



RUTHLESS KEEPER

L A I N E W A T S O N

ruthless keeper

ARC COPY

PLAYERS AND SINNERS

LAINÉ WATSON

Ruthless Keeper

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Hate the Sin...

Acknowledgments

About the Author

Thank you for purchasing Ruthless Keeper. Enjoy the book!

greed

What is *Greed*?

An uncontrolled longing for more. The innate sensibility that having more will gain one all the desires of the heart. A constant feeling of never being enough. The passionate pursuit of economic advantage, an unquenchable thirst that disregards relationship, kinship, and morality for the bigger picture.

ONE



cleats

SAM

SNOW HAS A BEAUTIFUL WAY OF COVERING THE UGLY. Too bad it didn't snow today.

From the kitchen window, with the crackling panes and dead wood, I gaze out into the dullness of this dry winter day. Though the below-freezing temperature is not accompanied by falling snow, it wouldn't be strange to see it in January in the Midwest.

I prefer a thick blanket of white over the polluted streets of downtown Dennington. That way, it would line the faded sidewalks, concealing the debris and unkept trash bins and forgotten shoes. It would add a spark of purity to the abandoned buildings with wooden planks blocking the broken windows. Just the presence of it, the cool air and the rain of tiny snowflakes, draws out the innocence. Children build snowmen on the corners, rather than groups of people aggregating near the liquor store.

Taking a deep breath, I glance around the barely decorated room. This midcentury-style home begs for a remodel—new furniture, new flooring, new appliances—the list can go on and on, but I'd settle for an updated thermostat. A forced air heater would be a lot nicer than these God-awful radiators somebody painted white, probably to hide something. No way could I ever bring a girl here, at least not one I liked.

I lean against the old white counters, the surfaces had yellowed from use. My mother walks toward the dining table, set up half in the kitchen and half in the dining room. Not even

an arch dividing the two spaces, just worn linoleum on one side and lumpy, matted brown carpet on the other.

“Your father’s working late tonight, so no family dinner,” my mother tells me as she packs her purse with the items she’ll need for her shift as the auxiliary aide. “I’ll be home late, but I have a split shift, so your dinner will be in the oven by the time you get home from practice,” she assures me, her feathery voice as pleasant as always.

“Mom, you don’t have to make my food. I can do it when I get back.”

“You’ll be starving by then.” She frowns, sharpening her eyes at me. “Besides, it’s the least I can do.” Her shoulders drop as her pursed lips loosen into a calming smile. “I’m sorry we couldn’t make it to your game.”

She doesn’t have much seniority, and we can’t afford for her to ski shifts just to see me play lacrosse. “It’s okay, really.”

She furrows her brow, a look of unrest befalling her smooth, pale face. “You know your father and I want to go, don’t you?”

“I know, Mom.” I hate to see her this way. She deserves better than to carry so much weight on her shoulders, that they curve with the burden.

“We couldn’t even get you new cleats. I know you really wanted the ones at the shoe store in the county.”

“Mom.” I sigh, massaging the tension gathering at my neck. “It really is fine. The ones from high school will do for now. When I’m famous, it won’t even matter.” I shoot a winning smile her way to mask the lie. My old cleats are worn and slow down my speed, and amid the shiny new ones of my teammates, they are a reminder of poverty.

She returns the sentiment, waving her small hands at me. She rummages in her purse again, pulling out a red debit card and handing it to me. “Okay, here you go. There’s enough on here for your books, and a little to get Storm something nice. Don’t go overboard, some flowers, maybe? Valentine’s Day is coming up.”

My chest tightens. Part of the reason I hate my life on most days is because of this. I can’t afford anything, and I wish I didn’t have to depend on people. “You don’t have to buy her anything, Mom.”

“I’m not, you are.” She grins.

“Listen...” I begin, but my mom cuts me off with a kiss on my cheek.

She tosses me the keys to our fifteen-year-old red four-door sedan. “Think of it as a loan. You’ll pay us back when you’re famous, right?”

“Right.”

She got me with my own ammunition. *Smart woman.*

“Let’s go. I don’t want to be late and neither do you. Good luck tonight. Not that you need it.” She sways into the kitchen and opens the backdoor.

I follow her out to the car.

The hospital isn’t that far from the house, but Mom always finds a way to make the most of those moments. “So, how’re things with Ezra Iram?”

Mustering up the nerve to talk about what I really want to talk about isn’t going to happen, so I stare out into the road. “It’s okay, I guess.”

“Have any shows coming up?”

“Yeah, we have one on Valentine’s Day.”

“Are you going to serenade Storm?”

I chuckle, straightening myself in the driver’s seat, my cheeks warming. Storm is a sore subject for me, not just because I love the girl I’m not supposed to touch, but because the more time we spend together, the more I feel like she’s falling for me.

And I’m not sure I’m ready for that. All I have to offer is love and that’s not enough. Not for me. I try to shake off the hollow feeling running through my chest, but inadequacy has a way of lingering in my brain.

Mom takes my silence as a means to speak, “When are you going to—”

“Mom, can we not?” I cut her off, immediately regretting the tone.

“I’m sorry.” She purses her lips together as she shrugs, gazing out of the window. “I didn’t mean to pry.”

“No, I’m sorry,” I retort in a softer pitch. Telling my mom the truth as to why I haven’t made things official, why we’re keeping it a secret, will make my mom feel like shit. “I just have to think things through before I make any big changes, and today, I’m concerned with my game.”

“I understand that. Prioritize.”

“Exactly.” I pull up to the emergency entrance of the hospital.

“Have a good game, Sammy.”

I close my eyes and wrinkle my face, letting out a quiet and disdainful, “Don’t call me that.”

She throws her head back and laughs as she gets out of the car. “Never going to change, are you?”

“Have a good night at work,” I mumble, unable to be annoyed with her. She’s perfect like anyone would want their mother to be: loving, kind, beautiful, and understanding.

“I will. I’ll listen to all the nurses ask me about my handsome boy.” She dances around and rolls her eyes playfully as she fans her hands around her face.

My cheeks warm and my smile widens. “Okay. I’ll call you when I get home. Be careful.”

She shuts the door and leans down into the open window. “Tell everyone I said, ‘Hi,’ okay?”

“All right.”

She turns to face the automatic sliding doors, lunch bag in hand, scrubs just a bit too big. She always wanted to be a nurse, but I came along and became the dream. It may not be her ideal job, but Mom seems content working as the prep aide, even with all the shit she has to deal with.

Because Downtown Dennington isn’t exactly the safest place in Missouri, I always make sure she’s inside the hospital before I pull off.

Rich people don’t live in this neighborhood. People like me do. The one-car households. Dad carpools with some other people who work at the warehouse with him and catches a ride with someone to get to his second job. Mom does the same thing when my schedule conflicts with hers. Both of them give me dibs, which I’m grateful for, but it hurts too.

The quicker I get away from here the quicker I can forget who I really am—some guy who has to bum shit off his parents. Sometimes I wonder if I should just stop singing, stop

playing lacrosse. I'm sure my dad could get me a job at the warehouse. I'm sure they're looking for strapping young men who settled instead of going after their dreams.

Seems like my dreams are costing a lot.

I swallow the disdain I have for myself and grit my teeth as I head toward Dennington University Campus. People around here call it The City. It's where everything happens. The nightlife is rich, all the college kids hang out there, and celebrities make appearances. Half an hour away from this trash-hole, people have real lives, aspirations, and money to burn. At least there, I can pretend like I'm one of them. Like I'm from Dennington County, where most of my friends are from, or Bristol Cobb across the river with gated communities and sidewalks.

After driving for a while and mentally prepping myself for today's game and boasting my shitty cleats, I happen to glance down at the gas gage. "Shit, almost empty." There's a gas station near the campus where Storm lives, so I'll fill up there.

As I pull into the space and turn off the car, I look down at the my shoes. Most people don't wear their games shoes out of the field, but I use mine a few hours beforehand, to mentally prep myself. They're low-pro heel cleats with transitional traction, so they don't make weird noises on the sidewalk.

They may look like shit but they're still good, I try to convince myself with every step toward the shop. The doorbell chimes as I walk into pre-pay for the gas.

"May I help you?" The attendant smiles at me.

"Yeah." I smirk back. "Five on, nine," I mumble as I hand her the debit card and glance around.

Wide eyes and an almost judgmental expression answer me, but the woman behind me snickers and shakes her head. “Did he say five? That’s not going to get him down the street.”

I can see the woman’s reflection in the security mirror. She’s in a swanky outfit, with a purse hanging off her shoulder that cost more than my mother makes in a quarter of work. The woman’s eyes are plastered on pump nine, no doubt assessing the car. Judging it, when she has no business doing so.

Swiveling on the heel of my cleat, I turn back to say something, but the pain in the pit of my stomach swells up to the base of my throat. The way she narrows her eyes on me, as if she fears me, caused damage—emotionally.

I keep my legs from anxiously twitching as I wait for the teller to return the card to me.

“Thank you,” the employee says, handing it back to me with a small piece of paper.

I drop it as I try to speed toward the double doors and get the hell out of here.

“You forgot your receipt!” someone calls behind me as I push the door.

Who cares? I have to get out of here.

By the time I make it to the car, that feeling in the pit of my stomach has exploded and penetrated my blood. I snatch the pump off its hook and almost rip off the tiny rubber string that holds the gas cap to the filler.

The rude woman leaves, eyeing me as I finish pumping. I kick the side of the car, almost hitting the crack in the bumper and making things worse. I drop my shoulders and get into the car, my skin feeling like it’s going to boil off.

Is this really my life? Sharing a car with my parents? Wearing two-year-old cleats with the paint peeling off and scuff marks? I frown. People making fun of me?

After a few long and heavy breaths, I sigh and drive. Drive, all the way to the trendy shoe store with name-brand sneakers and custom-made shoes. The one with an entire wall of cleats for different sports, but I know what I want. I want to stop feeling like an outlier. I want to stop feeling like I don't belong. I want the aqua-blue and yellow cleats that will make me fit in with my team.

Everyone will notice them: recruiters, my coach, my team. *These are my way to success. My stepping stone to my dream,* I convince myself as I yank the door open and walk right up to the attendant.

“How may I help you?” she asks with a wide smile and perky voice when she notices me.

Before she has time to assess me like the woman at the gas station, I make it known I intend to spend here. “Can I get those blue and yellow ones in an eleven?”

“Sure thing,” she says then disappears into a flap door behind the register. She returns and hands me a large box across the counter. “Would you like to try them on?”

“Sure.” I had already. A few times before, but she didn't know that, so I take a seat. “They have transitional traction, right? Low cleats are best for lacrosse.”

She stands beside me. “Yes. Those are one of our better ones. Do you play?”

Slipping my old cleats off, I use my heel to slide them under the bench and keep them out of sight.

“Yeah, for Den U.” I get up to see how they look on my feet. “We’ve got a game tonight.” *The fit is perfect.* After a few jumps and a couple of sprints in the empty store, I sit down and place my old ones in the box. “I’ll take them.”

She lifts her brows in surprise, or disgust at my dirty shoes in the pristine, shiny box. “They cost one hundred and seventy-nine dollars.”

But this time, I look her straight in the eye. Already these new cleats give me confidence. “That’s a good deal. I thought they would cost more.”

She tightens her lips as she snatches the box from me. “I’ll ring you up at the register.”

As I follow behind her, with confidence I didn’t have at the gas station, I bask in the glow of purchasing from this store. Purchasing something for myself and knowing this will make me stand out. I don’t know why, but I had a feeling these cleats would be the game changer.

The scanner reads the QR code, beeping the price onto the small screen facing me.

“Would that be cash or credit?” the teller asks as she plucks one of those fancy laminated paper bags from the pile.

“Debit.” My legs weaken as I hand her my mom’s card.

It’s an investment, for my future, I tell myself.

Once I’m done paying, I head out the door in my new cleats. One thing flows through my head: *Mom’s gonna kill me.*

TWO



something

STORM

GAZING AT MYSELF IN THE MIRROR OVER MY SLEEK VANITY table, I smooth my personal homemade cocktail—the perfectly plump curls formula—through my strands. My mind veers off, imagining Sam in his lacrosse uniform.

Every curl falls just right, and the shine is impeccable. I had to create perfection for my curls and coils to get one capable of doing all three: make my curls sleek, add moisture, and elongate. Some brands claim to do so, but they come up short.

I glance at the sheer, white curtains draped over my bedroom window.

I wish it would snow. I smile to myself. People's Christmas lights still line the siding of the building even though it's weeks past the first of the year.

I give myself a good look up and down. This hunter-green sweater goes perfectly with my outfit. Staring down at the only necklace I have, my heart flutters. It's special to me because Sam gave it to me last Valentine's Day. It's our secret. I wear it all the time and everyone thinks it was a random admirer who never showed himself. I smile, reaching down to the velvet-covered necklace stand I purchased just for this. I lift it over the top and undo the clutch, watching my reflection. I clasp it around my neck. It goes wonderfully with my outfit and falls just right between my cleavage.

Did I finish my homework? I wonder, glancing upward to think and I bite my bottom lip. *Yep! I'm good to go. Let me just close these containers and put them away.*

“You’re not wearing that!” my older brother, Porter, declares as he opens my door and steps into my room.

Startled, I drop the container in my hand and it falls to the floor.

“How many times do I have to tell you to knock first?” I turn to him as I try to fluff out my curls after scooping up the thankfully closed container. “Look what you made me do.”

“Change,” he demands.

“I’m not changing anything.” I glance back at my dresser mirror. “I look too cute.”

“It’s a lacrosse game, you’re not going to the club.”

“As if someone would wear this to the club.”

He frowns. “It’s like forty degrees outside, Storm.”

“I have a jacket. It goes with my shoes.” I giggle.

“At least wear some stockings or tights.”

“I was going to. The look isn’t complete without them. And I have these really cool boots that are the exact same color as the buttons on my shorts.” I say cutely tiptoeing toward the box and picking them up to show Porter, not that he cares how adorable my things are, just that I’m happy.

“Did I buy those?” He squints at the buttons as I point toward them.

“Technically no, *I* bought them. Was it with your money? Yes.”

“Don’t you have a pair of green boots just like that?”

“But they don’t match.”

“That’s a waste of money.”

“Fine, I’ll get a job. I’ll buy my own footwear.” I shoot back, smoothing sparkly lip gloss over my full lips.

“No.” Porter surrenders and flops down on the bed. “You need to be focused on your dual enrollment.”

“It’s not even dual enrollment. I have all my high school credits. I’m basically a college student.” I flutter my lashes.

“Yeah, except, you’re still in high school.”

He stops me in my tracks as I swerve around and look at him. “Well, I’m eighteen, so I don’t care—I’m in college.” I screw my lips to the side. “Well, I like to think I’m in college.”

He smiles as a good brother would. “How are you liking it so far?”

I gaze over at him, taking a few steps toward the bed to sit down beside him. “It’s okay. I’m still not exactly sure what I’m supposed to be doing, but at least I can be with Bria.”

“But not with me?”

“You’re a senior! And we literally have lived together since I was born.” I chuckle, pushing him a little. “And you’re one to talk. You literally live at work, if you’re not in class, you’re studying or practicing with Ezra.”

“But we see each other here.”

“Exactly. So, stop being weird about not seeing each other at school.” I giggle.

“Whatever.” He rises to his feet and heads toward the door. “I’ll be ready in about a half hour. We don’t need to be late. Sam would kill me if we were. It’s his first game. Ezra has to represent.”

“What if... What if he becomes a famous athlete. You think he’ll still be in Ezra?” I ask, staring at Porter.

“Of course. He started Ezra.”

“But he’s been playing lacrosse since middle school.”

“Yeah.” He smirks. “Hurry up.” He shuts the door.

I giggle, going back to the mirror to put the finishing touches on my look.

“Hey!” Porter says, startling me so much that I drop my comb.

“What?”

“Did you give our demo to Bria to give to her dad?”

“Yes. Now go away! I need to finish getting ready”

“Oh okay.” He smirks then leaves again.

“Loser.” I laugh as my phone rings.

Popping down on the bed, I grab it and answer. “Hey.”

“What’s up?” Sam says.

“Nothing, really. I just had to shoo Porter out of my room, being an overbearing brother as usual.”

He laughs. “He doesn’t suspect anything, does he?”

“No. I don’t think so.”

“Are you still coming to my first game?”

“Yes. Why would I suddenly change my mind?”

“I don’t know. I thought maybe Porter would think it was weird that you wanted to go. You didn’t come to any of my games in high school.”

“So. Even if Porter did think it was weird, do you think I’d just not come or something? I said I would...” I swallow. “... so I am.”

“Good.” He pauses. “What are you wearing?”

“What?” I grimace.

“To the game—or now. I could go for either,” he says playfully, his voice getting higher at the end.

“Oh, you’ll like it.”

“I already like it.”

“Storm!” Porter calls, opening my door.

I shove my phone underneath my pillow. *Why did I do that? That looks super suspicious! It’s not like he can see Sam on the phone with me—but he could ask who it is and...*

“What?”

“Are you ready?”

“A-Almost. I—”

“What were you doing? Why are your cheeks so red? Were you....” He suggests something with his eyes.

“No! Get out.”

“What did you shove under the pillow? Was it one of your so-called *friends*?”

“What? I don’t have any friends like that! Get out, Porter!” I toss one of my pillows at him.

He disappears and closes the door before it can hit him.

I reluctantly say, “Hello.”

And as I assume, Sam is laughing his head off.

“Shut up. I don’t do that.”

“No, because you have me to be your *friend*.”

Sam makes me smile. He always has.

“I guess we won’t be able to see each other after the game, everybody’s going to be there.”

“We’ll probably go out to eat somewhere.” Though I’d rather be pushed up against a wall, making out with Sam than eating around a bunch of people who barely notice I exist. Sam is the only one who doesn’t just see me as Porter’s little sister.

“Yeah, but I was hoping to celebrate our victory just me and you.” His voice lowers into a seductive, trancelike tone.

I get lost in it for a moment then I shake it off, closing my eyes as I swallow my desire for him. “How do you know you’re going to win?”

“Because I have my lucky cleats and my lucky Storm.”

I let out a coy laugh, making sure to focus on the shoes and not his statement about me being his. That man knows he can get to my heart so easily. “I thought you hated the ones you have?”

“Yeah, those old grubby ones. I got some new ones. Had to be fresh for my first college game.”

“Oh, then maybe they are lucky.”

“Not as lucky as you. I’ll only be able to do my best if you’re there.”

My cheeks warm as I rub my elbow. “Shut up.”

“I went to the mall today.”

“Oh, me too.”

“I got you something.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, Valentine’s Day is coming up. I thought we could go out or something.”

“That’s a super informal way to ask me out for Valentine’s.”

“Fine, I’ll take someone else. I’ll just have to find another person named Storm to give a necklace too.”

“You got me *another* necklace?” I gasp, getting up on my knees. “You’re not supposed to tell me. It’s supposed to be a surprise.”

“Okay, act surprised when I give it to you at dinner.”

“You’re horrible at romance.”

“You’ll be thinking about me all night, all through the game. All week. So, I think I’m pretty good,” he boasts. A pause follows. I run my fingers over the necklace he got me last year and hold it in my hands.

“You don’t have to buy me things.” *I don’t know why he thinks he does.*

“I wanted to.” He pauses. “Plus, you have one with your middle name, you have to have one with your first.”

“What’s next year’s gonna have on it, my last name?”

“Or mine.” He says so casually, as if it doesn’t suggest a whole other situation here. We can’t even tell people about us, now he’s making flirtatious jokes like that. Is he insane? What would he even say to Porter? *By the way, I’ve been sneaking around with your sister since senior year—I deflowered her, and we’re getting married.* Sam would never live to see

another day—I wouldn't even be able to go to his funeral. I get lost in my mind with all sorts of thoughts running through it, my chest is tight and my head seems like it's closing in on itself.

“Storm.” Sam's voice pulls me out of my slight freakout.

“Yeah?” My voice fades before I can finish speaking.

He chuckles. “Or course not—Porter wasn't going to let me go.”

“I see.” He continued laughing.

“Do you ever wonder what he'd do if he found out about us?”

“I do, but I can handle it.”

I tilt my head to the side, my heart gleaming with joy.

“Hey, asshole! Get off the phone, the game starts in an hour.” I hear from the other end of the line. One of his teammates probably. “I gotta go. See ya later?”

“Yeah.” I gulp and toss the phone to the other side of the bed after the call ends. “I love you,” I whisper. I don't know if I'll ever have enough guts to say it to his face.

I scoot further onto the bed and grab one of the teddy bears he got me from the carnival this past summer. How did we even get away with that?

