

The Virgin Bet

By

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Prologue

“You’re pretentious, Tippy. You’re a pretentious bitch.”

Tippy Madison’s mouth dropped open and she stared at the boy standing in front of her. The boy she’d ensured would pass English class so that he could stay on the football team. The Tigers had been bound for a state championship—as long as their star quarterback passed English.

Basically, Tippy had saved the day. And this was the thanks she got, being called out in the parking lot with half the school watching. Her face burned hot to her ears as her peripheral vision took in their audience.

“Listen, Brent, I think you’re blowing things out of proportion,” she said as calmly as possible, trying to diffuse the situation so she could retreat to the safety of her car. “I’m not interested in going to prom with anyone. Not just you.”

Brent glared down into her face, his eyes a vivid shade of blue in the mid-afternoon sunlight. His skin had taken on a dark flush—obviously he wasn’t used to being shot down. Especially in front of all his friends.

“You just think you’re better than everyone else because you’re so smart,” he said with a voice much too masculine to belong to such a youthful face. It carried easily to the growing throng of spectators.

Tippy blinked, that wasn’t it at all. She didn’t take him up on his offer of being his date for the senior prom, because she was ninety-nine percent positive it was a cruel prank. He’d even had the gall to ask her in front of his buddies with the attitude that he was doing her some great honor. One look at the rest of the football team gathered behind their star player said it all. Smirks, sly grins, snickers—yeah, she’d called it. And like hell she’d be part of a mean joke. Not long before this fiasco, rumor had it the football team had gone on a virgin hunt, with a bet on who could deflower the most girls. Like hell she’d be amongst these poor naïve victims.

The virgin bet had to be still on, because no way in hell would Brent Kingston take the school’s dowdy super nerd to prom. Tippy with her frizzy head of bright red curls and ruler

straight, knobby figure. Brent with his tall, broad shouldered physique and a smile that made even a few of the younger teachers blush shyly. The idea was laughable when any of the perfectly coifed and physically fit cheerleaders would jump at the chance to hook up with Brent the quarterback. She had some common sense, and obviously Brent was too stupid to see that his motives on asking her were completely transparent.

“Tippy...” Brent trailed off as his gaze darted over the ever-growing crowd. Word was out, a spectacle was happening, and the kids had flocked in to gather new gossip.

Brent stood between her and her car. Tippy took the only out she had for the growingly uncomfortable situation, she spun on her heel, and headed back to the school. She’d let the crowded parking lot clear out then climb inside her little hatchback and drive home. She hugged her school books tight, staring at the graveled ground littered with bits of papers, cigarette butts, and broken glass.

She reached the blessed double doors of escape when a hand grabbed her upper arm from behind. “Wait,” Brent said.

She shrugged loose of his hold, determined to get inside.

“Can you wait just a minute?” he persisted, stepping around to block her path.

She looked up and plastered on her best scowl. “Really?” she began. “Have you never been shot down before?”

“You got me all wrong. I really...I kind of like you.” He shoved a hand through his blond all-American boy hair. Tippy grudgingly admitted he had *great* hair. A bit long, a bit wild. He graced her with his magical smile, and she felt her heart rate kick up, and her face heated to new levels. She’d done a pretty good job keeping their tutoring sessions professional, but when she focused on studying nothing much got in the way. Now, they had nothing for distraction save for that damned virgin bet.

“Yeah?” she countered. “All wrong, eh? I think you’re a shallow, self-absorbed jock. I think once you’re out of high school you’ll become one of those sad burnouts who trolls the town hangouts, needing to relive your glory years with whatever teenager will listen.”

Mean, yes, but he seemed determined to see his prom prank through, and she was equally determined to put this silliness to an end.

Brent's already flushed face turned a deep, and alarming shade of scarlet, and Tippy took an involuntary step backward. Inside, kids and teachers milled around in post-school day huddles. She was safe within sight of them. Hopefully.

