day, I fight the guilt.

I know Victoria and I should stop, but fuck! Every time her hand lands on my thigh, it gets closer to my dick, making it impossible for me to stop her.

And now I'm addicted to feeling her breasts. There is nothing like having their smooth weight in my hand and bringing her nipples to a point with my fingers.

At night, when I finally relieve the semi I've had since entering the treehouse that afternoon, my thoughts wander from Victoria to Kirsa.

It starts by reliving our only kiss, but inevitably I picture Kirsa's breasts. They're more than obvious under her T-shirts, and imagining sucking her nipples is enough to blow my wad, but I stop so I can take our imaginary encounter further. I'd put my hand on her thigh and inch it up until I had her pussy under my hand. That's when I can't hold off any longer and explode.

Then the guilt swamps me. I'm a sick fuck, but I can't stop the erotic thoughts that begin with Victoria and end with Kirsa.

Each morning I tell myself I will not fool around with Victoria, but my resolve crumbles when school ends. I fight

with myself, but my feet still make their way to the treehouse, my dick hardening as I go.

SEVEN

Kirsa

Fourteen Years Old – Ninth Grade

My homework is finally done, and I'm heading out to the treehouse to meet Victoria and Brock. Even after years of having it, I'm still excited to step into the space that is ours.

What we did there changed, but the anticipation of seeing my two best friends is the same. In school, I'm the ultimate introvert. That changes as soon as I walk into the treehouse and see Brock and Victoria. I can open up and be myself.

They thrive in the school hierarchy. Both have strong personalities, and their looks attract people to them like flies to honey. They're always surrounded and in the middle of everything.

Lately, our interests have turned toward sharing whatever texts or posts we have on our phones. Knowing there are no adults or other prying ears around makes our conversations open and interesting.

I stop at the door to juggle the snacks and sodas I have in my hands so I can turn the knob. As I glance in the window beside the door, my world crumbles around me. I try to breathe through the weight on my chest, but the constriction tightening around my heart makes it impossible. I stare wide-eyed, unable to believe or process what I'm seeing.

Victoria and Brock are kissing, and it's not an experimental kiss. If the one-room treehouse were any

smaller, the windows would fog up. Brock sits on the floor with his back against the wall. His legs are spread out to accommodate Victoria.

Victoria is on her knees, leaning over him. What she's doing with her hands is even more shocking than the fact she's devouring Brock's mouth. I should stop looking, but it's like watching a horror movie. I can't look away.

One of Victoria's hands is under Brock's T-shirt, but her other hand . . . She's cupping and rubbing his junk over his jeans. I become strangely fixated on the sight even as I struggle to breathe.

I lift my hands to loosen the pressure in my chest. The snacks and drinks crash to the deck, causing the two bodies in the treehouse to spring apart.

For two heartbreaking seconds, my eyes meet the wide-eyed, dark stare of Brock before Victoria jumps up.

"Kirsa!"

My heart beats again. It thunders so loudly I can hear it pounding in rhythm to my brain as it tells me to *escape, escape, escape!*

So many emotions are running rampant through me. I'm sick to my stomach. Without conscious thought, I spin around, running down the stairs and hightailing it back to my house.

"Kirsa!" This time it's Brock's panicked voice calling out to me. It's clear enough that I know he left the treehouse.

My step stutters. Maybe I should hear what he has to say, but then Victoria says, "Give her a few minutes, Brock."

I run again until I reach my house and keep going until I'm safely behind the locked door of my bedroom.

A glutton for punishment, I maneuver around the perimeter of my room to peek out my French doors.

Victoria and Brock stand halfway between the treehouse and the door I had just burst through. Brock's arm is extended as he points forcefully toward the house. I can't hear what he is saying, but he's passionate about it, whatever it is.

My heart loses a little of the heaviness, hoping he's convincing Victoria to come and talk with me. I'm not ready to hear what they have to say, but it eases something in me to think they want me to listen.

The bit of hope shrivels and dies as Victoria cups Brock's cheeks with her hands and he stops moving. Their lips briefly touch, and then their foreheads. It looks like they are murmuring to each other.

I can't look anymore. I slide down the wall, curling into a ball and letting the tears fall.

This is not something that just happened today. It's something my two best friends have been keeping from me. The intimacy between them rips me apart.

EIGHT

Kirsa

Fourteen Years Old – Ninth Grade

Every time my phone dings with a message from Brock or Victoria, a slow-motion picture replays in my head of her hovering over him. All I can focus on is Victoria's hand on the bulge in Brock's jeans. The same betrayal twists my gut as if I'm seeing it again for the first time. Eventually, I shut my phone off without replying to anything. I don't know what to think or say, but I'm not talking to them until I figure it out.