Where did he get the money for new cleats? I wonder, staring into the swirls of my white ceiling. And another necklace? And dinner? Did he rob a bank? No! Sam would never do something like that. “Maybe—he got a job and didn't tell me? Grant money? Shows? Do they really make a bunch of money at shows?” I lift the pastel rainbow-colored stuffed

animal in the air. It matches my bedding perfectly and the entire theme of my room. I gaze into its black round eyes.

I hope he's not just spending his money on me. I mean sure, I love the gifts he gives me, and going on a real date would be awesome... it's been a long time, but all I really need is him. I'd trade everything if we could just be together and not have to hide. I'd trade a new necklace for a phrase. A simple one:

Storm, would you be my girlfriend?

THREE



are you good?

SAM

“SHIN-CARTER, ALL AMERICAN FROM DENNINGTON TOWNSHIP Highschool starting out his season with a bang. He’s showing us why a freshman makes it to the starting lineup here at Den U,” the announcer enthuses halfway through the third quarter of the game.

The cheers from the crowd fill my ears as I lunge forward in efforts to keep yet another flying ball from entering the net. I maneuver my body and my stick to the left, evading my opponent’s crosse. Thrashing onto the grass, I send the ball from my net, down the field.

“Nothing’s getting by him tonight! Opening with a three and zero lead sets Den U up for a season they haven’t had in over twenty years,” the announcer continues.

“Carter!” my coach calls to me as we break.

The other team glances over at us from their huddle across the field.

“Keep sending those balls back,” Coach tells me.

“Yes, sir.” I nod.

“They’re not making any goals this quarter.”

“Right,” I say through my teeth.

“I took a chance on you, Carter. You earned it. When O’Neal got hurt during camp, you were right there to fill his spot. Never missed a practice, played with your heart.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“You’re the best keeper we’ve got this season, maybe even the best in a few years.” He chuckles, roughly putting his arm around me, shaking me so hard my head rattles in the helmet.

My fingers are numb, and the gloves are a little tight, but it’s game time again. Running to my position in front of the net, I scan the crowd for Storm, but the whistle blows before I can find her.

Competitive grunts and sticks that sound like wooden swords fill my ears. One of the attackers on my team receives the ball from a midfielder, setting up an offensive play. A scuffle happens, causing us to lose the ball.

“Oh!” the announcer, howls. “That last play could cost them. There’s still time for the other team to come back. Shin-Carter because— ”

Fuck. This announcer is pissing me off. I sniff the air, mustering all the focus I can gather, angling my eyes sharply to the left and pulling them back toward the right. *If I make one wrong move, most everyone I care about will know.* My chest tightens as I take a deep breath. *I won’t be able to show my face on campus next week if I let these assholes get a goal.* I shake off my jitters with a calming exhale. *Okay lucky cleats. Time to prove your worth.*

The other team advances forward with what looks like a well-thought-out play. Too bad, I’ve seen this play a million times. They’re going to try to fake me out. They lack a strong defensive player, so they’ll be lucky to even make to the net with this play.

I watch their moves, calculating what advances they may take next, studying their footwork and the way in which they come toward me. Two players round the goalpost. My feet move quickly. The clock winds down.

If they don't make a move soon, we'll win.

As the players make their way to the frontlines, the attacker from the opposing team swings his crosse, making the ball airborne.

He panicked—no points this late in the game rattles some cages. The attacker's crosse hits his knees and he flips over. Another player comes from behind, snatching the ball from the air and launching it away.

Swift-footed, I estimate the ball's trajectory. A few seconds pass. It's almost here. I don't know if I'll keep this one out of the net. It passes me, so I throw my entire body around in a spin as forcefully as I can, closing my eyes for impact.

The buzzer ends the game!

My face is smooshed into the metal bars of the facemask and I'm eating turf. When I open my eyes, I see the ball on the ground just inches away from the net.

I did it!

The heaviness falls away, cheers dilute the taste of wet grass, and I smile as I my teammates lift me off the ground, shouting and singing my praises.

These really are my lucky cleats.



Coach spills his drink as he lifts his mug in salute toward the ceiling. "I knew this was our year!"

The team toasts to our victory.

“The scouts are going to be out early this year,” Coach teases. “Keep playing like that, and we might actually make it to the championship this season.”

This team usually has an okay regular season but disappears during finals and championships. “I’ll do what I can, Coach.”

He lifts his drink to the ceiling again, the team roaring loudly through the nearly empty restaurant. “Here’s to dedication!”

The team echoes back the salute.

Well, all of them but me.

I’m not dedicated to Lacrosse. I’m dedicated to success. To money. To helping my parents. To getting Storm a real gold necklace, not a gold-plated one. I’ll do whatever I can to be better, and if this sport takes me there, then I’m all in. If not, there’s always Ezra.

The band and storm, that’s where my heart is.

“Hey, stop fantasizing about being a pro-athlete.” Porter nudges me in the shoulder. He and Storm sit down at the table behind us along with the other members of the band. “Good game.”

“Thanks.” While Porter turns to order, I check out Storm’s outfit. She was right. I definitely like it.

She sends me a shy smile and pulls her hair behind her ear as the waitress comes toward her. That green V-neck shows off her perfect cleavage, while the matching shorts with four buttons on each side are short enough to draw attention to those semi-sheer tights. To top it all off, the necklace I gave her hangs from her delicate neck.

“Why do you look so out of breath?” Porter drops the menu to the table and takes a sip of his water.

It’s hard not to be out of breath when she looks so damn good. I smirk at Porter and slide one of my teammate’s celebratory flasks from off the table. “I may have had a couple sips of this.”

Storm looks everywhere but at me, but I don’t miss that sexy little eyeroll.

“Don’t let all that praise go to your head.” Porter pauses to ask his sister if she’s ready to order desert.

Her cheeks rose up as she looks up at me through those thick lashes.

The longer I stare, the dryer my mouth gets and the more tingly my skin becomes.

“What do you two want to share?” Porter leans back on his chair and nudges his sister’s shoulder in a playful way. “I swear, every time it comes to desert, women analyze it like it’s a career choice.”

Storm snaps her head up and glares at her brother. “I’ll take the cookie dough cheesecake.”

“Great.” He holds his finger in the air to get the waitresses attention. I half-swivel to my team, to make sure I’m not missing anything, and excuse myself. Dragging my chair over, I situate myself in the narrow space between Storm and her brother.

For a brief moment, she brushes her thigh against mine and we lock eyes. Dangerous, considering her brother is only a foot from me, but I don’t get caught.

Instead, Porter decides to kick my shoes. “What’d you do? Paint your old cleats and make them look new?” Porter laughs.

A nervous laugh falls from my lips, as I run my fingers through my hair. “No, I got some new ones this morning.”

“That way you’re still wearing them?”

I snort. “Since I won’t be buying any kind of shoe for a while, I’m wearing the hell out of these anytime I can.”

Porter’s eyebrows furrow and that fatherly expression he so often has when we talk is plastered all over his face. “What do you mean? You guys are good, right?” Porter asks.

He might as well have said, *Do you need me to give you some money?*

I clutch my jaw, not particularly enjoying him calling me out in front of the girl I want to impress. My eyes dart toward Storm, then back to her brother. “Yeah. Mom got... I mean...” I clear my throat and gaze toward the door. “We’re good.”

“The last time we talked, you hadn’t bought your books yet.”

The guy beside me, my teammate who doesn’t need to know my business, tunes into the conversation.

“You got them though, right?” Porter asks.

Storm’s eyes flit over me and she bites the inner corner of her lip.

Stop fucking embarrassing me in front of my team, in front of my coach, in front of Storm. He’s looking out for me, but did he have to say that shit here? Now? If my team knew I was some lame-ass dude from Downtown Dennington who couldn’t even afford a fucking window air conditioner, they wouldn’t be cheering me on. My coach wouldn’t be putting

me on a pedestal. They'd treat me just like the lady at the gas station did, like shit.

"Yeah, I'm good." I point toward the bar. "I'm going to go get something to celebrate, who wants something?" I ask the team and the group. A few guys raise their hands, but at least, they think I have money. "I'll just get a round on me." I hop up and head toward the bar to avoid this conversation going any further in front of my teammates.

Porter follows me with a scowl on his face.

I wouldn't have to spend money, if he didn't make me seem like I had none.

"Sam?" Porter calls to me, in a chastising tone. "What are you doing?"

Just short of the bar, I turn toward him. "Look, you're Storm's big brother, not mine. Stop hovering."

"I *am* your brother, and I'm just trying to make sure you're okay," Porter whispers to me as he leans in. "You've got on some new cleats, you're acting all weird in front of these people who don't even know you. I'm just making sure this shit isn't going to your head."

"What if it is? I earned it."

"It was one game." He always has to bring the pessimism. "And you didn't need *new* cleats to do it. They aren't magic."

No, but they made me feel like they were, and it worked. "Porter, you didn't have to make me feel like shit in front of everyone. That was an asshole move."

"What?" Porter shoots his upper body back in shock. "Caring about you makes me an asshole? I was going to ask if you needed cash to get them."

“No you were judging me for *wasting* money on things you don’t approve it, but you forget one thing.”

“What’s that?” He rubs his chin and then rests his hand on the back of the barstool.

“I don’t need your charity!” Adrenaline pulses through me.

“No, but you accept it.”

My pulse vibrates in my chest. “Porter, that was one time —”

“Look, never mind.” He holds his hands in the air in truce. “How are you going to pay for the drinks?”

My mom’s card.

Before I can even answer, Porter signals something to the bartender. “Let me get this one for you as an I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have blasted you out like that.”

“No—”

“Stop being so fucking proud—take the help. I know your situation.”

“I don’t have a situation that I need help with.”

“Okay.” He shrugs, undoubtedly still having more questions. “I’m still picking up this round.” He manages a smile. “If not because I was in the wrong, but because you were out of control on the field. I almost got worried a scout would take you away from the band.”

“Never. As for the team, people like me have to *overachieve*.” I end it at that, emphasizing the *over*.

His smile fades away and a serious expression crosses his face. “*Like you?*” Porter shakes his head in disbelief. “Sam...” he stops and restarts, “You don’t have to pretend with me—

with us, okay? You're my friend, and my friends are my family."

Uh. That doesn't sound great... considering what I do with his sister behind is back.

I drop my shoulders. "I've got this, but thank you. I'll get my books soon."

"All right, big man." Porter mocks me. This is his way of apologizing for being overprotective. Storm has it ten times worse.

"What are you guys talking about?" Storm appears to my left. Before Porter catches on, I sneak a peek at her perfect silhouette.

Damn, I could kiss that shimmery lip gloss right off her lips.

"Nothing." I say, like an idiot. I almost forget Porter is standing here, and reach out for her. My grin falls right off my face as I dart my eyes toward him.

Oh shit!

Storm angles toward her brother and wipes that come-hither stare right off her face. "Uh, so... are you going to introduce us to your team, Sam?" She changes the subject.

"Right. Yeah, come on."

FOUR



best friends

STORM

“AS PLANNED, THE STUDENT WHO GOT THE HIGHEST SCORE ON last week’s quiz could leave class early today—so you’re dismissed, Ms. Wyatt.”

I sit up straight, like a deer in headlights. “*I* got the highest score?” I ask, tilting my head to the left and laying my fingers on my chest.

“Sure did. So, enjoy your day off.”

“But what about the lecture?”

The instructor laughs heartily. “We’re just watching a movie today. Feel free to stay, but you can read up on the events described in the documentary in chapters five and six.”

“I’ll do that.” I shrug on my pastel rainbow backpack purse and head out of the large wooden door at noon.

At this time, Bria is usually headed to the cafeteria before her two o’clock class. Since we can have lunch today, I text her to meet me in the courtyard. After I head toward the double doors and get across to the courtyard. I find Bria near the front of the building.

“Here I am.” I smile.

“Oh, my goodness. You look awesome.”

“And I don’t usually?” I angle my head toward her, pretending to be dead serious.

Her mouth slips open slightly, but I lose my composure and hook my arm through hers.

“I’m just messing with you.”

She shakes her head and tugs me toward the coffee shop inside the liberal arts building. “Well, I’m not. Your curls really are popping today,” she notes. “What did you use?”

“I got this new mousse. I combined it with this keratin and honey leave-in conditioner. It really hydrates and seals in the moisture. Plus, it takes the crunch out—and I didn’t have to use any gel.”

“Are you serious? No gel?”

I swing open the liberal arts building entrance door. “Yep!”

“What about the dress?”

I sway my hips in front of Bria to show off the cut. “Ezra has practice this afternoon. I’m crashing.”

We enter the café and ease down into the brown leathery chairs.

Bria places her bag beside her and swivels to face me. “Porter’s going to wonder why you want to go all of a sudden... and why you’re walking in with Sam?”

“I’m not walking in with Sam. And, as far as Porter is concerned, I’m there to see him and get a ride.”

Bria bobs her head. “It may work, except you’re supposed to be in class, no? Porter’s anal about that stuff.”

“Porter’s uptight. Period.” I slide my leg down to plant both feet on the floor. “But I’m doing good here.” I slide my Nutrition’s test out and show it to her.

She leans forward to look at the grade and smiles wide. “That’s excellent, Storm!”

“Thanks.” Her happiness for me gives me a warm feeling. I slide my test bag into my backpack and zip it up, feeling kind of dumb for showing off my first perfect score to Bria, the A-student.

“Are you proud?” she asks.

“Yeah, actually.” For me, this is amazing. “Because I failed a grade as a kid, I always have to overprove I’m not dumb. People just assume I am.”

“You’re not dumb, Storm.”

“I know, but sometimes I feel like everyone else thinks I am. If I wouldn’t have been able to do the dual enrollment, I’d be graduating high school at 19?” Some of the people in my grade were seventeen.

“Don’t forget you had to have pretty good grades to get into this program.”

“True, but the people in high school don’t know that.”

“Forget whoever is talking crap about you.”

I sniff the air with my eyes downcast to the floor. “Yeah.” I smirk, raising my eyes up to meet her gaze. “Screw them. We have each other.”

“Best friends since eighth grade...”

“Until you disappeared.”

“You mean until my father freaked out and stopped letting us hangout as much because he sprouted propellers and became a helicopter parent?”

I giggle, but what happened to Bria lacked amusement. “If my kid almost drowned, I’d sprout more than just propellers.”

I swallow and gaze up at her. “Sorry, I know that bothers you. That he’s always hovering.”

“It’s okay.” She sighs. “My dad’s out of control. I don’t even know if I’m going to be going here next semester. He wants me to take a year off or something.”

What? “I barely get to see you now and you go here.”

“Yeah...”

“My brother will definitely be like your father when he has kids. He gets on me for every little thing, how I dress, how I wear my hair, how much make up I have on. Sometimes I wish Mom and Dad were still here.”

“At least Porter lets you go out. My Dad won’t even let me come see you guys. Porter pulled me out of the pool when everyone else stood around like they didn’t see anything.” She smiles, a glimmer in her eyes as she gazes off into the distance.

“Your Dad is kind of being weird. I mean, Porter ran off stage to save you. Pretty sure he chucked his guitar at Sam in the middle of the song.” I chuckle as I mimic what happened.

Storms laughs so hard she starts gasping for breath and coughing. She lets out a rough sound as she pulls her backpack to the front of her feet and pulls out her inhaler. Taking two puffs calms her a bit. Sipping from her water bottle helps her regain control of her breathing enough to talk. “Sorry,” she says, a bit short of breath.

This is why her dad is the way he is. She didn’t just almost drown, she kind of did.

“Don’t worry. In that little hiatus I’m being forced to take. I’m going to see a respiratory doctor in LA.” She clears her throat once more. “I don’t want to talk about.”

I nod.

“If I *really* have to take a year off of school, I don’t know what I’m going to do. Being on campus is the only time I get a break.” Her voice hollows out. “It’s going to suck.”

“It really will.” *For both of us.*

FIVE



ezra iram

SAM

EZRA HAS A LOOK. SWAGGER.

Not that we did it on purpose, but catering to different types of fans has done well for us. Porter is the stoic one, the type every woman wants to see let loose. They get lost in his grey eyes and his warm-toned pale skin with the slightest hint of red undertone; he finds himself declining more advances than he accepts, probably because of his melodic vice.

It blends perfectly with mine.

I'm the good boy, the kind of guy every girl would want to take home to their parents. My voice? I'm not trying to gloat or anything, but it's what everyone notices. A guy like me isn't expected to have the chords I do.

Legend is the silent one in the background. The type of guy every girl notices and becomes spellbound by his quick handed drumstick tricks and his almost unrealistic ability to match any rhythm. He has a deep, hypnotic voice, normally soothing when he's not in a bad mood, then it just sounds like thunder. Throw in his chiseled jawline and his flawless sepia skin and what woman could resist him?

Our bassist, Wilder, is the nerdy but chic one. Bowtie, suspenders, and a six-pack. Blue eyes and jet-black hair against his pale skin gives him this exotic look that always gets questions. His voice is soft and has a twang to it.

"I need to make some adjustments." He gazes down at his instruments. "The downbeat sounds weird when we enter the second measure... I need the drums and the base to be like

butter, then when I come in with the rhythm guitar, that'll wow the crowd."

I suck in a deep breath and close my eyes. Porter demanding perfection is kind of comforting. The basement of Porter's office building feels more like my home than where I lay my head.

I love the sounds of this place; it's quiet and there's nobody here to interrupt us. Sometimes I wish I could set up here, but I wouldn't want to worry my parents or leave them without a good reason.

Porter plucks at his strings, tuning his guitar as the rest of the band prepares to go through another run of our next show's set list.

"Why are we doing this show anyway? We don't play jazz." Our drummer, Legend, scoffs as he juggles his sticks in the air.

Porter arrows his eyes at Legend. We can't afford to have a fight right before such a big show. If Porter's about to answer Legend's question with another question, I'm sure the thunder is about to roll.

Porter rises to his feet, nestling his guitar on its stand. "Because... this is a big show for Ezra. We'll play some oldies, throw in some modern songs, then a few of ours. We get exposure, expand the audience. It wouldn't hurt us to gain a more mature audience. Plus, we get to bring somebody and get to have all that fancy shit for free."

Phew.

"Does it really matter? We're making *bank!*" Our bassist hops up from the chair he had been sitting in, fiddling with his

latest gadget to enhance the sounds of his bass. “This will be the most money we’ve probably ever made.”

“But,” I interject, “we have to pay them for the spot.” An uneasy sigh slips from my lips as my phone reminds me of the time. *Should I just go?* It’s not like Den U is that far, in fact it’s just a few blocks down the road, so maybe I can stay for another half hour or so and still make it to practice.

“Technically...” Wilder smiles, gaining my attention and pulling me back into the conversation. “They’re just taking ten percent, right Porter?”

“Yeah,” Porter answers with a side-eye glance at me.

“Ten percent of what?” I ask.

“We play after the dinner service. Everyone in the dining room, who remains for the show, has to pay a cover charge. So the house takes ten percent of the cover sales and half the bar. We keep our own tips,” Porter clarifies.

“Yeah, well.” I sigh. “We don’t know what kind of crowd there’s going to be. What if it’s empty, then splitting it four ways? Might not be as much as you think,” I say. *I hope it’s at least enough to cover those cleats and get my books, and pay Porter back for those drinks.*

I glance up to find Porter staring at me.

Wilder chimes in, “Lebanon Ferry? On Valentine’s Day? No way it’ll be empty. I mean people get married there, have huge parties there. Every year the V-day reservations are like a year out. Trust me. It’s worth it.”

“Doesn’t it bother you they want us in penguin suits?” Legend asks. “Who’re we supposed to be, the Rat Pack?”

“Sam?” Porter calls. “You good on the suit front?”

I dart my eyes over to him. Why does he keep calling me out?

“You don’t have a suit?” Wilder asks.

“I do.” Even if I did need something to wear, why the hell would he ask me in front of everyone? Who am I kidding? They all know... Fuck.

“While you all figure out the tweaking, I’m going to call my mom to see if she needs a ride.” I lie, I need some air, but it’s believable enough. I leave the band discussing details and head out of the room.

Once I shut the door behind me, I rest the back of my head against the cement wall leading to the staircase and take a deep breath.

It really sucks being the only one who has to be asked things like that. Porter and Storm live in a nice, gated apartment community. Legend has his own house and a good job, and he’s only twenty-five. Wilder lives in a different universe, basically. Wilder’s family home is massive. Every time we performed there, I could see myself living in the beautiful Mediterranean home with stucco siding, courtyards, and balconies. The two swimming pools and open garden would be perfect for my mom. Maybe Storm and I could even get married there someday.