"You have a mouth on you," Brent said, his voice a low menacing threat. "Someone should take you over their knee."

Over their knee? The absurd out-of-left-field comment caught her by surprise. Tippy burst out laughing. "No one has *ever* taken me over their knee, Brent Kingston. And I guarantee no one ever will."

She strode inside the school, still laughing.

Chapter 1

Ten years later.

“Time to call it.” Tippy pointed to the clock hanging on the wall. “Nick, can you lock the doors?”

Her coworker nodded, and headed to the front doors, ushering a remaining customer out, while Tippy headed back to her office. The bookstore had been packed, and the whole place reflected the hectic day. Despite their best efforts to keep stacks and shelves organized, she was sure it’d take hours to get the place presentable before they could leave for the night.

When she left the office with dust mop in hand, Nick met her, carrying the cash tills and receipts.

“I told you having a local author book signing would bring people in,” Nick said, smiling.

Tippy smiled back. “I admit you were right; it was a great idea.”

She’d been hesitant to ask area romance writers in for a book signing and giveaway when Nick had suggested it. Maybe it was her introverted nature, or maybe it was because she was a closet romance reader, and didn’t want to come out to the world about her romance addiction. Regardless, the event had been a success, and she kicked herself for not trying this earlier. Her bookstore had struggled through the past year, and she feared she might have to close the doors soon. Today’s sales and media attention would make up for some of the loss.

She plopped the dust mop onto the floor, weaving between shelves, leaving the cash work to Nick. He was a great manager, and she liked to show her appreciation for good workers by doing the dirty work of cleaning. Even the bathrooms, and judging by the noxious smell coming out of the men’s room, she had her work cut out for her tonight.

Tippy really needed a vacation. Not that it was possible with slow sales, she’d cut down her staff to bare minimum. She worked every day, seven days a week. Even a weekend vegging out in front of the TV with a good book was beyond her grasp at the moment. Nick offered on

more than one occasion to give her a day off, but she already worked him like a dog, and she felt bad putting more responsibility on his loyal shoulders.

As she and Nick left the store and trudged to their cars two hours later, lightning flashed in the distance.

“Is it supposed to storm tonight?” she asked. She wasn’t a big fan of thunderstorms.

Nick lifted a shoulder. “Not sure, haven’t heard the weather report. Take care,” he said, climbing into his car.

Tippy got inside of hers, and together they left the parking lot, he heading north, she south. Toward the flashing lightning that morphed into pretty wicked looking lightning bolts by the time she turned into her driveway. Thunder boomed as her garage door rattled closed, and by the time she’d showered, and donned pajamas, wind howled outside. Exhausted, she dragged herself to bed, hoping the house wouldn’t blow down on top of her. She was simply too tired to care.

When the alarm on her cell phone squawked her awake at 6 AM, Tippy rolled onto her back and groaned. Her eyes were gritty, and every muscle told her to stay in bed. Instead, she pushed out of bed, and padded to the kitchen to get the coffee pot going. Except when she jabbed *start*, nothing happened.

“Damn it,” she mumbled, rubbing her sleepy eyes. She poked at the button again then checked that it was plugged in. “Seriously, I have to buy a new coffee maker?”

She looked around the kitchen, and realized nothing was working. The electricity was out.

“Double damn it.” Caffeine was an absolute necessity, so she’d have to make a trip to the nearby coffee shop. Hopefully they hadn’t lost power. No one wanted to deal with Tippy Madison before she had her morning caffeine fix.

She threw on yoga pants, t-shirt, and a jacket, stuffed her cell phone in her purse and headed for the garage. Without electricity the door wouldn’t budge. She had to lift the cumbersome thing manually.

Tippy took in the scene outside. Tree limbs, trash cans, and various refuse littered the street. Down about half a block she saw a large tree through the middle of a house. Sirens wailed, and people were out, taking stock of the damage.

She shook her head. “What the hell did I sleep through?”