I pick up the book sitting on my nightstand, but all I do is stare at the pages. How long have they been hooking up? Were they sneaking off to be together when I wasn't around?

I feel stupid. How could I not know something was happening between them? It's like I'm their little sister and they've been humoring me by letting me hang around them.

All three of us are friends, but I've always known Brock and I have a special connection. I snort, which turns into a sob. Apparently, that bond is one-sided and imaginary.

Whenever we're in a large group of people, he searches me out and wordlessly asks if I'm okay. Then his eyes wander to my lips. Ever since our kiss in seventh grade, there's been a feeling of anticipation whenever we're around each other. It's like we both want to experience that kiss again, and maybe more, but we're both hesitant to go there. My mouth waters when Brock

and I are alone. My heart thumps and my body buzzes, but what if we went there and lost what we have?

Or at least that's how I used to feel.

Seeing Victoria and Brock together pulled the rug out from under me. It's suddenly crystal clear he doesn't have feelings for me and most likely feels sorry for me.

I throw my book down and turn the TV on as a distraction from my obsessive thoughts.

It doesn't work. The same thoughts still whirl around in my brain. Eventually, I turn the lights off, curling into a ball under my covers and weeping. Somewhere between crying jags, I fall asleep.

When the sun finally peeks through my window, my eyes are like sandpaper and my body aches. The urge to skip school is strong, but my pride refuses to let me do it. I haven't done anything wrong. *They* did. I drag myself out of bed to at least shower and change out of the clothes I've had on since yesterday.

Victoria, Brock, and I live in the same neighborhood. All of our houses sit on an acre of wooded land. Victoria, who lives at the outer edge of our area, drives to Brock's house and picks him up. His house is next door to mine, so she picks me up last.

It's still early as I get ready. I even apply the makeup I never wear but Victoria insisted I buy. Usually I apply mascara and Chapstick and call it good. This morning I use all the makeup I own. I need to hide my pale, sickly looking white skin and the black circles under my eyes. Unfortunately, I don't have anything to cover up the redness in my eyes.

I make my way to the kitchen, hoping to catch at least one of my parents. Typically, we're like ships passing in the night. They're both generally up and out of the house early

to get ready for their surgeries, and they stay at the hospital late to do rounds, catch up on paperwork, and study the latest research.

I stop at the bottom of the stairs at the low murmur of their voices. This is it, my first test on appearing fine and not like my insides are in knots. I take a deep breath and enter the kitchen.

“Morning, Mom. Morning, Dad.”

They both look at the clock, which reads 6:30 a.m., and then back at me. My dad turns to my mom.

“Jennifer, when was the last time Kirsia was up to send us off?”

Mom raises her coffee cup, pretending to contemplate his question. “David, I believe the answer is never.”

“Ha-ha,” I say. They both look at me expectantly. “I was hoping I could borrow one of the cars today.”

“I thought Victoria drove you to school?” my mom asks. Both of them are studying me. They’re so freakishly smart that it always feels like they’re dissecting every word I say.

I grab a mug out of a cabinet and make my way to the coffee. “She does, but she’s a cheerleader and they have practice after school.”

That was true, but I was going to do my homework in the library until Victoria was done with practice. I sit down and grip the mug with both hands, thankful it hides the trembling.

“With Brock in football and Victoria in cheer, I might need a way to get to and from school on my own.”

I hold my breath, waiting and praying I’ve made a convincing argument.

My dad finally says, “You can drive my car and keep it. I’ll drive in with Mom. I’ll call the car dealership and work on getting a new car delivered for me.”

They both get up, dumping their coffee in the sink and gathering their paperwork to put back into their briefcases.

My mom turns back just as she is almost out the door.

“Do you need anything else or want to talk about anything, Kirsas?”

I plaster a smile on my face. “No.”

She gives me one more penetrating look. “Have a good day at school.”

I drive to school, gripping the steering wheel of my dad’s two-year-old Mercedes with both hands. The combination of driving the expensive car and anticipating what will happen when I see my *friends* at school makes me feel like I’m having a heart attack. No matter how hard I try, I can’t take a full breath to calm down.

I park in the back of the empty school parking lot. I could pull into one of the narrow spots without the fear of hitting another car, and my escape after school would be faster. Most importantly, it would be hard to see me and the car when Victoria pulled in with Brock.

I’d left early to make sure I wasn’t at home when she came to pick me up, but I’m not going to actually enter the school until the last possible moment. My emotions are all over the place, and I don’t know what will happen if I see them right now.