I stare at the sullied gray cement for a while, then take deep breath and pull my phone out of my pocket to look at the screen. *Practice has already started.*

Shit. Coach is depending on me. *I’m just gonna tell the guys I’m leaving.*

My thoughts almost fade away as quick steps trample down the stairwell. I shoot off of the wall and turn to face the

opening behind me.

“Oh!” someone yelps and tumbles in a dress down the last four stairs.

“Hey, are you okay?” I rush to see if I can maybe lighten their dismount to the pavement.

“Yeah. I’m fine,” she whines.

“Storm?” I grimace in disbelief.

“Sam?” she pouts, pulling her dress down to a more appropriate covering.

“What are you doing here?” Her presence puts me in a better mood. I glance down at her bare legs as I lift her to her feet.

“Falling?” She fluffs her hair and straightens her dress. “I called Porter like twenty times.” Her cheeks rose up a little bit, and she snatches her eyes away from me and directs them toward the ground. “I locked my keys in the car.”

“Again?” I grin at her. “Or did you just come to see me?”

“Shut up.” She frowns, cutely sticking out her bottom lip. “Where’s Porter?”

I can’t help but laugh. No one, absolutely no one, can brighten my mood like she does.

“Nice rainbow underwear.”

She gasps, pulling her dress downward. “You saw?”

“I did. I mean, you did fall down a couple stairs. Did you hurt yourself?”

“No... Well, I think I got a scrape on my knee.”

I glance down and she did have a tiny little scratch on her left knee. I kneel down and fold my hands behind her leg, lifting it toward me. I slowly kiss it. “Now it’s all better.”

“It is.” She giggles.

I wrap my arms around her slim waist. Our lips grow closer together. Her arms drape over my neck, my hands traveling places they have no place being in the basement of a parking garage.

Her heavy breaths fill the dry silence, the city sounds fading further the deeper I fall into her.

“Sam!” Porter’s voice jolts me away from Storm. Her lips smear a glittery gloss on the collar of my white shirt before I spin around and slide to the side of her.

“Yeah?” I answer quickly, realizing my lips are glossy too. *Shit!* I use the back of my wrist to clear away any sign that his sister’s lips were on mine.

“What are you do—” He pauses, I’m sure noticing Storm beside me. “What’re you doing here, Storm? What were you two doing?”

“Well, she kind of fell down the stairs.” I laugh.

“It’s not that funny.” She rolls her eyes at me, that cute little pouty face warming me inside. I had run cold when I heard Porter’s voice.

“I locked my keys in the car. And then yes...” She arrows her eye at me, then pulls them away as she folds her arms over her perky chest. “I may have slipped or something.”

I laugh even harder.

“Oh my gosh!” she retorts as if she’s annoyed by my hooting. “Can I use your spare key, Porter?”

“Yeah. I’ll grab it.” Porter looks at me. “We’re about to start the set, are you ready?”

“Yeah.” I try my hardest not to look at Storm, but I catch one last stolen glimpse at her before I head back to the room.



you're my valentine

STORM

I PLOP MY HEAD OUT OF MY DOOR AND GIVE THE APARTMENT A once over, checking for my brother.

Clear. Even though I hid the sexy dress under the hoodie and sweats, this will not flow with my brother. Too much see-through material.

“Hey.” Porter walks through the living room with his guitar, eyeing my outfit. “Thought you were going to Bria’s before the show.”

“Yeah. I’m leaving in a few minutes. What are you doing?” I head over to the couch and take a seat.

“Restrunging my guitar for the show tonight.” He plops the base up on the armchair. “Want to be my plus one tonight?”

“Of course,” I say, my voice a little shaky. I’ll already be at Lebanon Ferry with my date, just have to figure out how not to get caught.

He grabs some string from inside his guitar case. “Great. I have to be there a little earlier for the soundcheck. I’ll be in the Viewing Hall backstage if you want to stop in before taking a seat. Playing there can make a huge difference for us. Reps are going to be there to check us out.”

“I’m excited for you.” I smooth out the little patch of tulle, warping the sweatpants at my thigh. “You’re going to kill it.”

“I hope so. Ezra deserves this.” As he tunes the guitar, I watch my brother get lost in the notes, every so often checking his phone for notifications. The material of my dress scratches

against my skin as I cross my legs, reminding me of how uncomfortable lies are. More specifically, how uncomfortable they will be when they blow up in my face.

“I’ll meet you there at nine?” I ask as I stand up.

“The show starts at nine. I’d get there a little earlier, though. If you want to come wish us luck.”

I smile stiffly. Maybe I should just tell Porter the truth: I’m Sam’s Valentine’s, and I want to be Sam’s plus one. But what if it makes things weird between them, and they don’t have a good show?

“Yeah, I will get there.”

Porter’s brows arch up and he juts his chin at my rainbow sweatpants. “You wearing that tonight?”

I snap my eyes toward him. This is my first outfit of the night. I have another one, more brother-appropriate, in the car. Sighing, I glance toward the door and the small gym bag with my heels, make-up, and the extra dress. Only I need a weekend worth of clothes for a single date. Mid-way toward the door, I turn to my brother in the middle of the room. “What if I was going out on a date?”

Porter laughs as if me seeing someone is a joke.

“Well, you’re an adult, so you’re free to go anywhere you’d like.”

Huh... “With anyone?”

“Sure.” Porter shoots me his version of a serial killer smile. “Just don’t feel too bad when he stands you up.”

I narrow my eyes at Porter. “Do I look like someone who gets stood up?”

Porter chuckles. “He won’t have a choice in the situation.” He plucks a guitar string, sending an eerie note through the air. “First he has to go through me.”

“Right.” I extend the word, bobbing my head, half wondering if he’s speaking the truth.

“You don’t need to be dating, Storm.” He glances up at me. “Why? Are you going on a date?” His entire body tenses at the idea, adding to the answer.

“Eventually, I’m going to date someone,” I prepare him. “Maybe it will be someone you like.”

“I’m never going to like anyone you date. I’m your brother.” He puts his guitar down against the couch and sits on the armrest, resting his elbow on his thigh. “Where’s this all coming from, Storm? You’ve never seemed interested in it before.”

“In dating?” I ask with an exaggerated tone.

Porter holds his hand up in defense. “Okay. I mean is it because it’s Valentine’s Day?”

I shrug and glance at the garment bag. “Maybe I want to be someone else’s plus one, you know?”

Porter cocks his head to the side and stays silent for longer than is comfortable between us. “Don’t be that kind of woman who needs to go out on Valentine’s Day. Trust me, the type of guy who wants to take a woman out tonight is expecting something.”

I chew on the inside of my lip and stop before he notices. “Well, I’ll text you when I’m on my way to Lebanon Ferry.”

“Okay.”

As I turn the doorknob, Porter clears his throat. Turning to face him, I swoop my bag up and wave, but he sits in the same spot, one arm hooked around his neck and rubbing the tension. *That's never a good sign.*

“What is it?” I ask dangling the bag in front of me.

He angles his chin toward me and bobs it as if answering his own thoughts. “You’re going to see Bria, right?”

Shit. “Yeah.” Lying sucks, but telling him now will mess up his gig tonight, and that would not only make me a shitty sister, but a shitty Valentine.

“Have fun.”

I force a giggle and head toward the car, a lot more nervous than before.



The extravagant lighting on the outside of the building illuminates the name: Lebanon Ferry. I still can't believe he got us a spot at the restaurant. Nor do I know how, but I assume it has something to do with them playing at the Viewing Room on the other side of the building.

I pull into the parking lot and look for a spot near the Viewing Room door, but opt for one closer to the restaurant instead. The spot between the Jeep and the SUV offers just enough coverage to reduce the risk of Porter noticing my car but a full view to the restaurant main window.

Great. To avoid drawing attention, I shift my seat back, expanding the leg room, and pull down the pants. One of the sides gets stuck to a piece of sequence.

Please don't ruin my dress, I pray as I tug in efforts to unhook the loose thread from the glittery piece. But it doesn't work, so I try the oversized hoodie. Widening the neck hole, I slide it over my face, careful not to fray the hairs on my ponytail.

It snags one of my earrings, tugging on it and hurting me.

Out of frustration, I wiggle my head and body to free myself. In the process, my elbow presses the unlock button and I decide to get out before I damage the dress. It's not like I'm naked. I need a minute, tops, to get ready. No one will notice.

Instead, I tumble out of the car and hit the ground.

After a short moment of frustration and a few eyes looking my way, I get up and remove my earring, which loosens everything. I toss the hoodie on the passenger seat and carefully detach the snags of the inner fabric off the sweatpants from the bottom of my dress.

Finally, I'm free.

Hopping back in the car, I quickly get to doing my makeup: some shimmery eyeshadow and some creamy blush to set off the look. Then add tinted lip gloss.

I close the front driver's side door after grabbing the bag with my shoes. I unpack my clutch and rest it on the top of the car, then slip on my heels.

Now I'm ready. I run my fingers through my hair to smooth it down, just in case.

My stilettos take me to the entrance. My heart races as I step in through the restaurant door and meet the host at his counter. Within moments, I'm escorted through the main floor. The hanging lamps with the fiberglass shades deliver a soft

yellow-orange glow, perfect lighting for my outfit: a sleeveless, A-line black cherry-colored dress with a plunging neckline and a thin layer of tulle underneath. Even though I'm about to fall over in these pointed-toe black stilettos, it's worth it to see the awe on Sam's face when I come up to the table.

After he pushes my chair out for me, The host excuses himself. I take a seat, wondering how long it's going to take Same to start talking again.

Two minutes.

"W-Well, you look nice," he mumbles, staring me down, the stem of his gold-trimmed water glass threading between his fingers. His eyes scan my body as if they have found their very own playground and don't know where to play first.

"You don't look too bad either," I reply.

Despite his suit being too big, he looks amazing. His crisp, black hair has a slight curl; his bangs fall right below his eyes. It almost pisses me off when he runs his fingers through it, exposing his forehead for a brief moment, but then those raven locks fall right back into place.

I dip my chin downward and tilt my head to admire him. His nose is not thin or wide, it's right in between. Perfect.

His lips? The lower is slightly plumper than the upper. Better to kiss.

"Thanks." He inhales heavily. "If you were aiming to please, then..."

I flutter my lashes at him. "I'm surprised it didn't wrinkle. I had to take off my sweats in the parking lot."

He laughs as he no doubt pictures how it must have gone.

After hanging my clutch on the side of my chair, I deadpan, “It’s not funny.”

He chuckles and reaches for my hand across the table. “Well, you’re a little clumsy, so I’m sure it was.”

I slip my hand over his palm and watch as he rubs his thumb over my skin. His sexy gaze flits from my thick lashes to the gloss on my lips and lingers, as if he wants to taste the soft pillows right here in the middle of this crowded room.

My lips part slightly, inviting him. Enticing him. Daring him to kiss me and make this public, but he doesn’t. Underneath the table, the tip of his boot presses against my stiletto and nestles between my legs. He leans forward, creating a vacuum between us. It’s him and me, and so much tension, I can’t breathe.

“For the lady,” the well-dressed waiter interrupts the moment, handing me a bouquet of long-stemmed, soft pink roses.

Tingles travel down my spine like a gust of wind. My entire body shivers. “Sam.” I take them from the man and lay them on the table. “Thank you.”

Sam dismisses the waiter with a polite head nod while I gaze around the beautiful dining room. Fancy and romantic. Tables and chairs fit for celebrities, carpeted floors, and elevator music in the background. The stage in the center catches me off guard.

“The stage? Are you not playing in the Viewing Room?”

Sam glances toward the stage. The stage has a partition in the center for the nights where they need a 360 stage.”

“Oh.” I tense at the thought.

“Don’t worry. They aren’t opening the stage to this side tonight. They make more money that way.” He leans back and grabs the leather menu from beside him, opens it, and folds it on the table so both of us can read. It provides a little privacy, but I don’t feel right. “I don’t really want to die by my best friend’s hands, so...”

“I know. I thought about telling Porter, but he kind of threatened your ability to breathe.”

Sam gives me his I-told-you-so look.

What if we get caught? What if one of the guys show up here or someone we know? Porter will be here in less than three hours, maybe we should have gone somewhere else? Just a couple of hours ago I wanted to tell my brother, now I’m terrified, and it’s not because he threatened to eliminate any boyfriend I have, although I highly doubt he’d kill him, but it would be a murder. An end to their relationship.

To avoid the conversation, I glance around the dining room for a moment. “This is beautiful.” But I swallow the rest of my thoughts. The ones that would push for an outcome no one is ready for.

I highly doubt he’d kill him, but it would be a murder. An end to their relationship. “I don’t think right now is the right time, but it would’ve been nice to ride here together.”

“It would have been. But...” he says, signaling to the waiter, “we’re here now and it’s Valentine’s Day. Let’s enjoy it.”

“How did you even get reservations for Lebanon Ferry anyway?” I ask.

“I have my sources.” He winks. “We’ll be fine. Two hours is plenty of time to eat and hang out.”

Hang out? Add rushing Valentine's Day to the list of why secret relationships suck. "So much for the matching lingerie. I was kind of hoping you'd rip it off me."

Sam's eyes widen as his mouth opens, but nothing comes out. "Are you trying to kill me?" He slouches a little lower on his chair, adjusting the long tablecloth on his lap. "I don't really want to die by my best friend's hands, so... don't say stuff like that on days we have to see him."

I snort and grab a piece of bread from the basket. "I almost told Porter today, but he kind of threatened your ability to breathe."

Sam gives me his I-told-you-so look and passes me the heart-shaped butter.

"I don't think right now is the right time, but it would've been nice to ride here together."

"It would have been. But..." he says, signaling to the waiter, "we're here now and it's Valentine's Day. Let's enjoy it without thinking about Porter."

"For two hours..." *It's kind of hard when there's a time limit to romance.* I angle my eyes at Sam. "But maybe you can sneak into my place after the show, when Porter's sleeping."

"Uh..." His face pales, almost blending in with his shirt. "Now, I'm not going to be able to think about anything else other than the lingerie and sneaking into your room."

"Or I can sneak into *your* room." I slip my foot out of my shoe and slide—

"No." He stops me dead in my tracks, his expression darkening and fist tightening around the innocent mini-loaf in his hand. "You can't come there. It's too dangerous."

“I have a father; I don’t need the guy I’m...” *Not even sure what the hell we are.* “...I’m hooking up with to scold me. I’m not fragile,” I remind him with a sexy tone, which goes over his head.

“In my neighborhood you are.” When he talks like this, he’s serious. “I know you want to tell your brother, but I don’t mind how things are right now.”

I do.

“Just let me figure some things out, and I’ll tell your brother about us.” His voice is flat and serious as if it is a warning and not just simply a statement. “Okay?”

I nod. “So... where’s my present?”

He pulls a blue box out of his jacket and hands it to me, grateful for the change in topic.

I dance around a little in the chair as I open it. It’s a silvery, shiny braided necklace with a pendant in the shape of the letter S going through a heart. On one side of the heart, there are a few small diamonds and right in the middle of the S and in the heart, there is a little small stone.

“It’s my birthstone.” I gaze up at him. “You said it had my name on it.”

“Surprise,” he says with a bit too much smugness. “Let me put it on.” He takes it from me.

I pull my curls up into a makeshift ponytail as he clasps it around my neck. I let my coils fall, staring at him as he sits back down.

“You like it?” he asks, in a low voice.

“Yeah. Love it.”

He nods and shifts his eyes away from me. “I’m glad.”

“Good evening again, sir. Now that the lady has joined us, are we ready to order?” the waiter bows slightly to us, his hands behind his back.

Sam peers toward the menu we hadn’t even looked at.

“I don’t know what to order. Just get me whatever you’re having.”

He furrows his brow, then shoots his eyes up at the waiter. “Two grilled filet mignons with bearnaise sauce.”

“Right away, sir.” The man turns from us and disappears beyond pillars in the middle of the hall.

“We’re fancy tonight.” I drink the complimentary iced water, neatly placed next to the fragrant and colorful floral centerpiece on our table.

He keeps his eyes from me as he fiddles with the fork across the surface of the empty gold-rimmed plate.

“I can give you something else to think of before your show,” I flirt and slide my shoeless foot under the cuff of his pant leg, where the sock ends. Our eyes meet; his cheeks rose up a little, and I take initiative, sliding my foot all the way up to his member.

He clears his throat and looks around the fancy restaurant. “Storm,” he warns, but it comes out more like a license to continue.

So, I do.

The utensil slips out of his hand right onto the floor. He coughs as if he may have choked. “You’re feisty tonight,” he mumbles, shifting his eyes toward me for a split second.

“Aren’t I always?” I smile.

My phone’s heavy vibrations against the table cut through the tension between us. Gazing down at the screen I smile. “It’s my dad. He’s texting me.”

“What’s he saying?” he asks straightening himself in his seat.

I show him the text.

DADDY:

Hey, little angel. I just wanted to wish my Valentine, a happy day. I love you more than I can ever express. I miss you and can't wait to see you.

Sam and I both smile.

“I guess I can share you with the man responsible for your life,” Sam says as I type a quick message to my dad. “He’s the first man to love you.”

I lower my head and lift my eyes up to Sam for only a second. “Yeah, I guess so.” I’ve always wondered if my birth parents loved me. It’s possible to give up a child for adoption out of love, at least that’s what I told myself as a kid.

I take a moment to stare into his eyes, the subtle blue in this light can’t be seen, but when it comes through, it’s captivating. I could stare at him all night.

The phone vibrates in my hand.

“Oh, my mom’s calling. I’m gonna take this. I’ll be right back,” I tell him as I tiptoe out of the dining area and into a room that must be for private parties. The walls are layered with dark wood and the same stained-glass designs as the lighting over our table.

“Hey, Mom,” I say in Korean.

“Hi, sweetheart!” she speaks back to me in the same way with that singsong way she speaks. “Your father texted, did you get his messages? You know he’s not that great with his new phone.”

“Yes. I got them.” My cheeks hurt; I’m smiling so big.

“Happy Valentine’s Day. I’m so sorry we are delayed with coming home. He just has a few more projects to finish and some things to take care of and we’ll be together again.”

“It’s okay, Mom. I know Dad’s working. We’re doing good.”

“What about school? Do you like being in college. Is it too much for you? You could have just taken the semester off.”

“It’s fine. Everybody is doing something. I don’t want to be the only one who doesn’t have something going on.

“Is Porter being a good big brother and taking care of you?”

“Yes.”

“Okay. Keep him on his toes.”

“I will.”

“So, are you going out with a special someone?”

“Well... actually I’m at Lebanon Ferry right now.”

“Wow! Fancy.”

“I’m here with someone special.”

“Well, I won’t pry.” She pauses. “You don’t have to tell me who it is, but does he at least go to Den U?”

“Yeah, he does.”

“Oh!” my mother swoons, almost as much as I do, “You’re dating a college man. Tell him if he’s not nice to you, your big brother is going to smash him to bits.”

I gulp, the weight of her words solidifying my decision to keep us a secret from Porter.

“Mom!”

She laughs heartily. “Okay. I’m sorry. I’ll let you go. We sent you a little something for Valentine’s, so enjoy your night, sweet girl.”

“I will.” I sniff the air. “Oh, Mom. Can you not tell Porter. He sort of thinks I’m at Bria’s house baking cookies.”

“Your secret is safe with me.” She sighs. “I love you.”

“Love you too.”

SEVEN



get home

SAM

SHE GLANCES UP AT ME WITH THOSE BIG BROWN EYES, looking so pouty and beautiful, I can barely think clearly. I look away, my heart beating out of my chest. Sometimes I feel so lame when I'm with her, she could do so much better.

She giggles. "Oh, Bria and I went to look at prom dresses today."

Crap! The prom. I almost forgot she's in that dual program. "Did you see anything you liked?"

"I know the exact dress I'm getting."

It's probably something sequenced and studded. I'll look like a joke standing next to her in one of my dad's suits. *Fuck.* I blow air out of my nostrils, gazing toward the frosted window to my left.

"Sam?" she calls, gaining my attention, a look of dismay on her face. "You're still taking me to my prom, right?"

"Storm—" I didn't even go to mine. It's a waste of money.

"No, you promised!" she urges, leaning toward the table. "We didn't get to go to your prom, even though you said you were going to take me. So, you can't change your mind this time."

"We still hung out." We more than hung out. "You know, I'm not into stuff like that. Proms aren't my thing. Why don't we do what we did last time?"

"Pizza and soda in my living room isn't exactly the best substitute for getting dressed up and making memories."

“We made some memories, later on that night... You don’t remember?” I raise my eyebrows, smirking at her. *Some great memories.*

“Shut up! Of course, I remember.” She rolls her eyes. “You got laid on prom night, but I want to go to mine, then get laid. I want it to be special.”

“We took each other’s virginities. Wasn’t that special?”