She walked back inside the house, silently berating herself for sleeping through what had to have been a dangerous storm, and grabbed her iPad, hijacking internet service from her phone's data plan. She pulled up a live streaming local newscast.

"Wind damage is wide spread," said a newscaster with a mock-serious expression. The twinkle in her eyes said she fed on the reprieve of chaos that rarely occurred in their boring small city. "Downtown, one business is in flames after a suspected lightning strike."

The station cut to live footage of a burning building. It took several seconds to break through the stupor of disbelief. Tippy's heart dropped to the pit of her stomach. Her bookstore was on fire! Why hadn't the alarm company called? She grabbed her phone out of her purse, reading *5 missed calls 5 new messages* from her alarm company. Her ringer had been turned off.

Shaking, she pulled up Nick's number and dialed. When his sleepy voice answered, she blurted out, "The store is on fire!"

"W-what?" he asked.

"The. Store. Is. On. Fire. It's all over the news. Did the alarm company call you?"

Nick grumbled. "Hold on, let me check. Damn it, they did, I slept through the calls."

"I'm getting out there as soon as I can. I'll call you back." She disconnected the call, and dashed for her car. The trip was slow going, she had to maneuver around downed trees, limbs and even a trampoline at one point. By the time she was two blocks away from her store, she had to park, and jog the rest of the way. Black billowing smoke told the tale long before she arrived at the scene. Her stomach twisted in knots when she finally arrived to the smoldering shell that had only yesterday been both her bane and her pride and joy.

"Ma'am, you can't be this close," a firefighter said, trying to usher her back behind a temporary barricade made up of volunteer firefighter vehicles.

"This is my store," she said, brushing his hand away, trying to force her way around him.

He gripped her shoulders, pushing her back. "I'm sorry, ma'am, but I still need you to stay back. There's nothing you can do for the place."

Her nerves were stripped raw and her heart was breaking. She lifted her chin and glared at the firefighter, jerking out of his grasp. "I'm not moving one inch, until I find out if I can salvage anything in there."

"Excuse me, miss." A firm hand was placed on her shoulder. "I need you to come back here with me."

She whirled on the owner of the baritone voice, knocking the offending hand off. She met a pair of bright blue eyes. Tippy blinked, recognition dancing at the back of her mind. The police officer gave her a stern look as his gaze took in her face. His mouth opened then closed. “I think I know you,” he said.

“Brent Kingston?”

“Tippy Madison,” Brent said, a small smile gracing his lips.

Had she noticed how masculine his mouth was while in high school? A strange awareness swept through her. A totally misplaced sensation considering her livelihood had gone up in flames overnight.

“I need you to come over here with me.” Brent took her by the elbow. Tippy balked. She *had* to know if anything inside her store could be saved. All of her beloved books with their wonderful new book smell would wreak of ash now.

“No,” she said. “The fire is mostly out. I need to go inside.”

“Not until it’s cleared,” Brent said, taking a firmer grip, and half-dragging her toward his patrol car. She staggered behind him.

“Let me go, Brent.” She struggled to get free, but he held tight to her arm. He may have a uniform on—and looking pretty damned good in it—but hell if he’d manhandle her. Disgust warred against the odd attraction she suddenly felt for the once high school jock. Shock, it had to be shock setting in. “Let me go, you...you asshat.”

“Calm down, or I’ll have to take you into custody.” Though his words held authority, she couldn’t miss the cocky grin dancing at the edges of his masculine mouth. Stop that, she chastised herself, his mouth is nothing special. It’s a mouth. They were close, too close, the breadth of his chest eye level, and within inches of her touch.

Still a high school jock through and through, the idea laced her rising ire. She wasn’t sure what made her do it: too many long days, too little sleep, too much stress, Brent *was* a cop after all, but nonetheless, she brought her foot up and stomped down with all her might right on top of his boot.

He let out a yelp and jumped back, but kept hold of her arm. A moment later she was jerked around, and shoved up against his patrol car, both of her hands caught behind her back.