I alternate between trying desperately not to let the tears welling in my eyes fall and trying to control the need to scream at them like a banshee. I don’t want either of those scenarios to play out at school, and my overtired body can’t handle a confrontation right now.

After the warning bell should have rung, giving me five minutes to get to class, I emerge from the car, dragging my feet as I walk to the front doors. I halt when I see Brock

leaning against one of the pillars framing the school's doors.

For a long moment, we stand there staring at each other. My heart gallops as my body locks up. What is he doing here? He should be in class.

Screw this! I shouldn't be the one avoiding him. My anger swells, and I barrel toward him.

Brock straightens, and a rare look of hesitancy crosses his face.

"How long?" I ask scathingly. I don't even recognize my tone, but I never thought he would betray me. "How long have you been screwing Victoria behind my back?"

He widens his eyes before shuffling back. He *should* take a step back. My rose-colored glasses were shattered yesterday, and my anger is like a living being in me.

Looking up, he husks out, "I'm sorry, Kirsas."

That's it? That's all he has to say? Not good enough. "You didn't answer my question, Brock."

He looks at the ground, and my stomach drops. A shroud of ice overtakes my body.

"A couple months," he mumbles to my feet.

"What?" I breathe out, stunned. They'd looked too comfortable for it to be the first time, but months?

When tears burn my eyes, I know I have to leave. The apple constricting my throat doesn't allow me to say anything else. I sidestep him and speed walk away. His desperate voice follows me.

"Kirsas, let me explain! Kirsas!"

I make my way to the bathroom, knowing Brock can't follow me. I brace my hands on the sink and stare at my trembling arms as a tear splashes into the sink. I turn on the water, wetting a paper towel and laying it over my gritty eyes. This school lives for gossip, and I refuse to be the center of it.

The tardy bell rings, but for once, I don't care if I'm late for class. Lifting the paper towel, I look in the mirror. Lackluster puffy green eyes stare back at me. The lack of sleep was already obvious with my pale skin, but now I look sick.

I pull out my ponytail elastic and the black strands fall to my shoulders. My hair is long enough to use as a curtain to hide the effects of a sleepless night and an encounter with Brock.

The door opens, and I prepare to leave.

"Kirsia." Victoria's hesitant voice reaches me.

I snap my head up. Her angelic blue eyes radiate regret. She's biting her lip as she stands with her arms folded across her stomach.

I give her what I hope is a cool, impassionate look. I don't want to talk. I just want to be left alone.

Victoria is standing a couple feet in front of the door, preventing my escape. I continue staring coldly at her, hoping she'll move. After a few moments, she whispers, "I'm sorry, Kirsia."

The same fury that enveloped me during my encounter with Brock returns.

"Are you sorry you got caught, or sorry for not telling me? Because you've been lying to me for months. Sorry isn't going to cut it."

Victoria widens her eyes, and her jaw slackens.

My usual MO is to avoid conflict. I'm always the peacemaker between the three of us. But their betrayal is cutting me open.

"You should go or step aside. I'm leaving."

There isn't anything she can say right now to loosen the knife in my back or lessen the impact of the razor blade tearing my gut apart.

Victoria pleads, “I didn’t mean to hurt you. It just happened.”

Hopefully, my scoff displays my disgust at that idiotic answer. *It just happened* would be something I might consider if it was a onetime thing, but it wasn’t.

“Please don’t tell anyone, Kirsia. We just need some time to figure this all out.”

My stomach caves in. *We*, meaning her and Brock. Apparently, this isn’t something the *three* of us need to discuss and figure out.

NINE

Kirsa

Fourteen Years Old – Ninth Grade

Two days later, I'm sitting on my bed, where I always seem to be if I'm not in school. My history book and laptop are open, but my tired eyes just stare out my French doors toward the treehouse. I haven't been there since *the incident*, and I don't have any plans to return.

Out of the corner of my eye, there's movement. I crane my head to get a better view and stare intently. Brock walks up the stairs of the treehouse. When he gets to the deck, he stops and stares through the window.

I sit up straighter to see through the trees. Does he remember all the games we've played, all the sleepovers and conversations we've had, and all the pizzas we've eaten in the treehouse? And then Brock turns, and my breath catches. He's looking toward my French doors.

For the first time in days, my heart fills the empty void in my chest. It's too far away to see his face clearly, but I swear we're connected and feeling the same pain.

I slide the laptop off my lap and set it on the bed. I've taken two steps toward the doors when Victoria appears. I stop as Brock's attention is drawn to her as she climbs the stairs. As soon as she's at the top, she throws herself into his arms.