“Sam, I want to go and I want to go with you.” Even when she’s being a brat, she’s hot as fuck.

“Prom is overrated.”

“If you’re worried about Porter, it’s not like this.” She gestures to the romantic restaurant. “We could say you’re taking me because we’re friends. I want everybody to see you’re mine.”

Her words drive a stake into my heart... a beautiful pain hollows out my chest and makes me lightheaded. “Y-Yours?”

Her eyes float up to me. “Going to prom is a risk.” An expensive one. “This isn’t just about making memories. It could really put a snag in our relationship. One wrong move and our little happy haven disappears.”

She swallows and plucks one of the petals off the roses, stretching it between her fingers until it snaps. “Is it so wrong to want to show you off?”

“I guess it depends on the reason...” I reach out toward her, placing my palm over her hand.

She flicks the torn petal in my face. “Stop knowing me so well.”

“What do you mean?” I play coy.

“You know people used to make fun of me for having to repeat first grade over.” She frowns. “It’s not my fault I got sick and had to stay home almost an entire semester. Asses.”

“Yeah. Kids can be harsh. But come on, no one is talking about that anymore. You got to graduate early; you’re taking college courses. You’re amazing by yourself, you don’t need me to make you look cool. In fact, I’m sure I’d do the opposite.”

A smile forms on her face and she stares at me with dreamy eyes. “You’re not getting out of this. You said you would.”

There she goes with those eyes again, how could I ever tell her no? “We’ll talk about this another time, okay?”

She gives a stiff nod.

“St—” My phone rings just as I’m about to give into her.

“It’s Porter.” I gulp, my heart about to fall out of my chest. “H-Hello?” I answer, my voice cracking a little. I clear my throat. “Hello.”

“Hey. I finished my presentation early and restrung my guitar! You wanna meet me at the Lebanon Ferry in about a half hour?”

I glance at my watch. I told Storm we had a couple hours.

“Remember that talent scout is coming. We’ll have time to set up and look things over since we’ve never played there before. I’m hoping we can convince them to open the 360 stage.”

There goes Valentine’s Day. “Yeah. Sounds good,” I say, my voice an octave higher than normal.

“You want me to pick you up?”

“No,” I glance at Storm apologetically, “I’ve got Mom’s car and am close to campus. How far away are you from Lebanon Ferry?”

“You okay? You sound weird.”

I clear my throat. “I’m good.”

“I’m like twenty minutes away. The guys are meeting us there; Wilder is probably there already.”

Fucking shit. I scan the room for my bandmate... Once. Twice. Thrice.

“See you in a little bit.” He hangs up.

My heart pounds through my ears. “We’re going to have to get this to go, Storm.”

“What? Our date’s over?” she asks, disbelief shrouding her voice. “We haven’t even gotten the entrée.”

“Your brother will be here in twenty, and Wilder is a few minutes out.”

She stiffens. “I’m supposed to be at Bria’s house right now. If Porter finds me here without her, he’s going to know I lied.” She grabs her bag and sits it on her lap. “I still have to change into something less...” she points to her sexy-as-fuck-cleavage, “...less this and this.” She circles a hand in front of her heavily made-up face.

“Bria doesn’t live the far away from here. If you call her now, she can get here around the same time as Porter. Maybe even before.”

“But not Wilder.” She unzips her clutch and removes a small gold pouch. Unhooking her earrings, she drops one in the bag. “Am I supposed to do hide in the girl’s bathroom until Bria gets here?”

That's actually not a bad idea. I know better than to say that when she's frazzled.

"How is everything?" the waiter asks, approaching the table.

"Can we have the check?" I blurt out. "And these to go, please?"

"Of course," he says and disappears again. Within a couple minutes he appears. "Your check." He hands me the small rectangular paper.

Storm reaches into her purse.

"No, I've got it this time," I insist.

"Are you sure?" she asks.

"Yeah." I nod, handing the waiter my mom's debit card. As he walks away, I gaze at Storm. "Look, I promise after the show, we can finish our night. Just you and me."

Storm nods.

The waiter approaches the table clearing his throat. "The card has been declined."

His words make the room around me go black. This is probably the most embarrassing thing that could ever happen. The waiter probably wonders why someone as beautiful as Storm would be caught dead with someone who can't even cover one dinner.

"It's okay," she says without hesitation and pulls a card from her purse to give him.

"Thank you, miss." He retrieves the card and leaves the table again. "Wait!" She jumps up, scrambles through her clutch and pulls out a wad of cash. "I'll just take that back."

She smiles, carefully pulling the card from the waiter's hand. "Keep the change."

She takes tiny steps back to the table and falls into her seat. "Could you imagine what Porter would say if he saw the credit card bill in a month?"

"Dammit!" I say, moving the table a bit, the dining room guests turn toward me.

"Sam," Storm whispers. "Calm down. It's fine. I don't mind."

"You shouldn't have to pay for it. You deserve the flowers, dinner, chocolates, candy, bears, everything and I couldn't even afford a fucking discounted dinner and some roses?"

"Sam—"

"No, it..." I suck up my irritation, letting out a smooth breath and changing my tone to a softer one. "It won't be like this forever. I promise. I'll be able to take care of you. One of these days either Ezra or lacrosse is going to pay off, I know it. I'm working my ass off for both. All I have to do is keep my grades up. I know kinesthetics like the back of my hand. So, it's no problem."

"I want to be with you. I don't really care about roses or candy. I'll settle for pizza and soda. It's special. It's our thing."

Settle. She shouldn't feel like she has to settle, for me. That just mean she thinks she deserves better.

"No. Storm. You're right, you deserve to go to the prom or do anything that you want. I should be able to give it to you."

"Oh, Sam you just—I know you're working hard, but I—"

"I'm going to tell Porter about us when I'm able to do all the shit a man should do for a woman."

The waiter quietly places a small, rectangular silver platter on edge of the table with our receipt and a mint on top.

“Sam—”

My phone rings, cutting her off. My blood boils. I could flip this table right over. *I fucking hate being poor!*

Glancing down at my phone, I furrow my brow.

“Mom?” I say answering the call.

“Get your ass home right now!”



i'll have her

SAM

I PULL INTO OUR GRAVEL DRIVEWAY AND SHUT OFF THE LOUD engine. It took me over forty minutes to get home, and it will take me the same to get back to Lebanon Ferry. Way to let the band down. I'm going to be fucking late. This couldn't wait until later?

As I step out of the car, I narrow my eyes toward the dark house.

She's home, right? I wonder, she told me to come home. *Did she leave?*

I exhale as I make my way to the backdoor pulling out my phone to text Porter and for some light.

SAM:

Something came up. I have to talk to my mom, so I may be a few minutes late.

I don't expect him to text me back right away, but just as I'm opening the door to walk into the kitchen, my phone buzzes.

PORTER:

Seriously?

Sam, this is a big deal. Don't flake.

SAM:

When have I ever let you down?

PORTER:

There's always a first time.

I balance my entire life so I can show up for Ezra, for Lacrosse, for my studies. I stop on the sidewalk and consider heading back, but Mom wouldn't have called if it wasn't important. I'm starting to get real sick of being torn between things. Of having to be the best here, the best there, the best everywhere. I always end up falling short. I throw my head back and glance up at the starless sky to gain the courage.

SAM:

That's a shitty thing to say.

PORTER:

You didn't go to prom because you didn't have a suit.

I just want to make sure everything is good.

You have one now, right? This place is stupid fancy.

I'm not even going to answer that.

SAM:

I'll be there.

I clear my throat as I close the door. I reach for the light control, but I can't see anything. Mom at least leaves the stove light on. I flick the switch up and down, then up again. *What?*

"It's not going to come on," my mother says from somewhere in the house.

I spin around to find a single flame lighting the surface of the round, small table in the dining room, my mother's face barely visible.

“Mom?”

“What did you do with the money, Samuel?” she blurts, her voice tense.

Shit. I gulp. “I—”

“Give me my God damn card!” she orders. “Unless someone else spent all our money. Please tell me you lost it, someone stole it, or something.”

I reach into my pocket and set it on the table in front of her without saying a word.

“Oh, Sammy.” She sniffles.

Great, not only did I embarrass myself in front of Storm, mess up with Porter somehow, but now I made my mom cry.

“There was enough for your books, a nice present for Storm, and enough to keep the lights on until your dad got his paycheck. Not only can we not pay the energy bill, which was already behind, but the account is overdrawn by one hundred dollars. What the hell have you been doing?”

I hear her through what sounds like a tunnel.

“Sam!” she calls again, smacking her palm onto the table, the candlelight flickering on impact.

“I got the cleats. I got some gas, and I got Storm a necklace and some flowers.”

She closes her eyes as a tear falls from the corner. She shakes her head, pursing her lips.

With her slow sigh, my chest burns with heavy, fiery coals.

“I know you want to impress her. I know you want to have nicer things. I get it, Sammy. But we’re barely staying afloat as it is. We are already two months behind on the energy bill just getting you what you need for school. Your father is working two jobs... I’m working and we’re not even making ends meet.”

“I can get a job.”

“No. We’ve talked about this already. Nor I, nor your father would ask you to do that. We’ve invested in your future, so you won’t have to have the life we do. We are more than happy to make these sacrifices now, to ensure you and your children and their children will have a better life.” She gazes up at me, staring into my uneasy soul. “You’re so talented. We never had a chance to go to college or anything like that. I got pregnant in high school. Our parents didn’t help us. We were on our own—we’re still on our own.” Her shoulders drop. “We’re still just trying to make it. We want you to have a different life. You have such a beautiful voice, an intelligent mind, and you’re great at sports. You have so many avenues you can succeed in.”

“Mom...” I call to her, as I sit down next to her; her pale face is lit by the flickering fire.

“If it weren’t for you getting that scholarship, there’s no way we could’ve afforded sending you to such a good university. We struggle to pay the out of pocket portion. Your grandfather worked really hard coming from Korea and gaining his citizenship. It took him years. He worked horrible jobs. Your father started working at fourteen years old. We didn’t want that for you, Sammy.”

“I know, Mom.”

“It’s a smack in the face for you to be so materialistic, so greedy to throw all of your father’s hard work away on a pair of shoes. And if you have to impress Storm that much for her to like you, then you should ask yourself if she really likes you for you.”

“She’s n—”

“I know.” She nods once. “You didn’t buy them because she needed to be impressed. You wanted to impress her. I know she likes you for you. I’ve seen it. But do you like you, for you? Money, clothes, and material things are not everything. This does not make you a better person.”

“But... I won.”

Mom shakes her head. “No, you did not play lacrosse any better in those expensive cleats than you would have in the ones you already had.”

She doesn’t understand. It may not make me a better player and maybe Storm didn’t need me to impress her, but I love seeing her face when I give her something. And everyone is always talking about those cleats—they did make me play better. They made me get noticed, and I bet I’ll get noticed by scouts way more than I would in those old, ugly-ass cleats. Still, I didn’t mean for all this to happen. I never meant to make my mom so angry. Mom, I’m sorry.”

“No. *I* am sorry.” She pulls my hands toward her. “I want to give you everything, and I’m ashamed that I can’t.”

“Why are you ashamed?” My chest pains with the weight of her words. “I promise, Mom. I’ll show you that the sacrifices you and Dad have made aren’t in vain. You’ll see. You won’t have anything to be ashamed of.”

“Did you at least get your books?”

I lower my head and my heavy sigh says it all. “I’m going to get them, Mom. I’ve just been using the ones at the library for now. It’s not that big of a deal.”

“Yes, it is. You have been a good son, you make good grades, and you help out around the house. You should have some luxuries. You should have been able to get those new cleats, the ones you wanted, and your books, but right now we cannot give those types of things to you.” She sniffles.

“It’s okay. I was stupid. Listen, I can fix it. We have a gig tonight, that starts at nine, but I need to meet Porter at Lebanon Ferry. We make half the bar and I’m sure they tip well. And they’re only asking for ten percent of the dining.” I pull my hands back from her.

“Lebanon Ferry? I’ve never even *been* there.”

“It’s where I took Storm,” I admit, even though that means I had planned on wasting a lot more money.

She smiles and pats me on the hand. “You don’t have to give me your hard-earned money, Sam.”

“No, I did this. I should make it right. You can have my entire cut. I have everything I need. So, let’s just call it a loan that I’m paying back, huh?” I rise to my feet. “And even if there’s something left, if it covers everything, you can still have it. Let’s call it interest.”

She purses her lips as if trying to come up with any other solution. She sighs. “That would be great. This way we wouldn’t have to tell your father.”

“Yes. Please don’t tell Dad.” I crumple my face. “You should come to the show. You can be my plus one.”

“Is she going to be there?”

“Yeah. But don’t say anything to Porter. He doesn’t really know about us.”

She shakes her head. “I hope this teaches you a lesson, Sam. Hiding things always comes back to bite you in the bum. So it’s best just to be honest, okay? Even if it’s a little embarrassing or if it’s hard. You’ll feel better in the long run.”

I nod taking what she said to heart, but I have no intention of doing it yet, especially not after the way Porter’s been acting.

“So, what did Storm think of her gifts?”

“She said she loved it, but I want to get her things with money I’ve earned. I’m working really hard to get somewhere... Be the best at lacrosse, at music, at—”

“I know sweetheart,” she cuts me off gently. “It will pay off someday.”

“I seriously hope so. Our first game was so good. We’ve got so many gigs coming up. Plus, there’s going to be a music agent there tonight! Who knows? Anything could happen. My big break is around the corner. I know it.”

“Samuel...”

“Mom, I promise things won’t be like this forever. I just made a bad choice. I’m gonna keep working hard and whichever career takes off first. I’ll either be a professional lacrosse player, or we’ll be touring soon, doing bigger shows, and making more money. Something’s gonna happen soon. I can feel it. Believe in me, Mom.”

She stares into my eyes.

“I do.”

NINE



i can see this

SAM

THE BLACK CURTAINS THAT DIVIDE US FROM THE DINING ROOM and the Viewing Room do little to stifle the chatter slipping in. Two rooms full of people tonight.

Lucky for me, doing the 360 stage delayed our show and I made it with time to spare. The band had everything set up by the time I got there, and aside from a few minor placement things and getting used to a rotating platform, we were ready.

Wilder was right. It's a packed house. Two rooms full of people. That's a good sign.

I take many deep breaths. It doesn't really matter how many times I've been on stage. It's always frightening.

"Five minutes," the owner says, opening the door from behind the stage.

"You ready?" Porter asks, then his hopeful face falls into a concerned frown. After the messages he sent, I've barely spoken to him. "Where's your tie?"

"I don't have one."

He bends down to one of his guitar cases. On the pockets of the soft, golden, pillow-like lining is a black tie. "I thought as much."

I bite my tongue because of Ezra. I don't want to make us look bad. If we have at this here, shit will get out of control. All of us are on an adrenaline-high; this is our biggest crowd yet.

"Thanks," I mumble, taking it from him.

“Do you need help putting it on?” Wilder asks.

I swallow, too proud to tell the truth.

“Don’t worry it’s a clip-on,” Porter points to it and swivels a finger in the air for me to flip the material around.

“What am I, six?” I mutter, a frown on my face as if I smell something that stinks. Something does stink: the fact that I have no idea how to put on a real tie.

“Take the damn tie!” Porter orders as he chuckles, no doubt making light of my attitude.

Wilder clip sit onto the collar of my shirt.

“Get rid of the attitude. We need you in a good headspace,” Porter says. “Ezra... Ezra is your baby.”

“You’re the manager. You book all the gigs. Seems like your band,” I retort.

“I didn’t say it was *your* band. I said it was your baby. Ezra was built around your voice, your energy.”

That makes me feel better.

“I’m only four years younger than you.” I laugh because it’s trivial. Because we’re on the precipice of something amazing. Porter’s right, we all need to be connected on stage. Anger blocks the flow.

“Four and a half,” he corrects and gives my shoulder a squeeze. “I don’t know how many times I have to tell you, I’m always going to look out for you. We’re friends. We’re brothers,” he says, then addresses the rest of the band. “Tonight. We all have to give two hundred percent.” He turns back to face me. “You know how to get the crowd hyped and keep them on the edge of their seats. Win them over with your

smile, real them in with your voice, and that almost country boy drawl you have.”

I nod. “I’ll give four hundred percent.”

“That’s what I’m talking about.” Porter smiles, giving me a bro handshake.

“Curtain time.” The owner peeks his head in to tell us.

“All right!” Leo flips his drumsticks around in his hands effortlessly. “Let’s do this.”

We all put our hands in and say a prayer then we raise our hands up shouting, “EZRA!” unanimously. Then we get into place. Before we say hello and address the crowd, we like to introduce ourselves with a song.

We are announced and the quiet, uniformed claps fade from my ears. All I can hear is Wilder’s bass bringing us in. Soon, Leo’s perfectly rhythmmed drums accompany him. Porter turns to face Wilder; my back is to the crowd as I tap my foot to the beat. It’s funky, feeling the rhythm of the songs. As I do, it fills my veins. I am one with each instrument.

This song we’re opening with called *Whiskey in Georgia*.

That’s actually how Ezra Iram got started. My mom used to take me to work with her when she worked at the nursing home near the county. Porter would ride his bike down there, guitar on his back, and when we were bored, we’d just start singing and he’d play his guitar. At first I didn’t know any of the songs. But one of the patients wanted me to sing it. He had a record and let me hear it. It was a good song about love and missing someone. I can relate. I sang this song every day for that man. It flows through me.

The beat drops.

I spin around, and all the music stops. I shut my eyes and tune into the notes.

Opening my eyes, I stare out into the crowd. The platform only turns when the switch in Porter's pocket is activated. We plan to rotate every couple songs, and in between, we command the space around us.

My first note, I hold like I always do. Already feeling like one of the greats. I glance across the crowd, making eye contact. The smiles I receive, the blushes and the stares, I love them. Most of all, I can't wait to lay my eyes on the one person who dreams of me. Storm. And there she is gazing up at me as if I'm her knight in shining armor. I'm a little more confident now that she's here.

The crowd is ready now. We have their full attention. They weren't expecting a couple of kids to know a song like this, but we're going to earn our keep tonight and send all these audience members home remembering our name.

Tonight was not the Valentine's Day I had planned, but being here on this stage with Storm and Mom sitting in the crowd, gazing up at me feels so good.

"Did you like that, folks?" I smile. "I liked it too." I glance around once more. "We are Ezra Iram, and we're here to entertain you through the night. There's no dance floor in here, but if you get the feeling to move your feet, I won't hold it against you." I round the stage to face the other crowd. "There's plenty of room for you and your loved one to have a nice dance. You don't mind, do you folks? If someone sways by you with a smile on their face?"

The crowd confirms their support.

“This next song is probably one of my favorites growing up.” My mother gleams, looking all pretty like moms do.

“Now it’s time to dance. Porter?” I glance back, the mic stand in my hand. I pull the microphone out of its holder and move the stand to the side.

Porter steps out as the lights dim and the spotlight gleams on us. The first guitar riff from a popular song from the past. We’ve played these songs a million times.

The bass comes in so smooth, setting the downbeat and blending with the smooth rhythm that takes over the room.

Everything blurs.

Her eyes stay on me though.

Someday I’ll be worthy of that perfect gaze. I’ll have all her love. I’ll have all of her.

TEN



i know

STORM

“ALL RIGHT FOLKS. YOU’VE BEEN AMAZING. I DON’T KNOW when I’ve had so much fun. We’ve got a few more songs for you,” Sam says, this unbelievable sexy swagger dripping from him as he takes a bottled water from the bin on stage and takes a swig. I never really knew that a guy drinking water and swallowing would be so hot.

“Wow, Storm. He can sing, for real,” Bria says.

I glance at Bria. “Yeah... He’s great, isn’t he?”

“Of course, *you* would say that.” She laughs.

I giggle quietly before I turn back to gaze upon the stage and watch Sam do what he does best, put on a show. It’s hard not to fantasize that he’s singing right to me. I don’t get to go to a lot of shows, so I’m glad I got to come to this super fancy one.

Sam’s clear and clean voice blankets the dining room with warmth and joy. This is my favorite song. The last few had been facing the dining room, but this time around he’s positioned toward the Viewing Room.

I always find myself wondering about our relationship status when he sings this specific song. The lyrics are so poetic. It’s strange to imagine that a guy with a chiseled body like that, could also be the same person who writes something so beautiful.

The sky is a rainbow with a dark
backdrop,

a night that lulls you away.

Shooting stars, rushing cars.

The fear of being found,

the fire a simple touch can strike in a
man.

Your eyes will always be the portal to
my sanity.

at least in part, the brick walls

that surround us

will always remind me of the first
time

I knew I had a heart.

I love those lyrics. My cheeks warm, and I sway along to
the music. They're about me.