“Assaulting police officers, is that who you are now, Tippy?” Brent asked in a raspy rumble, his words sending a hot breath over the back of her neck. Goosebumps broke out over her

skin. “I expected bigger things from the smartest girl in school. I thought you’d be a rocket scientist or something.”

“I was an English nerd, not a science geek, you goon,” she hissed between her teeth. Tippy knew she should shut up while she was ahead, but she couldn’t deal right now. Not with him, not with the loss of her store, not with the bloody flippin’ world at the moment.

Brent slid her purse off her shoulder, releasing one of her hands long enough to take it away, and lay it on top of his car. Then she heard clinking, before the cool metal of handcuffs slapped around her wrists. “Temperance Madison, you’re under arrest for assaulting a police officer.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me!” She stumbled as he pulled her around to open the back door to his cruiser. She’d had at the worst maybe three speeding tickets in all of her life, now she was being arrested? “You’re arresting me? I couldn’t possibly have hurt you.”

His eyes twinkled with amusement. “You hurt my feelings.”

“You’re an ass. You were an ass in school and some things never change.”

“Yeah, well at least I’m not a burnout bragging to teenagers. And that’s Sergeant Ass to you.” He winked, and she gawked, recalling their last conversation too many years ago for it to matter.

“So what, are you going to turn me over your knee?” she asked, remembering the last part of their conversation, the last conversation they ever had, as he guided her into the backseat of the police cruiser.

Brent leaned in, grinning, and her throat went dry. “Don’t tempt me,” he said.

A quick run of Tippy’s information told him what he already knew, she was clean. He looked up into his rearview mirror, and their gazes clashed. The shade of red gracing her lovely face said she was furious. *She’s still a fireball.* Back in school she’d been nerdy, but she’d also been opinionated, and mature beyond her years. His crew of friends didn’t much take to her, but Brent had found her fascinating. Beneath the baggy shapeless clothes, and oversized glasses, was a shy, but blossoming girl that he had wanted to get to know. Asking her to tutor him in English class had been the perfect excuse to get to know her. He’d slacked in class, having found it boring beyond belief, but if he’d applied himself he could’ve gotten a passing grade without her help.

It'd taken him weeks to work up the nerve to ask her to prom. His friends assumed it was to get in her pants—they'd had some dumb virgin hunt going on at the time. Not that Brent wouldn't have been happy to deflower Tippy back then. And he'd certainly love to get in her pants now. But that hadn't been his motive. He'd honestly wanted to take her on a date.

"Are you taking me to jail now?" Tippy asked, breaking him out of his reminiscing, her tone of defiance only adding to the arousal simmering low in his belly. He shifted uncomfortably in his seat, meeting her eyes again in the rearview mirror.

"I don't know yet," he said. "Do you think you can be good now?"

"What do you mean 'be good'? I didn't do anything in the first place!" she spat back.

Brent kept a straight face, but he was loving this exchange more than he should. "You defied that firefighter who was only concerned for your safety, *and* you assaulted me."

Her mouth worked soundlessly several moments. "I did not assault you," she finally managed.

Some of her bluster had faded, but he could tell by the lift of her chin she'd fight him to the bitter end. He chewed the inside of his cheek then started his car. "If you can't promise to be good, then I don't have much choice, but to take you to jail, Temperance."

He shifted into drive, and purely for affect, turned on his overheads. Tippy's eyes widened.

"No, please," she said. "Wait."

He waited as she glared a hole through his windshield.

"Fine," she muttered, her shoulders slumping.

"Fine what?"

She growled.

"Fine what?" he repeated.

"Fine I'll be good."

He swallowed his smile. "Fine I'll be good what?"

She let out a frustrated snarl, and rolled her eyes. "Fine I'll be good Sergeant Kingston," she rattled off as quickly as possible.

Then she remained quiet, her heaving chest pushing her breasts against the cotton jacket she wore. He licked his lips. He quite liked having her handcuffed in the backseat.