I dart to the side of the doors and watch. The lethargy returns to my body as they draw comfort from each other. When they finally separate, they have a hurried conversation and then enter the treehouse.

I can't force myself from the doors. What are they doing in there? Do they actually think I'm coming out? If they really want to talk with me, wouldn't they come to my house?

Maybe they just want a place to make out. My insides turn over on each other as the image of Victoria hovering over Brock enters my head. I keep my eyes glued to the treehouse.

After about half an hour, the door opens. Without a glance toward my house, they leave, hands linked.

My heart shrivels, and I stand there long after they leave.

TEN

Kirsa

Fourteen Years Old – Ninth Grade

I walk up to school at a brisk pace, with just enough time to stop at my locker and get to class before the tardy bell rings.

“Kirsa!”

I stop short at the hard, demanding tone. I was so focused on getting into the school I didn’t notice Brock at the base of the stairs leading up to the doors.

He stands with his legs braced apart and his hands locked so tightly onto the straps of his backpack his knuckles are white. The expression on his face is one I’ve never seen directed at me before. His jaw is rigid, like he’s grinding his teeth. What gives me pause are his eyes. They’re usually full of life, except for the last week when they’ve been pleading with me. But now they’re just flat as they bore holes into me.

Brock doesn’t get mad often, but you don’t want to be on the receiving end when he does. And his anger is now directed at me.

For a couple of heartbeats, we stand and stare at each other. The air between us is heavy, but I refuse to be the one to break it.

“Why did you do it?” he finally grates out.

“What?” I should be the one asking that question. “I didn’t do anything, Brock. Remember, you were the one kissing Victoria, and who knows what else, in *my* treehouse and keeping it a secret from me!”

I fold my arms and narrow my eyes, daring him to disagree. Brock takes two quick steps toward me, forcing me to crane my neck up. He stares down at me, and his forbidding demeanor slithers down my spine.

Something is off. I soften my tone. "What are you talking about, Brock?"

He doesn't make me wait for the answer, his tone full of disgust.

"What Victoria and I did was wrong, but what you did was *viscous*. Don't talk to Victoria or me. If I find out you're spreading any other vile lies about her, I will make your fucking life unbearable. You were already a nobody, but I kept you around out of pity. From now on, keep your ugly-ass, bitchy self out of my sight."

I flinch and step back like he just punched me, frantically trying to figure out what is going on.

"What are you talking about?" I whisper.

Brock snorts, and with the same hard rancor answers, "I would buy your innocent act if I hadn't heard it straight from Samantha herself."

Samantha is also in ninth grade and sometimes sits with us at lunch, but I'm still lost.

"What are you talking about? What does Samantha have to do with anything?" I'm trying to keep my cool, but it's unraveling. A sense of doom is sinking further and further into me.

Brock rolls his eyes. "Did you really think when you told Samantha *in confidence* you caught Victoria giving me a blow job, she would actually keep it a secret?"

What? I gape at him. Before I can deny the allegation, Brock continues.

"That pack of lies is all over the school, and I will make sure karma bites you in the ass, Kirsas."

He turns to leave, and I frantically call out, "I didn't say that, Brock."

I've never seen anyone stop so suddenly. The look he gives me when he turns back toward me makes my blood run cold.

"Do you think I'm a fucking idiot? Victoria is in the bathroom crying and refusing to come out. Jesus, Kirsas, we kissed! Big fucking deal!"

Tears spring to my eyes. He believes I did this. He's staring at me like I'm the dirt beneath his shoes. Desperately, I try to get through to him.

"Brock, I didn't tell anyone about you and Victoria kissing. And I most definitely never said anything about a blow job!"

"How else would Samantha know anything happened between Victoria and me, Kirsas? The only people who know what happened in the treehouse are you, me, and Victoria. I sure as hell didn't say anything, and she wouldn't say those things about herself!"

Each word grows in volume. I fight off the panic enveloping me. I need him to understand I didn't do this.

"I don't know, Brock, but it *wasn't* me."

"Quit fucking lying, Kirsas! After Victoria came to me in tears, I asked her who told her. She said it was Samantha, so I talked to her. Do you know what she said? She said it was you who told her!"

Why would she say that? I haven't even talked to her for over a week. Brock apparently interprets my silence as guilt.

"No denials now, huh, Kirsas? Until you can admit what you did and get on your knees begging us to forgive you, I will make sure you don't enjoy one single day of high school."

The blood drains from every part of my body as Brock issues the coldhearted promise. My body shakes as he stalks away. What the hell had just happened?