About us.

About the day I knew he was meant for me.

It started when I begged Sam to take me to a secret party. When my brother showed up, we ran out of the house like idiots and ended up getting lost in a town we had never even heard of: Cupid's Hallow. It was raining, and I was scared, but Sam gave me his hoodie and everything was okay. Right before he dropped me off at my house, a shooting star fell over the sky. We both gasped like little children and smiled at each other.

He wrote a song about it.

"Hi," a woman's sweet and quiet voice pulls me out of my memories.

I stiffen in my seat. "Hi."

Sam's mom sits down at the table with me and Bria.

"Pretty dress," she says.

"Thank you." I gulp and try to make the neckline not as plungy. It's one thing for Porter to see me wearing this, but Sam's mom probably thinks I'm a slut and trying to show my boobs to her son.

I glance at Bria. "I'll be right back."

She left me out to dry.

Sam's mom leans in toward me, and I move back slightly. "Don't worry, I know about you two. And I'm not going to say anything."

"Yeah." I peep. "Because Porter doesn't know."

She gazes down at my chest. "Lovely necklace. My son has good taste."

I sigh in relief when she doesn't delve into it. "He does."

“I imagine if he’s gone to such lengths to make you happy, you must be quite a woman.” This gaze in her eyes is so loving, like she is hugging me. It’s not like we haven’t seen each other before or that we’ve not spoken, but it’s never felt like this.

“A woman?” I mutter. No one has ever called me that before. A girl, a brat, but not a woman.

“I’m happy Sammy has someone to look at him like that and someone who can pull off a dress like this.”

I swallow hard. “You saw me looking at him?”

She smirks. “With those stars in your eyes.”

I glance at Bria across the room—she’s no help at all, just sitting there with her father. Now she’s okay with being with her dad.

“I’m surprised your brother hasn’t caught on. I mean the band *is* named after you, right? Before that, they didn’t even have a name.”

I shake my head. “No.”

What is she talking about? My mind races.

“Iram? Wait... Iram spelled backward is Mari... my middle name?” I gasp gazing up at her.

“Ah, there we go. It just took a little while.” She smiles. Her voice is so light and soothing.

“No way,” I say, clutching my pendant. Gazing up at Sam.

The music stops.

“Thank you, thank you so much. Did everyone have a good time?” Sam pauses. “So did I, it was so much fun. It’s

also a super special show tonight because my mom is here,” he says and the spotlight comes on our table.

Everyone claps.

“You’ve been a great audience. We’ve got one more song for you lovely people. By the way, Happy Valentine’s Day.” The last song starts. Porter shows off his guitar skills. The light moves away from us, and Sam stares in our direction. Our eyes lock for a moment and then he sings.

Bria makes her way back over to the table. She plops back down beside me and smiles. “Having fun?” she teases.

Shut up. “This is Bria, Mrs. Shin-Carter.”

“Oh, hello.”

“Yeah. Her dad is a talent scout. He’s here to see them.”

“I gave him the demo. He liked it, so he said he wanted to come to a show.”

“Really?” I smile.

“So that’s the music agent Sammy was talking about?” Sam’s mom says, looking over in his direction.

Bria chuckles. “*Sammy.*”

“I know. He hates when I call him that. Don’t tell him, okay?”

“Our lips are sealed.” I turn sharply toward Bria. “So, what did your dad say?”

“He liked the show, and said Sam has so much charisma. He’s literally been on the phone with record execs for the last hour.”

“You’re kidding?” Mrs. Shin-Carter says.

“Yeah. I don’t know what that means beyond he likes them, but seems promising. My dad told me he went to one of their regular shows and was impressed, too.”

“He did?” I ask.

“They don’t know that—and you don’t tell them.” She shoves me in the shoulder. “My dad is the one who set this show up.”

Mrs. Shin-Cater gazes up at the stages with loving eyes as if to say, “My boy, I’m so proud of you.”

Me too.

ELEVEN



you owned it

SAM

THE OWNER COMES AROUND TO THE BACK AS THE GUYS AND I load up the van. “So, do you think you could do this next week, week after that? Just to see if we would get the same response. Heck, you could even come back every Valentine’s Day. We already have a band for Christmas. Maybe we’ll have someone for every holiday.” He chuckles.

“Porter is the manager, so you’ll have to check with him.”

“My apologies.... Mr. Lee?” The manager smiles and heads toward Porter. He hands Porter an envelope. “Again, it was a pleasure. You don’t have to answer me now. You’re welcome back anytime. Here is the band’s cut, we’ve already split it four ways. The tips will be calculated with the billing for the evening. Many of the customers added a tip for the band. You can pass by tomorrow or wait a few hours.”

Porter accepts the packages from the man and glances at the time on his phone. “I’ll be in touch tomorrow.”

“Have a good night.” The manager leaves out the doors into the dining room.

“Okay, let’s see what we’ve got.” Porter hands us each a small, rectangular yellow envelope. He quickly counts his. “Two-grand! Just from the cover portion.”

That’s more than enough for Mom.

“Works for me.” Porter smiles, putting his bills back into the packet. Then he hands it to me. I glance down at it.

“What’s this?” I say with a wide-opened mouth.

“You earned this. Take this and get your books, maybe you can use it to help your parents with your tuition.”

“Wilder also hands his to me.”

I shake my head. “T-That’s yours.”

“Yeah, but we’re keeping the tips. This is for you,” Wilder says.

“You don’t get any of the tips so don’t be greedy.” Leo smirks handing me his envelope also.

“I ca...”

“You did most of the work. You wrote our songs, composed all the arrangements, and you carried us out there. No one was looking at us. They were looking at you. You earned this, we’re not giving it to you. You deserve to get paid for all that you do. From here on out, we’ll be splitting gigs forty-sixty.”

I stand there listening to them. Things are changing for us. “If I’m being paid for writing and composition, you deserve to be paid for being our manager.”

Porter looks back at the guys.

“It works for me,” Wilder says. “I’m sure not booking any gigs.”

I walk over to the table on the other side of the room and take the money out of all the envelopes and count it doing the math in my head.

Almost five thousand dollars in one night? This is what I’m talking about.

I take thirty percent, give Porter thirty and the other guys split the remaining equally.

I nod.

“Good show,” Porter tells us.

“Thanks, guys.” I gulp, holding back tears. I gotta go talk to my mom.”



“Sam!” My mom says as I approach her.

She rises out of her seat to meet me.

I glance around. “Where’s Storm?”

“She went to get some air.”

I know what that means—she’s waiting for me.

“Oh. Okay.” I hand my mother my envelope.

She purses her lips. “Sweetheart, you don’t have to give this to me. You worked so hard for it.”

“Please, Mom, call the energy people and pay the bill, all of it. There’s enough. I promise I won’t do it again.”

“Okay.” My mother disappears into the foyer, and I glance around to see if Storm is anywhere in the dining room. By the time I turn around again, I catch my mother stomping toward me.

“Samuel!” she whisper-screams at me. “You mean to tell me you made eight thousand dollars in one night?”

“Mom. Don’t worry about it just—” It’s not necessary to tell her what actually happened. “That can help, right?”

“No. I’m taking what you took. To pay the energy bill and the presents. The rest is yours.” She shoves the money back into my hands.

I don't take it. So she stuffs it down my pants pocket.

I'll just use it to pay the tuition part that my scholarship doesn't cover. That will help lighten the load for them.



some valentine's

STORM

PUSHING MY HAIR BEHIND MY EAR, I LEAN AGAINST THE HARD wooden door, all flustered. He looked so sexy on stage. It hurts to not be able to wrap my arms around him and congratulate him, to have to resist.

I press my fingers against my neck and drag the tips down my skin. *It's Valentine's Day. We didn't even get to have dinner, much less kiss.* If it's like this now, how will it be if he and Porter become famous? Will we still have to hide or...

I stop myself from trailing off and push the worry down. There will be plenty of time to think later. After putting on a little more lip gloss, I march toward the door, and right into Sam, propped against the bench along the window wall, the clip-on tie half stuffed into his trousers. My heart beats fast, reminding of the song he wrote about us. Of the beautiful words only the two of us knew were a story.

“Why'd you disappear?” he asks as I step out of the private restroom and stare behind him, out the windows. The garden lights behind him, lead a path down to the creek.

The strands of Sam's hair catch in the warm glow and I hold in my smile.

“Sorry. I was giving you and your mom some time. I bet she's proud of you.” I find it hard to keep my eyes away from his sparkling blue ones.

“Yeah, she is?” He steps closer to me. “Are you proud?”

“Of course...”

He raises a brow. “But?”

When I don’t answer, he brushes his fingers over my cheek. Tilting my chin up to face him, he studies my eyes. “I promise to give you a better Valentine’s Day.”

I sigh and shake my head. “It’s not about that. Plus, tonight was about you shining up there and impressing the big money.” I wrap my arms around him and rest my head against his hard chest, my ear pressed up against his beating heart. “You were awesome. I might start a fan club for you and be the president.”

He laughs and I hold him a little tighter. “This might be it, Storm.”

That’s what I’m afraid of. I want him to be successful, but I can’t help but wonder about what that means for us. If he can’t risk telling Porter now, why would he risk it before the first album? The second? How long until he decides that I’m not worth ruining his career over.

He presses a soft kiss to the top of my head and leans back, nudging my chin up to look into his eyes again. “I’m glad you were here with me. I want you to be there with me for everything.”

Be there... Hidden?

“I am too.” I swallow nonchalantly, stepping back from him. Giving him a little space before he realizes the truth. “We should get back out there and see what’s going on, right?” My eyes dart to the door.

“Hey, don’t walk away,” he whispers. “I want to hold you for a little.” He grasps on to my hand and tugs me gently, but I resist. “Where are the guys?”

“Who cares?” The low, seductive voice, renders me speechless, motionless, and ready for whatever he plans to do as he approaches me. He threads the necklace he gave me through his fingers, the chain grazing the delicate skin. “I like this dress too.”

The only thing I care about right now is the location of his lips. *Too far away.*

His eyes burrow into mine, every passing second... nothing but torture. Extravagant, delicious torment inflicted by the lack of his touch.

His arms wrap around me, effortlessly lifting me onto the table. My legs part to accommodate his body between my thighs. I grasp at his dark and smooth hair as his tongue sends flutters down my back. The way he moves it, the way his lips feel against mine, I could eat him alive. His low moans fill up the room, drowning me in him.

I can't keep my sounds to myself. Slight whimpers, that would normally embarrass me to the point I'd want to run and hide, edge both of us on.

“God, you're so fucking sexy,” he mumbles in between kisses.

Just rip the dress off already! It's just a few thin lays of lacy and sheer fabric. I must have forgotten where we are or I just don't care.

His deliciousness is warm and heavy. My heels slip off my feet as one of his hands finds the smooth skin underneath the skirt of my dress, between my legs. His heavy breaths fall on my ear, making me quiver with anticipation. I can feel him right next to me, growing, hardening, wanting, needing me just as much as I desire him.

“Are you... Are you sure you want to do this... here?” he murmurs through pants. His lips travel down my neck to my chest, tickling my aching body, making me even more sensitive to his touch.

“What?” I can barely speak or even understand what he’s asking.

I want him so bad. I hear his words but nothing registers. The quiet creaking sounds so far away.

“What the *fuck*?”

I heard that.

Porter’s voice pulls me out of my trance-like state.

Sam spins around to face Porter, and I quickly pull my dress down and get to my feet.

“Porter!” I squeak.

“I can explain,” Sam counters, his hands in the air as if pushing Porter away.

The most agonizing seconds of my life are these few moments when Porter wears an unreadable expression on his face.

“Okay,” he says in a low whisper. His eyes look blank like he’s staring right past us. He stands there with balled-up fists at his side.

“You left your mom in the middle of a restaurant, so you could—”

“Whatever you’re about to say, no,” Sam interrupts him.

No? I snap my head up toward Sam as I attempt to adjust myself.

Sam glances down at me, warning me not to say anything with his body language. His cheeks are red, no longer from the endorphins but from the embarrassment of getting caught.

“You got nothing to say?” Porter shakes his head and glares at me, thought I’m not the one he wants to hear from.

“Uhm.” Sam clutches his jaw and glances down at his trousers. Unzipped pants are hard to deny, yet Sam remains silent.

I open my mouth to say something and Porter lifts a finger to silence me. I do, not because he commands it, but because I don’t want things to escalate.

Porter steps toward Sam, between the both of us. “You had your hands in my little sister’s underwear and you’re going with, *uhm?*”

“It’s not what you think, Porter.” Sam swallows hard and glances at me for approval. I shrug for him to go ahead. “We came here for dinner.”

“Here?” Porter side-eyes me, catching me in my Bria lie, but the look he exchanges with Sam is different. My brother rarely shows his emotions, but the way his jaw tenses says everything.

“Yes, here.” Sam’s voice raises. “I know it’s expensive but she deserves to have everything she ever wanted.”

“How did you pay for it?”

My lips part. “Porter!” I call him out for being such a dick and touch his upper arm, shoving him back. The two of them had come way too close for comfort. “Why the hell would you ask.”

“Storm,” Sam calls.

I ignore him. “That’s none of your business. Sam and I—”

Porter turns his attention to me, cutting me off, “Sam *and* you?” He scoffs and shakes off the disbelief. “You know what? If I were you, I wouldn’t lecture me on anything, Storm. You could have told me.” Porter runs his hands through his hair. “We just had a conversation in the living room.”

“I know.” My gaze veers toward the floor in shame.

“It’s not her fault,” Sam takes the heat off me.

“I wanted to tell you,” I peep.

“But. You. Didn’t,” he enunciates each word as if every letter hurt him to say.

Because I hurt him. Sam hurt him. We hurt him. I sigh and lean against the table we had just been passionate on and cross my arms over my chest. Words form in my mouth but find no exit strategy.

Sam answers for the both of us. “The reason she lied is because of me. It wasn’t her idea... it was mine. I’ve been waiting for the right time to tell you.”

“That you’re fucking around with my little sister?” Porter smashes his lips together as he processes the words coming out of Sam’s mouth. “I’m not sure there’s a right time for that.”

Great.

Sam’s mouth gapes open. “I’m sorry for not telling you, but it’s more than that with her. She’s my best friend.”

Porter’s eyes go from me to Sam in a tizzy of chaos, like his brain revolts against the idea, but the softness in his voice means his heart has a say. “Is this like a one-time thing?”

“No,” Sam admits with a hung head.

“How long has it been going on?” Porter asks.

Neither of us say anything.

“How long?” he shouts.

“We started hanging out a lot when I was junior. You remember Bria was gone for a while. I didn’t have anyone to talk to, you were always busy.” I shrug. “It just sort of happened.”

“And if I said you couldn’t see each other. If I oppose?” Porter throws his head in Sam’s direction. “What would that mean for Ezra? For our friendship?”

Both of them eye each other, knowing the consequences if they spoke.

I wish I could say I knew for certain Sam would choose me, but I don’t. All I can say for a fact is: I have dreaded this moment for months, wondering what would happen to them, to the band, to my heart.

With a snuffle, I wipe my eyes with my fingertips. “I knew you would be so pissed. But why? Don’t you trust him? Don’t you trust me?”

Porter tosses his head to the other side and lets out a heavy sigh. Resting his hands on his hips, he purses his lips. “You want me to say I’m okay with this?”

Yes. I gulp. “No, but I want you to work on being okay with it. At some point.”

Porter scratches the back of his head.

“Is it serious? The feelings.”

Sam and I share a look. We had not labeled anything. Valentine is the highest title I've ever gotten, but I want more. I want to be Sam's official girl.

After a while of Sam and I staring into each other's eyes, Porter tilts his head to the ceiling. "I can't believe I'm saying this." Porter lowers his voice and shakes his head. "You know what? How about I say nothing. How about I just let both of you do your thing and figure out what you feel for each other."

My brows furrow. Did I hear him right? *I can keep him?* "Are you... Are you saying..."

"I'm saying I'm good with whatever you've been doing as long as Sam makes you happy."

"He does!" I beam.

Sam pops into the conversation again. "I'll run stuff by you before we—"

"No. Don't, just..." Porter stumbles over his words. "I don't want to walk into any more rooms and see you feeling up my little sister, okay?"

"Deal." Sam throws his arms around my shoulders and quickly drops them to his side when Porter snaps his fingers. "Got it."

Mid-eye roll I catch my brother smiling. "I came in here because Bria's dad wants to talk to us. I got a good feeling about this."

"Bria said her dad loved the show, but you didn't hear that from me." I smash my lips together and blink playfully.

Sam gazes at me with a half-smirk, his suit a little wrinkly from our hot and heavy make-out session. He comes toward

me and spins me a little. “We might get signed?” he asks my brother.

The smoldering overprotective older brother glare I thought would be on my brother’s face isn’t there. His expression is soft, amused until his gaze snaps to Sam’s hand. On my hip.

“Well, it’s getting weird.” Porter shoves his hands in his pockets. “Hurry up.” He nods and leaves the room, closing the door behind him. Then second guesses himself and throws it wide open. “Two minutes, Sam.”

We wait for him to leave, and Sam rushes out, “You’ll never have to pay for another date again. You deserve to be pampered and taken care of.” He gazes deeply into my eyes as he pushes some loose hairs behind my ears.

“Couldn’t we just take care of each other?”

“Yeah. Of course.” He moves closer to me as he wraps his arms around my waist.

I giggle and lay a sweet kiss on his lips. “You have business to take care of.”

“You’re my business.”

My cheeks warm. “Go get a record deal!”

“Oh, I like when you tell me what to do,” he says, a sexy tone in his voice as he kisses my neck.

I inhale, the pit of my stomach aching. Our eyes lock for a moment. There’s nothing else I can say. He presses his soft and warm lips against mine one last time and I let the tip of my tongue caress his upper lip as he pulls away from me to open the door.

“Here goes nothing.”

THIRTEEN



jumping ahead

SAM

TEAMMATE:

Hey, man. Why haven't you been at practice?
Everything okay?

I glance at my phone screen as I work on a live show arrangement for one of our songs.

Are you even coming to the game tonight?

The screen goes black, and I shift my eyes back to the staff. I hum along to the melody of the song, finding new beats to accentuate.

Okay, if Porter comes in here instead of the first measure...
I squint my eyes, hearing the composition in my head before I jot it down on paper. *Yeah, sounds way better.* I finish writing down the arrangement and grab a soda from the fridge before sitting back down at my desk. Another text comes in.

STORM:



I bite my bottom lip, thinking how sexy she is and how I almost died a couple of weeks ago when Porter found out about us.

He hasn't said anything, I ponder as I stare at our text message. She always ends hers with some cute emoji. I think it's sweet when she sends me stuff like that.

I'll call her later, I decide, sitting up and pulling out some staff paper to work on another song. Our songs have to be good. They want us to perform tonight in front of the label owner. So we have to step our live show game up—bigger and better, baby.

A knock comes at the door, pulling me out of my work.

“Samuel?” my father frowns.

“Oh, hi Dad.”

“I saw your light on. I knocked to be courteous, I didn't think you would be at home.” His eyebrows furrow deeper. “Aren't you supposed to be in class? Don't you have a game today?”

“Dad! I told you Ezra has a meeting with the label tonight. I have to be prepared. They want to hear a brand-new song. That *I* wrote. The guys are counting on me. I have to put my all into this. We might really be getting a deal.” I stand up.

“Might?” He grunts, his face crumpling. “So now you disregard all your other responsibilities? Throw away a four-year scholarship on what *might* happen?”

“I thought you'd understand. This is big.” I ball my fists up beside me as I step toward him.

“I *do* understand. But you have to go to school.”

I scoff. “I'm not worried about school right now. It's not giving me any money. If anything, it's taking away from my ability to make money.”

Dad laughs for some reason.

“This isn't a joke, Dad. This is a real record company that wants to give us real money. I need to focus on my music.”

“Samuel...”

“No, Dad. Can’t you see how serious I am about this? Bria’s dad believes in us and I trust him; he’s been in the industry for a long time. I’m sure he’s making a hefty sum off getting us signed too.”

“I hear what you’re saying—”

“Do you? He’s been to our shows and he liked us. So I don’t think he would tell us about the deal if it wasn’t a guarantee. And we need guaranteed money right now. Aren’t you tired of working two jobs? We never see you. You haven’t been to a show or a game in the two years.”

“There are other avenues.”

“Playing lacrosse, it would take me what? Three or four, maybe more years to even get noticed? How many scouts would have to see me before they want to sign me? At least here, I’ll get to be with my friends.”

“You don’t like your teammates?”

“It’s not that... There’s no guarantee I’d make it to the pros or the minor league in lacrosse. What if I get hurt? Then my career is over. This is a real chance for me to be successful.”

“I’m not saying it’s not real, son. I’m saying the only *true* guarantee is going to school and getting a degree, getting a job that pays well and has benefits like a retirement plan, healthcare.”

“None of your jobs have had that,” I spit out, flaring my nostrils.

“Exactly. This is not the life I want for you. You need to be smart while you are young so you’ll be able to take care of yourself when you get older. You need to plan for your own

life, your own family so you can support them as a man should.”

“You and Mom *are* my family, and that’s what I’m thinking about now. You think it doesn’t piss me off to see you and Mom breaking your back just so I can go to college? The scholarship on covers so much. I know you have to pay out of pocket for the rest. This is my chance to do something for you. My chance to get us out of this mold-infested hellhole. It’s my chance to be able to take Storm somewhere and not feel like a loser because I spent the utility money!” I kick my foot around and keep my eyes off my father.

“You what?”

“I gave Mom the money back and she paid off the credit card. I got my books and I covered the tuition bill.”

Dad’s eyebrow jumps at the admission. “What?”

“Yes, I paid for our portion of it. Well, the installments for the next few months. All of this from just one show.” *Granted, the guys helped, which is why I cannot let them down. They are counting on my brain to get us some fresh sounds.* “Think about what we would have if Ezra got signed.”

“It is a loving sentiment and I’m proud of you, but it is not your responsibility to care for us now. This is our time to do as much as we can to ensure a good future for you and the future of the Shin-Carter family.”

“Come on, Dad.”

“I know you’re not thinking about kids and marriage, but you need to be.” He nods, strongly. “Your wife and child will need you there, not working fourteen and sixteen-hour shifts. And that is the life you will be headed for if you don’t get a degree. You can’t sing forever, and you can’t play sports

forever, and to be honest, those dreams can vanish in a second. Getting a degree can help you later in life when you've hung up your microphone and put away your cleats."

"Maybe I can't, but I'll make enough money to retire early and what is a degree going to help me with, if I don't need a job. I know how to manage money. You and Mom taught me that. I'm not gonna get rich and then suddenly become a *spendaholic*."

"You're trying to convince me you've made the right decision, but you're not even sure you're going to get a record deal. This is all speculation. The opportunity looms before you, not security. And for this mere possibility, you give up everything else you have worked so hard for? Ruin your chances for greatness in other areas?"

For a moment, I want to negate everything he is saying. In my heart, it feels like a surefire thing. But what if he's right? What if they hear us and they don't like it? What if they hate the new song? What if they want to change something about us and someone isn't on board? Anything could happen. It could have blew up at Lebanon Ferry.

"You're jumping ahead of yourself. Thinking like that, you will end up with nothing. Don't get swallowed by greed looking for what you consider the easiest fix."

"I don't think it's gonna be easier, Dad."

"Know this, nothing is guaranteed except hard work, and even then you run into problems. Don't limit yourself. Keep your options open."

I nod understanding him.

"Don't abandon people who believe in you, who respect you. You made a commitment; your team needs you. You are

more than just your voice. You are more than your physical attributes. You have lots of talents, let them work for you.”

“Yeah, Dad. Maybe I was... Maybe I didn’t think it through. I was just so happy. You know?”

“I do. Your bandmates are depending on you and so are your teammates. When you are the best at something, when you may be the only one to achieve such heights, you bare a responsibility to be a leader and someone who can follow.”

“I’m just tired of being poor,” I admit, in a quiet tone.

“Having little is not so bad. Having too much, desiring too much, can be.” My father stares at me with understanding in his eyes.

I nod and then arch my neck. “What are you doing at home in the middle of the afternoon?”

My father hangs his head letting out a tiresome sigh. “I was laid off from my second job.

Hard work, huh? He works harder than anyone I know and still he can’t seem to catch a break. I purse my lips together. This deal needs to happen. I hope with all my heart. Standing there staring into my father’s weathered eyes, looking at his shabby clothes and runover shoes. I can’t bear to live like this for much longer.

“It’s okay. Stuff happens, right?” I offer.

“I’ll start looking for another job tomorrow. I saw an ad for a warehouse not too far from here over in Dennington City.”

“We don’t have to think about that now. It’s been a while since you had a day off. Wanna go to the game with me?”

“I’d like that.”

FOURTEEN



nothing serious

STORM

I SLIDE A SHINY GLOSS OVER MY LIPS AND MAKE KISSY FACES in the mirror as I listen to some music. I wish Ezra had stuff recorded. I'd be listening to Strawman all the time.

As I stare at myself all I can see is Sam; his lips on my neck, his breath in my ear, and his hands all over me.

“Storm!” Porter calls.

My palms hit the surface of my dresser, and I let out a deep exhale. I shake off all that heat and let it release from my body. “What?”

He doesn't say anything right away, so I continue getting ready. After putting on my wedge sneakers, I slip on my cute army fatigue jacket with the pink splotches. To top it off, I fasten my necklace around my neck. I swoon as I play with it in my hands.

Then I just stare at myself, my high-waisted jeans reaching up to touch my crop top but just missing it.

I hope I get to talk to him. They have the meeting with the label after the game. *I need a Sam kiss, like right now.* I giggle to myself, making more kissy faces at myself.

I step out of my room into the living room and Porter is standing in the kitchen with a dish.

“What's that?”

“Casserole. The neighbor brought it by.” He puts it in the fridge.

“She’s so nice.” I daintily move toward the sofa and rest my knees on the cushion.

“What... is this?” Porter pulls out a freezer bag filled with a white and creamy sliquid substance.

“It’s my deep conditioner.”

“Why is it in the fridge?”

“Because it’s fresh.”

He shakes his head and puts it back where he got it from. Porter glances at me. “Dressing all cute for your boyfriend?”

My shoulders drop and I rise to my feet. “He’s not my boyfriend.” *Yet*, I think to myself. But I have a feeling we will be official soon. I know it.

“Okay. Then why were you kissing him?”

“What? I can only kiss guys that’re my boyfriends?”

“No. You can’t kiss anyone.” Porter smirks and shrugs. “He gets a pass because you looked like if I touched him you were gonna cry.”

I roll my eyes and suck in a deep breath, looking away from him and flopping down on the sofa.

He comes around and sits in the chair next to the bookshelf and the large windows covered in black out curtains. “How are your classes going?”

I shrug, “It’s okay. I only took it because them was either this or suffer through some weird elective at Township. This seemed easier.”

“Is it?”

“Yeah. I also took one of the classes because, well, I thought it was Human Nutrition but it’s Comprehensive

Nutrition and I thought maybe I could learn something about nutrition that would help me with my hair. And I did.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah. I wrote a paper about moisture versus hydration. That bag,” I point to the freezer, “is my concoction. I’m testing if oil only functions as a sealant.”

Porter narrows his eyes at me as if he can’t believe what I’m saying. “So, you’re doing a science project along with your thesis paper.”

“Nutrition project.” I correct him. “And yes. If my theory is right, using certain oils and proteins can both moisturize and seal your hair without having to use a bunch of different products. I’m on the fence about using a preservative, but I want to see the difference between what would happen to my hair if I did use it and what would happen if I didn’t. And how long the shelf life would be for each.”

“You’re really having fun in this class, aren’t you?”

“I am.” I sigh. “I don’t know exactly what I want to do once I’m fully in college but it beats having to go to Township for sure.”

Porter looks me over.

“Well, whatever you’re doing, your hair looks nice. Shiny and full. Your curls look good. So, it’s working.”

“I thought so too.”

“Well good. Glad you’re having a good college experience.”

“Yeah. High school was hard. I never got to be the smart kid. Now, I’m the smart one in my nutrition class. In fact, I got the highest score and it felt amazing.”

“Impressive.”

I smile. “I’m also not the girl who failed a grade. At Den U everyone’s just minding their own business and doing their own thing. Everybody doesn’t think I’m stupid.”

“Nobody thinks that, Storm.”

“In high school they did.” *They even made fun of me for it.* “When I get my diploma, I want to feel like I earned it. I want to prove I can be good at something.”

“We have to tell Mom and Dad about your graduation. Remind them to see if we can at least video stream it.”

“I wish they could come.”

“I’m sure they’d love to see you off to prom and take thousands of pictures of you all pretty.”

I air flick Porter in the nose. “I try to look pretty every day.”

Leaning back in the chair, he smirks and mumbles the word, “Debatable.” He hops up and comes toward me, picking up my necklace and giving it a once over. “Sam’s taking you to prom?”

“That’s the plan, even if he doesn’t want to. But it would be nice to be official before you guys make it big.”

Porter is about to say something, but decides not to. “He got you that necklace?”

“Yes, but I didn’t get him anything.”

“Oh he got enough.” Porter rolls his eyes then rubs a finger across his brows. “You might already be official.” He points toward the chain. “That’s a trademark, property stamp. Please return to Sam Shin-Carter if lost, kind of thing.”

“No, it’s not! Shut up.” I frown. “We’re not official yet and I don’t want to pressure him. He’s been busy anyway, with the band stuff.”

He falls into the chair after he takes a few steps back from the sofa. “You’re gonna have to fight off a bunch of girls if we get signed. You ready for that?”

I’m not really sure what I’m ready for.

I shrug and pop up off the sofa and stroll over to the kitchen to get a cookie.

He meets me in the kitchen and grabs one for himself. “When’s the last time you talked to Mom?”

“Yesterday. They really miss us. Why didn’t you tell her about the meeting tonight?”

Porter chews his carb and swallows. “I only want to get them excited when things are official. They have a lot to think about and I don’t want them to get disappointed.”

“Disappointed.” I plop my cooking on a paper napkin. “Dad is going to flip! I sent him a video of you on stage and Mom sent me a pic of Dad crying.”

Porter rests his palm on his chest. “They’re proud of you.” I have no clue if they’re proud of me, since I have no idea what I’m doing with my life yet, but I know how much it means to Porter. “You should tell them.”

Porter scarfs down another cookie and points toward his bedroom. “After. In a couple days I’ll know whether or not it was worth not killing your...” He lifts his hands and air quotes the word, “...boyfriend.”

FIFTEEN



benched

SAM

“SHIT.” ONE OF MY TEAMMATES GRITS HIS TEETH, GLARING back at me from the fence. He strikes the crossed metal, shaking it with his hand when the ball is intercepted. “We haven’t scored another goal, and it’s almost halftime.” He paces in front of me and the other benched players with his hands on his hips.

I lower my head and close my eyes. I know he’s thinking it’s my fault because I’m not playing. I glance over at Coach, working up the nerve to go and talk to him. Once the whistle is blown for halftime, I walk up to him.

He won’t even look at me.

“Are you pissed at me too?” I mumble.

“No,” he says, sniffing the air. “Just disappointed. We’re a team. We all need each other, but we all need to respect one another too.”

“Just let me play one quarter. My dad is here. He never gets a chance to come. I’ve had to watch us get creamed for the first half of the game.”

“There are rules, and I can’t break them for you. It would be different if there was a reason you were out for an entire week of practice. But you haven’t said anything. I couldn’t possibly honor that request.”

I cast my eyes down to the dirt, this hollowness in my chest sinking deeper.

They're definitely going to blame me if we lose. If Coach would just let me in the game, I could at least keep the other team from making another goal. They only have two. We're only one down. I shake my head. When I gaze up, Porter and Storm stand near the fences. I jog over to meet them.

"Hey." Porter frowns. "What's going on? Why haven't you played?"

Storm looks so good in those tight jeans and that jacket. She's wearing my necklace.

"I missed practice a couple times. You can't play if you don't come to the practice before the game."

"Why'd you miss practice?" Storm asks and glares at her brother. "It wasn't because of me."

I hold back a smile. "I missed it because we had to practice the new song. It conflicted, so I didn't say anything."

"You should have said something," Porter says. "We could have had it after practice or something."

"Yeah maybe."

The whistle blows, letting everyone know that the second half of the game is about to begin.

"Well, I'll see you guys after the game," I say.

Porter and I nod at each other. leads her back to their seats on the bleachers.

I ease back down on the uncomfortable silver bench and watch play after play of my team being destroyed.

The good thing is they've managed to keep them from scoring, just as much as the other team has kept us from doing so.

These are the longest eight minutes of my life.

When the last quarter begins, I can barely sit still. It makes me glad Dad didn't stay after he found out I wasn't playing. At least Mom will have someone to pick her up tonight and she won't have to wait on one of the other nurses to bring her home. The stares from my teammates around me have me glancing in every direction.

"What an upset. The Dennington Harriers are zero to two as we round the fourth quarter," the announcer says.

"I can't take this," the captain of the team says. He's a senior and this is his last season. He approaches the coach. "Please, can you let Carter and I play? Just put us in."

"I would but..."

Another two players who had been evil eyeing me join in the persuasive argument and then another. Their words are all jumbled up together as they spiritedly plead with our coach.

When he peers over to me and we lock gazes, I almost stop breathing, wondering what he's about to say.

"I could get in a lot of trouble for this," he says.

I hop to my feet. "I promise, I won't miss any more practices. Just let me play, Coach?" As soon as the words escape my lips, I know I might have just lied. What happens if we get the music deal? Things may change, I may not even be able to finish school.

The ball in my throat stretches as I glance toward the audience. I promised my Dad I would have something to fall back on too.

Breaking promises can't be a consequence of fame.

After a pregnant pause between the both of us, Coach lets out a heavy sigh. “All right.”

Cheers go up to the sky as he calls a timeout.

The players huddle up.

“Okay. Carter’s going on. Cap is leading him,” the coach says.

Everyone agrees.

“Carter!” the captain calls as we break. “Let’s do fake cave.”

“Right.” I nod, my blood pumping as I put on my gloves and helmet. I grab my crosse and head out to the field.

“Shin-Carter takes to the field for the first time this game. Can the Harriers redeem themselves? Will the game go into overtime? It’s the fourth quarter and anything could happen,” the announcer teases.

I put in my mouth guard and make sure everything is in place. I’ve come to play. Cap signals to me: *it’s their ball*.

We’re going to make them give us the ball with our signature moves we’ve been keeping a secret from everyone. We’ve never done it in a game before. But it’s as good a time as any to see if it actually works.

The whistle blows and he sets up the play. Clanking sticks and grunts fill the atmosphere as the strategies are played out. I move to the left and gaze off someone, the opposing team’s star play swings his crosse to put that ball right smack dab into the net behind me. I slowly turn around to realize that I need to try and prevent this from happening. Or so that’s what we want them to believe. When our defense comes for the ball, they have a wide-open shot to send it back down the field, and

that's exactly what cap does. Our midfielder intercepts it and goes for the goal! They don't have time to catch him and we make our second goal of the game.

I'm sweating and the cheers pump my adrenaline even more. Me and the captain of our team lock eyes. He nods at me, spitting on the ground. I salute him back, getting back into position. It's our ball.

The announcer is speaking, but you can barely hear him over the cheering crowd. And then the chanting Carter, Carter, Carter, Carter!

I smirk then wipe it clean; I've got my battle face on. If they try to intercept this, they will be met with nothing but rage and contempt. I dare them to even try to get something past me.

The play starts, and our guy makes it down the field but the ball is intercepted. I go into beast mode as they send the ball my way. Once, twice, three times. The third time, I catch it in my crosse net and throw it as far as I can.

It's our ball again. Seconds before the buzzer. Our player is tearing through their defense like a hot knife through butter he fakes to the right, and then the left. Their goalkeeper falls and he practically laid the ball in the net.

Screams fill the air! They chant my name once again. All the players who were on the sidelines and the ones playing in the game rush me to the ground, cheering.

We won.



some anything

STORM

AS PORTER CHATS WITH SOME FRIENDS, I STAND NEAR THE bleachers. With all the commotion his team made around him, there's no way I'm going to see him before the big meeting.

To my surprise, he approaches me.

"Sam." I smile tight-lipped.

He's all sweaty, his stringy hair hangs in his eyes, and he looks so good in that lacrosse uniform. I want to kiss him but that would be way too embarrassing.

"You got to play."

"Yeah." He sways side to side, staring at me as he often does.

It's almost as if he hadn't noticed before then he stops and glances away from me. "So, my dad's picking mom up. I'm gonna catch a ride with you guys."

"Sounds good." I want to say so much to him. Tell him that they wouldn't have won without him. I want to tell him that they're definitely going to get a deal tonight, but I don't say anything. I'm frozen, just gazing at his statuesque body. He wears that uniform so well. He looks so good.

Before I can say anything else, a teammate of his jumps on his back and they all crowd him. I step back closer to Porter, it's like they don't even see me.

"What are you doing?" one of them says. "We gotta go celebrate! That was epic!"

“It was.” The tallest guy on his team says. “I didn’t think that play would work, but it did—they weren’t expecting it. This game was important. A couple more games and we’re a shoo-in for playoffs. At the first round.”

“Hell, with this guy on our team, we might go all the way.” Another teammate says, “We’ve never been to any big conferences or championships.”

Sam smiles with an unsure look on his face as they praise him.

Most of the people who were at the game have left and it’s just a few stragglers along with us and the two teams packing up to leave the field.

“Let’s go Carter.” A teammate pushes him forward and laughs.

Sam smiles, running his hands down the sides of his hips and legs with stiff shoulders.

“Yeah. I’m excited. But.... Actually, I have a meeting to go to.”

“A meeting, at night? What kind of meeting?” someone asks and they all look at me.

My shoulders stiffen up, and I get even closer to Porter.

“You okay?” he asks, not even noticing the team.

“Introduce us to your girl. She can come too,” one of the players says.

“This is Storm. But, it’s a business meeting.”

“What?” the tall guy scoffs.

“I’m serious. Just have to take care of a few things. Where are you guys going? I might stop by.”

“Whatever! See you at practice on Monday. There’s no way, I’d flake out on her to be with us.” Sam’s cheeks turn bright red as he stares at me. Then cast his eyes to the floor, a bashful smile on his face.

I guess they think I’m hot. I gleam as they murmur away.

Sam walks over to me, skin still glistening with sweat. He’s about to say something but Javai turns to me. “Ready to go?” he asks.

“Hey, can I ride with you to the label?”

“Yeah. That’s fine.” Porter smirks. “I thought you weren’t playing hotshot.”

“I had to. I couldn’t let the team just drown like that.”

Porter offers a congratulatory nod. “You put in work, for sure.”

“Thanks. I just need to take a quick shower. Five minutes, okay?”

“Yeah. We’ll be in the car. We got to drop Storm off on the way.”

Sam takes off into the sports with his teammates and coach.



Sam looks at me through the side mirror. Both of us pretend like we didn’t lock eyes as Porter pulls into our gated apartment complex. He pulls up to our building and stops the car.

“I’ll grab something to eat on the way home, okay?”

I nod. “Good luck,” I say and Sam gets out of the car.

“What are you doing?” Porter shouts at him.

“Walking her to the door, asshole,” Sam barks back.

“Ah jeez. She’s fine. It’s what? Twenty paces.”

Sam doesn’t listen and guides me toward the stairs.

“Hey. Get your hand off the small of her back.”

Sam throws up the middle finger and ignores him.

I can’t help but laugh.

As we get to the landing in front of the doorway, I turn to him.

“You look really good in that. I can almost see that birthmark by your navel.”

I fold the ends of my jacket over my midriff. *Stop looking.*

“Aw, are you being shy?” he says, coming closer to me and sliding the ends of my jacket right open, and laying his hands on my waist. He gazes down at me and I up into his almond eyes.

“I hope everything goes well tonight,” I say.

He nods, taking a breath.

It’s so strange. Sometimes, he’s so witty and straight forward and other times he can barely look at me without his cheeks getting all red. How cute.

“Me too. We only practiced the new song once, so hopefully, it’s good. I don’t know what to expect. I’m a little nervous.

“Well, you’re the best singer I know. I’d buy your albums.” I grin.

He licks his lips and raises his eyebrow.

“I can come back later if you want me to.” He pushes me against our door

I nod with pursed lips. My body shakes with anticipation. I know when he turns his head to the left, he’s going to kiss me. I grab onto his shirt and soft and delicious lips envelop mine. The pit of my belly churns and tickles, as my ears jump. His damp hair falls into my eyes.

“You smell good,” he tells me in between licks and lips.

I can’t really speak right now. *Can’t we just go in the apartment, kick Bria out, and get a quicky before you go?* That’s what I wanted to say. It’s been so long since we made love. I don’t even know how it feels anymore. It makes me wonder if we ever will again.

Porter’s horn blowing obnoxiously loud interrupts our kissing and my thoughts.

Sam throws his head back and groans. He sounds so sexy.

“Okay. I gotta go. Later, okay?”

I nod, watching him walk away, then head inside and throw my jacket down, letting out a frustrated sigh.

“Everything okay?” Bria emerges from my room, eating one of my caramel white chocolate soft baked cookies that the neighbor made me.

“Hey, don’t eat all my cookies.”

“I’m not.” She smiles and takes a bite of the dessert. “Why are you being mean to your clothes?”

I shake my head and mope to my room and throw myself on my bed.

“I’m so ready for prom,” I whine, peeling myself off the soft mattress I stare in the mirror. My cheeks are rosy. I glance up at my prom dress and pull it down from the closet door.

“I’m going to be so hot that night. What do you think?” I say, laying the dress over me and dancing with it.

“I think I wish I could go to prom.” She flumps onto the edge of my bed. “Hell, the only reason I was able to come over here tonight was because my dad was at that meeting with your brother’s band.” She sighs, hopelessly.

I stare at her for a moment, then put my dress back on the door. I flop down on my bed next to her.

“He thinks I’m made of glass—like something would happen at a college football game or a show or at the movies.”

“He can’t be that bad.”

“You’re my best friend and I think I see you once every other week, if that. I don’t do anything. My life is so boring.” She drops herself back onto my pillows. “It’s just study, study, with my parents. I can’t wait until high school is over.” She rolls her body up and leans toward me. “Please tell me parents let up a *little* bit when you go to college.”

I muster a half smile, thinking about my parents and how they haven’t been here in the last two years and I had to move here with Porter.

“Oh, I’m sorry. I didn’t...”

“No, it’s okay.”

“That was so insensitive of me, complaining about my parents and yours aren’t even in the country.”

I shrug. I still get to talk to them and video chat. They’re coming back next year, so it’s not a big deal.

I have you and Porter... I glance up at her, “And Sam... so, I’m happy.”

“Sam? So, things are heating up between you two again?”

“I’m not telling,” I say, fluttering my eyes.

“So yes!” she squeaks. “And he’s so hot!”

“Yeah...” I gush, smacking my lips. “

“I’m so jealous. I want some romance. I want some anything, some lust, some friends with benefits.” She laughs.

“Yeah.” I stare at her. “What if he’s the one?”

“The one? Wake up, Storm, just enjoy it for now. I mean, the way my dad was talking, they’re going to be big. Not just Sam, but Porter too. He’s not gonna have time for...whatever you guys are.”

My shoulders fall. This is why I don’t like to talk about me and Sam with anyone.

“Oh, I wasn’t trying to make you sad. I just... sometimes you get carried away in like a dreamland, and I was just... I don’t know what I was doing. Please don’t be sad.”

“No, you’re right... you were just preparing me for what might happen.” I peer up at my friend and confess. “He hasn’t even asked me to be his girlfriend yet. He hasn’t even confirmed the prom.”

“I’ll go to prom with you.” Bria offers, which makes us both smile.

“What if Porter and Sam are always gone and I’m left here alone. I know my parents are coming back next year but, what if they get this deal and I don’t have anyone.”

“You’ll have me.” She pauses. “Whenever my dad says it’s okay for me to come over.”

I drop my head. “Great. Thanks.”

SEVENTEEN



good deal

SAM

WILDER ON THE BASS—THE SOLO I GAVE HIM SO HE COULD show off his skills—has everyone in this studio captivated. I wonder what they're going to think about Porter's solo.

I belt out the chorus of the new song and Porter plays along as he sings background.

The suits smile and nod, showing their interest. That's a good sign... I hope.

They request an encore, and after two or three more songs, the music stops and we're standing in the middle of a hardwood floor in a studio encased with large windows. Three men in three-piece suits are about to decide our fate.

The silence presses into my skin as if the room is closing in on me. I put my heart and my soul into this performance. My heavy breaths fill up my ears, along with the overbearing sounds of instruments settling. I glance over at Mr. Abrams. He nods.

Chauncy Dustle is his name. That's how he introduces himself. He is the senior executive tasked with overseeing the day-to-day administrative and operational functions of the record company. He sits behind a minimalistic, black desk staring out into the studio, and two other record executives accompany him.

Me and the guys glance at each, not knowing what to do or say.

Please don't let Leo say anything. I pray to the high heavens.

“Good,” Mr. Dustle finally says out of the burrowed silence. “Good sound. Good balance “Great look. Especially you.” He arrows his eyes at me. “What’s your name?”

I glance around at the guys. “Me?” I point to my own chest.

“Yes.”

“Sam Shin-Carter.”

“Nationality? Ethnicity?”

“Korean American.”

“Very nice, very nice.” The older man nods. “Very unique. Powerful. The chunky, rhythm guitar with the funky base. And your drummer. Let me guess. You’re the eldest?”

“I am,” Leo says, coolly.

“A great drummer plays off of his musicians. He’s a listener. He follows and interchanges the feel of each band member. You all have a harmony that sometimes can be missing with young people.” He clears his throat.”

“Mr. Porter?” Mr. Dustle calls, looking blankly at Porter.

“Yes?”

“You’re fired.”

Porter frowns.

“You’ll need to focus on playing guitar. The label will find you proper management.”

Oh shit. Here it comes. I could faint right now. My ears pop, and I’m sweating like a fucking cow—*do cows sweat? What the hell am I talking about? We’re about to get signed. Get it together, asshole.* I shake off my weird nervousness and link back into the conversation.

Mr. Dustle taps his fingers on the surface of the black desk. “We’re prepared to offer you a standard three-album contract.”

Fuck! He said it. We have deal! I jump around my head like a moron hyped up on caffeine but on the outside, I’m cool as a cucumber.

“Of course, each of you will receive a portion of the signing bonus. We’ll get a 360 contract drawn up. It’ll be simple. A traditional recording deal—”

“When will we get the signing bonus money?” I ask point blank.

Mr. Dustle smiles. “As soon as you sign the contract, the checks will be cut and given to each of you. As I was saying, it’s a standard deal. We cover the cost of everything upfront. Whatever you need. We’ll get you a publicist and a vision market strategist. You have something unique going on here. It’s very marketable we have a great marketing team. Get you some songwriters, get you in the studio right away.”

Porter glances at me. “We write our own songs.”

No. shut up, dude! What’s wrong with you? Who cares who writes the songs they’re about to give us money. Fuck, I’ll sing the Happy Birthday song if they pay me.

“There’s no need,” Mr. Dustle assures us.

Porter nods. He’s a little uneasy, but if everyone is on board, even if he’s not... he’ll still go along with it. Ezra is like a brotherhood. We stick together.

“We need to be able to write our songs,” Porter insists.

He doesn’t write shit! I write the songs, so why is he positioning for me if I’m not saying anything? I furrow my brow.

“Listen. What if we just get you some co-writers and co-composers? You’ll be able to write, and take your concepts to a new level with professional writers and compositionists. You’ll still be a part of the process. We just need to get a game plan together for a brand. That’s important.”

“Does that sound okay to you?” Porter asks me.

Oh, now he’s wondering what I think? Once they said they’d be giving us money I was on board either way.

“Sounds good to me.” I feel as if it’s crucial to not jump the gun or seem too eager in front of them.

“Great. Then we’ll get with our legal team to make those changes. How about we say in twenty-four hours, we meet back here in the second-floor board room to go over the contracts and get them signed?” Mr. Dustle suggests.

I nod, gauging the other members’ responses. They are all in favor.

This is actually happening.

“Sounds wonderful. One of the guys who had been sitting at Mr. Dustle’s side rises to his feet. “How about I take everyone downtown to celebrate, grab a later dinner and drinks on us?”

“See you gentlemen tomorrow.” Mr. Dustle gathers his documents and says good night. The two men accompany us to the parking garage and they pile into a limo.

Everything seems so surreal I still can’t believe it.

“Aren’t you coming?” Porter asks, about to get into the car.

“I promised Storm I’d come back when this was over.”

“You were the one waiting for something like this the most.”

“I know, but we’ve got. We’re signing tomorrow. That’s all I really care about.”

“Sure you don’t want to come out and celebrate?”

I look away and shove my hands in my pockets.

“Not with us, huh?”

“I think I’m okay with you flaking on us for Storm.” Porter smiles. “Business is taken care of. “Look.” He reaches into his pocket and pulls out the car keys. “Why don’t you take the car? I’ll catch a ride with one of the guys if they’re not too drunk.”

“Thanks.” I smirk, a warm feeling covers my body.

“No problem. Tell her the good news. You’re gonna be a rockstar.”

“And you’re okay with us being together?”

“After you chose to be with her rather than do anything else, rather than go get treated like a celebrity. Yeah. I trust you. You’ve been there for her when I didn’t realize I hadn’t been. When Mom and Dad went to South Korea, I took up the mantle as breadwinner and I am focused on that, so a lot of stuff fell through the cracks. She said you’ve been by her side. I’d like you to keep being there. Even with all of this.”

“Yeah. Of course.”

“Storm is my responsibility. My first priority is to keep her safe and get her taken care of.”

“You know. I’ll be able to take care of her too now.”

He nods and gives me a bro handshake before he turns around and gets in the limo.

I stand there for a moment in disbelief.

This is happening.

EIGHTEEN



private party

STORM

“STORM?” SAM CALLS.

Great, I’m dreaming about him again.

“Storm. Wake up.”

Oh. He’s really here. My eyes open to him hovering over me in my bed.

I stretch and hug him. I stare at him for a split second and plant a kiss right on his lips pulling him down to me, forgetting all about the label stuff. I just want him.

“Storm.” He calls through kisses. He pulls away from me and turns the light on. “Baby.”

Baby? Did he just say call me baby?

“We got the deal!” he reveals with his hands in the air.

It takes a second for it to hit me. I scoot off the bed and hug him. “No way!”

He swings me around my room.

“That’s right!” He sighs. “I can’t wait to take you to prom.”

I gleam with excitement as he glances up at my peach frilly skater dress.

“Is that your dress?”

“Yeah. And I got you a bowtie to match.”

“I’ll find flowers that are the same color, or I’ll have a white one dip-dyed. Everything’ll be perfect that night. I’m

gonna get a limo, and a photographer. A horse and carriage.”

“What?”

“Yeah, they have them downtown on the brick roads near the river. I’ll take you back to Lebanon Ferry the next day so you can see the garden. It’s so beautiful, just like you.” He kisses my hands.

“Sam.” I’m speechless. *He did it. They did it.* “Please don’t forget about me.”

“What?” He grimaces. “Why would you—no, Storm. I can finally be who I need to be to you. You won’t have to want for anything. I’ll give you whatever you need, whatever you want. Let’s buy a house in Dennington country with a big backyard. Just like Harper’s house.”

“What are you talking about, Sam?”

He can’t be stopped. That look of determination in his eyes and the earnestness in his voice.

“I’ll take you on dates every night. We’ll have dinner with my parents on Sundays, and hang out with the guys on Saturdays. You can come to our practices, to our shows. You or my parents won’t have to sacrifice anything anymore just for me. I’ll do it. I’ll sing for the rest of my life if I can just take care of you. Make sure my parents don’t have to work their lives away.”

“Sam, I....”

“My dad just lost his second job. This couldn’t have come at a better time. I’m going to get my parents out of that neighborhood. I can still play this season too, we can definitely get to championships. I can do it all and break no promises. I won’t let anyone down. I’ll finally be able to pay my parents back for everything they’ve done for me.”

“It wasn’t a loan. They did it because they love you. And they see what I see, what everyone sees. You’re amazing. Not anyone can get a record deal.”

“Yeah, the label guy said we had a unique and marketable sound. That means we’re going to be making lots of money.”

“I guess so.” I pull his face upward to look into these hazy blue eyes of his. “Sam, you *are* everything to me.” I kiss his lips. “I’m happy you’re doing something you love. But I don’t really care about having a limo or a photographer, being with you is enough—I’m not turning down the horse and carriage thing though. I’m going to be a princess that night if it kills me.” I giggle.

“You are a princess. You’re my princess.”

“And you’re my prince.”

He wrinkles his nose. “If any of the guys from the band or my teammates heard me talking like this, I’d never hear the end of it.”

“Good. That means it’s something we share. Only I know this version of you. It’s mine. It’s my Sam.”

“I’m your Sam?”

I nod.

“And you’re mine?” he says, a seductive look in his eyes. He pulls his shirt over his head, exposing his rock-hard abs, and inches closer to me. Our lips collide, and he swooshes the covers away from me. I lay back as he pushes me down slowly onto the bed.

He falls on me, deepening the kiss. My legs spread to accept his muscular body between them. Heavy breaths flow between us as my rising heart rate intertwines with his. As he

steals his lips from mine and they travel down my body, everywhere he touches— everywhere he kisses— is a new sensation that sends electricity through my body. My back arches as his lips reach my inner thighs, they quiver weakly.

My only experience with a man has been with Sam. The only person I've ever wanted has been Sam.

His warm hands smooth over my body until they tug at the sides of my underwear and shimmies them down my legs. He spreads my knees apart and lays between them. His warm breaths after every kiss along my inner thighs steal my breath, as they go from quiet and long to short pants. I spread my fingers on the sheet and press my palms into the lilac flowers. As he nibbles on my sensitive areas, my mind shuts off every doubt.

This is Sam. This is me.

Official or not, this is real.

When his lips move toward my middle, a sharp breath slips past my lips. My cheeks crimson, and I want to pull the covers over me, but his hands grasp at my hips, pinning me down. Burrowing his face into the folds of my womanhood wipes all of my anxiousness away; my chest contracts and I coo with pleasure.

The pressure of his tongue on me and the lapping sensation feels like he's trying to suck my life into him. I'd willingly slip right into his existence.

I purr like a kitten. As all my emotions gather at the center of me, an eruption cripples me for a few moments. My legs shake; I'm so weak.

"Come here." He orders me. I love it.

Even still, he came to me. He slips off his sweats and boxers revealing his appendage that stood straight up, stiffly. He hovers over me, slipping his hands underneath my shirt. He cups my breasts in the palm of his hands before he crinkles my shirt up and pulls it over my shoulders and head.

I lay there, still not fully restored from the prior explosion, yet I can't help but want him inside of me. He leans into me, niggling my right nipple, then my left. My womanhood jumps with anticipation. His scent is so intoxicating a woody cashmere that mixes with a dry honey aroma that drives me wild.

As his lips take over mine, biting and licking, the pit of my stomach throbs down to my center.

He slips inside of me. The pleasure expands past what I believed I could endure. He brings his body even closer to mine as his manhood dips inside slowly, back and forth. My moans are met with his deep groans.

“Storm...” he calls breathlessly.

I wish I could say his name, say anything. I can't. It's hard to even remember to breathe. My eyes roll back in my head as another eruption builds with every long and forceful thrust. I hold on to him as our lips twist and twirl around each other and his hands hold my body so dearly. The deeper he goes, the higher my back arches... the more I want to scream, but nothing comes out, only gasps.

My lips quiver, as well as my legs.

My entire body is as light as air, as if I am floating. Until everything stops. My hands clutch his hair as his face rests on my chest.

I fall back onto the bed, tears in my eyes. It's like I had come from a different world and just landed back here in reality. We both pant into each other's faces. I can't help but stare into his eyes, and furrowed brows wondering how the hell he could do that to me. What did he do to me? We had sex before, but is this what making love is?

I want it all the time.

NINETEEN



understand

SAM

IT'S BEEN A WHILE SINCE WE'VE BEEN IN A POSITION WHERE we didn't have to be careful, or look over our shoulders. It's also been a while since we've been here, like this. The first time we'd ever made love, it was awkward and I could tell she was scared. But each time, she's more and more open to it, wanting it in the way I need it.

I drop my eyes down to the blankets. Her slender back peeks out from the covers, her firm breasts press against my inner thigh as she lies peacefully in my lap.

I've been waiting for something amazing to happen. For the perfect time to make her mine, to feel good enough to be loved by her. And this is it.

I'll take her out tonight when we sign the contracts and ask her to be my girlfriend. I stare out her window as the sun shines in on us, then laugh, feeling just a little stupid inside this room full of rainbows, but that's who she is and I love it.

I'll buy her as many rainbows as she wants once we make it. The signing bonus is enough to get a car, even if it's a lemon. After I help my parents, I'll save up and get a really nice one with automatic everything. I'll just finish this semester out, get the team to the championship, and let them down easy after the season. If I can. They didn't really tell us what the next step was, but Bria's said we had room to negotiate.

I don't care about negotiation. I can always go to school later. As for Lacrosse, if it comes down to it, I'm ready to sacrifice.

I suck in a large breath and exhale, caressing her skin with my fingertips. If I'm being honest, I could stay like this forever.

A knock comes at the door. I cast my eyes toward it and set one foot on the floor as I try to rise to my feet without waking her.

"No," she whimpers, pulling me back onto the bed and cuddling even closer.

I live for this. Every time it happens, even though I know I'll have to leave at some point, the fact that she doesn't want me to, that she wakes up from her sleep to secure my presence, I never want to leave her. I want to be by her side always and always have her need me, want me, choose me.

I clear my throat.

"I'm sure that's Porter. You might want to put some clothes on," I say as she rolls over, pulling the cover up to her shoulders.

"Okay." She reaches for the pajama shirt that falls at her knees and pulls it over her.

I'm wearing boxers, but I slide my pants on from the floor before I open the door.

Making my way over to the other side of the room, I smile at her as she seems to adjust a bit more to the idea of being awake and puts on some more clothes.

Porter stands there on the other side of the door, his eyes cast to the floor and a tear falling down his cheek.

"What's wrong?" I ask, furrowing my brow. I dart my eyes at Storm for a few seconds then back at him.

He steps into the room, ignoring my presence, and peers right into Storm, who slides on her knees in the middle of the bed. Her messy ponytail barely has any hair left in it. The stray strands of curls fall around her face, past her neck, and down her back.

He eases down onto the bed, twiddling with the covers.

“Did something happen?”

What did they fuck up last night? Please tell me Leo didn't say something stupid and get our contract revoked.

He lets out a murmuring sigh. “D-Dad had a heart attack.”

I know I should not sigh in relief, but I do and immediately feel like a dick when I realize what he just said. “Oh, shit.”

“Is he okay?” she squeaks, her voice already high-pitched and at the point of cracking. Reaching for her phone on the side table beside the bed, she stares up at Porter. “Mom called me.”

“H-He...” Porter drops to his knees.

Storm rushes to him, as do I. She kneels in front of him.

They gaze into each other's eyes. His lips quiver as he tries to get words out, unsuccessfully.

“No...” Storm mumbles as she shakes her head stiffly in disbelief. “He's okay, right?” She secures his face between her hands as if forcing him to say something else.

He resists the up and down movement, causing her to freeze. It feels like time slows, narrowing in on the slightest of moments. Porter shakes his head.

Her hands collapse to the floor beside her. “No.” She whimpers, tears building in her eyes. “Porter? No.” The

tremble in her voice echoes inside me, bouncing off the walls as I had been hollowed out.

Porter opens his arms to her and she falls into him.

My heart is beating so fast that it's hard to know what to think right now or even what to do. I swallow hard, the jumbled thoughts in my head keeping me from saying anything.

"It's going to be okay," Porter whispers, then kisses the top of her head, trying to be strong. Be the man of the house.

He does a horrible job of holding back his tears, and the tighter she squeezes him—rocking back and forth, pouring her heart out in agonizing scowls—the less he's able to be the man she needs. Pools of sadness form in his eyes, and he gazes up at me.

I had never seen him like this—not once—but I can imagine what it feels like to crack inside. To split open. To implode. If anything happened to my dad, I'd die a little too.

"Daddy!" she croaks out, as if her heart had nestled at the base of her throat and vibrated her vocal cords. She wasn't talking to Porter, it's as if she was calling him back from the dead.

Thick tears fall from the contours of Porter's eyes. "W-w-w-we. Um... h-h..." He heaves out every syllable.

I contemplate whether or not to wrap my arms around both of them, but when Porter stutters, I know he needs me to take her. "Baby..." I whisper and touch her shoulders, helping her up into my arms.

Storm stumbles into me, embracing me. I hold her as she shivers.

With a thankful nod, Porter rises to his feet and sits at the edge of the bottom of her bed. I pick her up as if I'm going to take her over a threshold and carry her to the bed, letting her hold on to me. I rest on the top portion of her bed as she cries into my chest. I pull Porter toward me and hug his neck.

I kiss her forehead and she holds on to me tighter. All three of us huddle together, forehead to forehead to forehead.

“Mom’s a wreck right now,” he mumbles through sobs.

“I’m sorry,” I offer. It’s all I can manage. We stay like that for what seems like forever, until their sorrow reaches the first plateau. At some point, between them whispering about memories, I came to realize Porter’s life didn’t just change, it stopped. He was talking about his plans, and not once did those plans mention Ezra.

I’m not sure what to do at a time like this—how not to be selfish. Mostly because my mind’s thoughts have leveled out and are on the contract, but I think it might be in poor taste if I mention that.

“I don’t know what I’m going to do.” Porter frowns, staring forward as if there is something to be seen in the center of the room. “It’s not just that Dad’s gone.”

“What else?” Storm snuffles.

“I don’t know why they weren’t being honest with us—well, I guess I do. She told me about the medical bills, and I’d been sending them a couple hundred dollars to help each month. But she didn’t tell me it was this bad.”

“But Dad i-i-w...” she swallows and by passes the word altogether. “... some big-shot tech guy. How? Didn’t he make a lot of money?”

“Yeah, at one time, but he had been missing a lot of work. Another thing they didn’t tell us. *Why* tell us anything? I guess we’re still kids to them at the end of the day.”

“Like how much?”

“Like thousands of dollars.” Porter eyes Storm. “Dad has been having heart problems. Without dad’s income, Mom can’t pay them.”

“W-What does that mean?”

“She can’t come back home until the debts are paid. They’re behind on rent. I just can’t believe they didn’t say anything to us. Maybe there was something I could have done.”

“They didn’t have *any* money?”

“They would have been fine if Dad wouldn’t have gotten sick, but no insurance means if you need an MRI, that’s between seven hundred dollars and twenty-five hundred dollars. And because of how much money he makes and the fact they’re not citizens, I guess they didn’t get any assistance. Treatments, physical therapy, heart monitoring, tests. He had valvular heart disease.”

“What is that?” Storm asks, arching her neck, a look of disbelief on her face.

“It’s when there’s something wrong with all four or one or more valves that transfer blood to the heart. They can get clogged, they can shrink, they can leak— lots of things can happen. Mom didn’t really go too far into detail.”

“Then, what is *she* going to do?”

“You know she has that teaching job, but that doesn’t pay enough. They had some savings, but it’s gone.” He shakes his

head, staring pensively at the floor.

“We don’t have any money?” Storm asks, loosening her grip on me. “I can get a job.”

“You just started classes. You’ll be a full fledge college student in the fall. I can’t ask you to do that.”

“I can sell my car,” she offers, desperation in her tone.

“It’s my job to make sure you’re doing what you’re supposed to and have everything you need. You’re just figuring out what you want to do with your life. Mom would kill me if I took something away from you that you need. I’d never want to do that. We’ll figure it out. We’ll get her home.”

This was the perfect time to chime in.

“Don’t worry,” I say, pulling her face toward mine, “We’re signing the contract and they are offering a bonus. It’ll probably be a good amount maybe it’ll help. You won’t—”

“What?” Porter grunts.

I dart my eyes over at him to observe the disgust on his face as if I had spit in his eye.

“You think I’m worried about that right now? My dad just died. I’m not leaving Storm’s side. If Mom calls back, I’ll be right here for her. These people will understand. I’ll shoot them an email later. Family is more important. Decent human beings know that.”

I turn my lip up at him. Is he implying I’m not a decent person? I glance him over.

“What’s your deal? It may not fix the problem entirely, but it’s money you don’t have, that you would. Wouldn’t *that* be helping your family? You need money now, more than a hug. You’re not thinking clearly.”

“You fucking insensitive jerk. How could you even bring this up? Is that what you’re thinking about? I can barely even think let alone try to do business. You know there are more important things.”

“Whatever. You literally were just talking about it. You need to get your head out of your ass and let’s go get this money. We can try to pay off something.”

Storm, slides off my lap, as I rise to my feet. “I’m going. I have to take care of my family just like you do. Only I don’t look in the face of a problem and think ‘oh let’s just hug it out and things will take care of themselves.’ I’m going to *actually* help my family.”

“I knew it. You don’t give a shit about Storm. We’re your family too. We’ve been here for you. You’re going to leave her like this? Her dad just died. And you’re gonna take off and make some money, huh?”

“For a few hours. It’s the difference between your mom being in South Korea indefinitely or sending her a big chunk of cash in good faith. It’s living in a shitty neighborhood all my life, my parents working fourteen and sixteen hours a day or going to sign this fucking contract so we can at least live in a place where the roof isn’t leaking, and we don’t have to have six locks on the door or we might be robbed. I know Storm understands. Why can’t you? Just get the fuck up, and let’s go get this money.”

“You *fucking* greedy prick. You can’t get your mind off of money long enough to grieve with your own damn girlfriend? I don’t know what she sees in you. Instead of thinking about how many zeros are getting tacked on to your bank account, you should be thinking about her.”

“I *am* thinking about Storm! I’m thinking about all of us. All of us need this as much as the next one. We’re supposed to be a team.”

“My fucking Dad just died. Do you not understand that.”

“People die every day. What about us who are still alive? I am so sorry for your loss and I am here for both you, but I’m going to that meeting. If they give us some time, great. I’m here for that too. But you’re not thinking clearly. You give me so much shit about being proud and being self-righteous but right now you’re the one on some type of self-righteous soapbox, like you’re better than me. You—”

“I am better than you. All you think about is—” Porter shouts, rushing in my direction.

“Okay! Okay.” Storm cries, stepping in between us. Neither of us would even dream of doing anything that would harm her, so we keep to our sides glaring at one another.

“Porter!” she calls to him.

“You protect him like I’m the monster?” he groans. “Whatever.” He moves her hand off his shoulder and stomps toward the door. As he leaves the room, he slams it and the sound rolls all over the room. Storm cringes at the sound, closing her eyes tightly.

When she opens them, she stares into my eyes as if I have the answers.

“Am I wrong?”

Her lip quivers as she pushes me onto the bed and throws herself into my arms. “I don’t know.”

I grab her by her shoulders and force her to look directly at me.

“You understand, don’t you?” I take a breath; my heart races and my face is on fire. “I’m not leaving you, you know that, right? I’m only gonna be gone for a few hours. I’m coming right back to you.”

She nods but her sobs don’t stop. Her tears still fall.

“Porter is the one who doesn’t understand. He doesn’t see this is the answer to getting your mom back. He’s the one who isn’t thinking about you. He’s the one who isn’t thinking straight.”

“He is thinking about me. You guys might not agree, but I know you both think you’re doing the right thing.” She nods, staring dreamily at me as if she believes my every word. I need her to believe me. She lays her head on my chest and continues weeping, holding on to me so tight. I wrap my arms around her.

“I’m not leaving you,” I mumble, kissing her in her hair.

I gulp staring out into the room.

Am I doing the right thing? I nod. Yeah. I am. I’m not blinded by self-righteous outrage, by misdirected emotion. I’m thinking clearly. This decision benefits both of us, all of us. She understands. I know it. But does it matter if Porter doesn’t?

TWENTY



brainwashed

STORM

IN MY ROOM, I STARE AT THE WALL AS TEARS FALL DOWN MY face. The jazz music my father loved so much plays from my speaker on the side table.

I remember when they told us we were adopted. I had already guessed it when I was way younger. It doesn't matter. They were our parents and that's how they thought of it too. Mom couldn't have kids. She says we were her angels.

So I always think maybe we were always hers, we just had to come through someone else. And I was fine with that.

I lie down in my bed; sniffles tune out small parts of the smooth music. My pillows reek of Sam's warm and sweet scent. I give the room a once-over and spot his shirt on the floor. I hold it against my bosom and cuddle with my pillows and pull my covers over me recalling what it feels like to be in his arms.

When my mom tells the story of how they came to be our parents, she says we were living with a relative of our biological mother and they came to see me. They had originally wanted a daughter they could call their own, but when they got to house, they couldn't bare separate us. Porter was so kind and sweet to me, tickling me calling me baby sister and telling them all the cute things I would do.

He was a protector of me even when he was three years old. Now I have two people who want to protect and love me. Two people who want the same thing but think about it in totally different ways. And I'm in the middle of it all.

My door opens and I glance up from my covers.

“Hey.” Porter sits on my bed. I suppose in honor of Dad, he’s speaking in Korean. He pushes my hair back and it refuses to stay there, falling right back on my face. “How are you doing?”

“I’m okay,” I mutter, weakly. “I can’t believe he’s gone. We didn’t even get to see him. And Mom... She’s over there all by herself.”

“I should have called them, like you said,” he says.

My eyes water more than they were before, and I lie down on the pillow, my hands slipping from under the cover as I cradle the garment against my neck.

Porter darts his eyes toward my hands. I’m sure he sees Sam’s shirt there as I clutch it.

The caring leer he’d offered upon entrance escapes his face. “Give me this!” he says in English, forgetting the sentiment he had brought with him when he came in. He tries to snatch the shirt from me, thinking he had surprise on his side, but my grip is far too strong.

“Stop it!” I squeal, shoving it deeper under the covers. I dare him to reach any further. I’ll bite his fingers off.

He blows hair out of his nostrils. “I can’t believe that asshole left you like this.”

“He’s not wrong,” I peep.

“True to the end. Whatever he does is fine?”

“No. He—”

“Look...” He scowls at me. “There’re some things you don’t do. I’d never leave you like this. And I’d be a horrible

brother to just not say anything. If you wanna be in love with an insensitive jerk—that's your problem.”

“He's not insensitive.”

“Why do you take up for him all the time? Can't you just admit he's a prick?”

“You're being a prick too! He's your best friend. I mean he's mine too, but he was yours first. You're not even listening to him.”

He doesn't say anything for a while.

“Yeah, well...” he ignores my statement. “I emailed Bria's dad. We'll take care of it once we figure out what we're going to do. I mean Bria's your friend. They know us. He has a family too. I don't mean to say it like this, but they owe us.” Mom really needs us right now. We need to call her back, see what we can do. Let her know we're there for her.”

Yeah, her dad knows you guys, not the record company.

I don't make a peep right away; I don't want to get yelled at. He won't listen to me anyway.

“Can we go to South Korea? At least to see Mom or go to the funeral?” I ask after a few minutes.

“No, I can't afford to miss work. I haven't worked here long enough to acquire any vacation or PTO. And you can't afford to miss any classes. Remember the last time you missed classes. Do you want to have to do an entire college semester over? There's only about a month and a half, maybe a little more of this semester. I'm the sole breadwinner here now. That's my responsibility—It's also my responsibility to get Mom back home. Dad is counting on me to do that.”

This seems like a good time, maybe he's open to suggestions now.

"Well..." I gulp. "Wouldn't you have the money if you signed the contract, like Sam said? Maybe they would even get you more if you told them what was going on?"

He rises off the bed as if he is going to call a duel.

My chest caves in.

"Are you *that* stupid?" he scoffs. "Did he brainwash you with his materialistic asshole gaslighting? Can you think for yourself?"

"Porter!" I frown.

"W-What if it falls through? What if I can't be there for you or for Mom, what if they don't give us what they promised? We need to look over the contract anyway, we need to get a lawyer. Isn't one of your friend's dad a lawyer? We can't just sign it— sign our lives away. Sam is only thinking about getting money. He's not thinking about the big picture."

"You don't have to be so mean," I whimper.

"It's not being mean. It's being realistic. This deal is not a guarantee, and somehow, you've let Sam convince you he's some type of superhero who can make all our problems go away with money."

"That's not true. He's trying to help."

"Yeah, of course, that's what he wants you to believe. And you're naïve enough to listen. He's going to help by abandoning family, friends, whoever because money is the answer? I tell you what, if you start thinking like that, you're gonna be just as materialistic as he is."

"He's not—"

“I get it. We tiptoe around it a lot. He’s poor. I understand. He doesn’t have a lot of things and he probably looks at us, at Wilder, at Leo like we’re living the dream.”

I lower my head. We never say things like that. And I don’t like to hear it. Even though it may be true.

“But we’re not rich, like Wilder. Leo’s working too. We’re all just *working*; things don’t just come to us magically. Money isn’t the answer to everything. Sometimes you need to be together, to hold one another to be there when the rest of the world is thinking just like Sam is.”

“But he has a point.”

He throws his hands up. “Just stop talking. You’re letting him mess up your morality.” He scoots closer to me and stares me straight in the eye.

I arch my neck trying to escape the heaviness of his glare. “Listen to me. Family is more important than having a big break or something like that. Sam is a greedy asshole who only thinks about money. He doesn’t have any morals or values when it comes to making a dime.

“Then why have you guys been best friends for so long?”

“He’s a good guy. I know he is, but this is his fight. He has to learn the right thing to do. I was trying to help him. Maybe if he saw how I moved, he’d catch on. I thought he understood. I thought we had an unbreakable bond. But he messed up this time.”

“It was just once. When he comes back you guys can talk about it. You can’t break Ezra up.”

“The band is *his* baby, I was just trying to help him. I’ve always been trying to help him. It was a way for him to see how much talent he had and a way for him to make money. I

didn't necessarily want to be in a band or it wasn't my first thought for a career."

"I thought it was. It's been you and Sam since we were kids."

"Yeah. And I felt like that too, like if this band thing would help Sam, then I was on board. A few months ago, I started feeling like, maybe this really can happen, maybe we'll be successful. He's so good and he loves it. I'd always be behind him one hundred percent. But he showed me today that that's now how he feels about me. Or about you."

Are they not friends anymore? Did Sam do something to me? Because It feels like they want to do the same thing but are going about it in completely different ways and neither can see that the answer isn't as black and white as they assume it is.

As he stares into my eyes, like he's trying to infuse my psyche with his thoughts, a knock at the door startles me.

"Yeah?" I say breathlessly.

Is he back? Is it Sam?

The door opens slowly and my lips quiver with excitement. I wait to jump into his arms.

"Hey."

My shoulders and my chest drop. A frown comes upon my face and tears run down my cheeks more rapidly. The disappointment hits hard. It's Bria.

"Hey. My dad doesn't know I'm here, but I had to come." She sprints over to me from the door and wraps her arms around me. The despair disappears once her arms are around me.

“I’m so sorry, Storm.”

Me too.

TWENTY-ONE



something good

SAM

“WE’VE BEEN WAITING HERE FOR AN HOUR.

“Is Mr. Lee coming?” one of the label executives asks me.

The other members, minus Porter, sit on one side of a long, oddly shaped wooden table. It kind of looks like a rectangle and an oval had a baby. The chairs are nice and comfortable and spin around.

I may have spun around a few times before being eyed by Mr. Dustle, as if I were a child. I stopped and put my hands in my lap.

The glass door whooshes open and Mr. Abrams, Bria’s dad, stomps into the room, anger distorting his face.

“Well, gentlemen, it was nice meeting you.” Mr. Dustle nods, raising one of his eyebrows and giving us all a moment before he leaves the room along with the other man who had joined.

“What the hell is this?” Mr. Abrams growls, walking right over to me and slamming some papers down in front of me on the table.

I gulp, wide-eyed. Stiffly dropping my eyes to the paper, I see the printed email from Porter.

“It’s over.”

What’s over? My head snaps to Bria’s father.

Wilder chimes in, “We can get them back when Porter is feeling more like himself. They liked us.”

Bria's father shouts, "No. You. Can't! That was your break!" He points toward the door. "You all just let it walk right out."

My heart beats so loud it sounds like a drum.

"Do you know how many strings I pulled to get your demo in the right hands?" Bria's dad pauses to level out his tone, to one more professional. "All you had to do was show up. Four members."

I glance at the empty chair. "We did show up. We're here." They guys nod and give me the approval. "We can make this work." *I need this to work.* I read that contract, a quarter million dollar bonus for each of us. We'd get into the studio right away, but—

"If they can't understand an emergency maybe they aren't the right people for us," Wilder chimes in. "There are other companies. Other opportunities for us."

Bria's dad shakes his head. "There is no deal. The little stunt your "manager" pulled just cost you." He glances out the window, and lowers his voice. "Irresponsible little shit."

"Dude!" Leo says, his deep baritone voice filling the room. "His dad died."

"Yeah," I add. *Why is he getting so angry?* I get we cost him money, but we are the ones who just pissed off one of the biggest record companies in the country.

"I put my neck out for you four—put professional relationships at stake, pulled favors, and set my word down—and this is how you repay me?"

"He saved your daughter's life," Leo stands up, as if he's about ready to storm out of here. "He pulled her out of a pool. And you can't even give the guy a break?" Leo scoffs and

cocks his head to the side. “Bria would be dead if not for Porter.”

“Don’t you bring my daughter into this, boy.” Mr. Abrams straightens his spine and squares his shoulders. Leo is not helping the situation, but he doesn’t shut up.

Leo points toward the door. “You have pull, that’s what you keep saying, so go out there, reschedule. Get them back. You owe Porter that much.”

The scowl Leo gets in return cements his distaste for Ezra.

De-escalate. “Porter isn’t my favorite person right now either.” I pace toward the large window, trying to connect with the only man capable of salvaging this. “Can’t you understand a little bit, Mr. Abrams?” I don’t know whether I say this for Porter or for myself. Self-preservation, maybe, considering I was just arguing with Porter about the same reason.

“Understand? Have empathy? *This damn generation.* This is a business.” Mr. Abrams puts his hands in his pockets, probably so he doesn’t strangle Leo who glares at him. “You think this guy gives a shit that Porter’s dad died?”

He has a point.

“Do you think if his dad died while you guys were expected to do a show or record an album, he’d give a shit? No, you’d still have to do the show, you’d still have to record the album. Hell, if one of you died, he’d turn the tears of your fans into cash. Everything in this business is business.”

“Yeah, but—” I try to say.

“Don’t! Talk!” he shouts at me, his rugged voice rippling through the walls. “People die every day, nobody cares. People’s bills don’t care who is no longer among us. They will continue to come and continue to pile up. You have to be adult

enough, professional enough to not let emotion rule your actions.”

This confirms exactly what I was trying to tell Porter earlier.

“If he would have shown up, we may have been able to get an extension. Hell, we may have even been able to spin it and get you guys’ support, followers, and fans before your debut, but no. This label is a veteran, and Mr. Ichinose didn’t become the CEO by doing bad business. He knows if someone isn’t responsible enough to show up when they are expected to, they will be trouble. This is a job—you don’t show up for work on your first day, you get fired.”

“Technically, it wasn’t our first day.” Leo needs to just keep his mouth shut.

“He probably isn’t thinking straight,” Wilder offers, adjusting his rectangular glasses. In reference to Porter or Leo, I have no clue.

“And?” Mr. Abrams turns to face him. “Did you think about your step-father in all of this?”

Wilder shrinks into his chair, probably regretting saying anything at all, especially since this might mean his stepdad might not have a job. He was one of those favors Mr. Abrams spoke of.

“I didn’t think so.” Mr. Abrams bounces his gaze between the three of us who showed up. “Porter still has a mother. A sister. And a life of his own. I knew his father. If he were still here, he’d tell Porter to get his ass here. To be a man of his word.” He swipes the email into his hand and uses it as evidence. “He’s a quitter. And instead of being here supporting him, you should consider how little he thinks of you.”

“He’s not thinking straight,” Wilder shrugs, but we all know Porter did us wrong. He spoke for us and ruined our chances.

“Look, Mr. Abrams.” I lean against the windowsill. “Porter fucked up.” The guys stare at me, but don’t stop me. “What can we do?”

For the first time, Mr. Abrams’s expression softens. For a millisecond. “If he cared about his own future, or your future... he would have shown up.” He scoffs, walking toward the door and rubbing his forehead. “There’s nothing *Ezra* can do, and I’m done with this band. This was the best deal. Top label just *throwing* money at you. You blew it! First impressions are everything and—”

“Okay, that’s enough!” Leo barks. “If I wanted to get yelled at, I’d talk to my mom. You don’t get to stand here and insult us. You said so yourself, you’re done with us.”

I gulp.

Leo continues, “If we don’t have a deal anymore, then whatever. We tried. Let’s go guys. We don’t have to take this.” Leo steps toward the door, quick on his feet.

Mr. Abrams sighs and head toward the door, the printed paper still in his hand “Let this be a lesson.” He rips the paper up and drops it in the bin. “You can’t just go throwing away chances because your heart is broken. No one’s going to hold your hand in adulthood. You get one chance. Maybe in your next endeavor, because Ezra definitely isn’t it, don’t blow it.”

“This is bullshit,” I mumble under my breath.

After a while, Wilder gets up in defeat. Leo falls behind him.

Poverty stands outside that door. I held two-hundred fifty grand in my hand, but it would have been in my hands twenty-four hours after signing.

“You coming?” Leo asks.

I shoot my head up to him. Rage and sadness battle it out in my veins. A rush of heat pulses through me, then a sinking feeling. I stay put, refusing to believe this is it. I used the money I earned for tuition. My Dad doesn't have a job. My account is on empty. And I can't... I can't leave empty-handed. “This it, Mr. Abrams? I mean no disrespect, but there's absolutely nothing we can do?”

“No one will touch *Ezra* after this hits the street. Not for awhile. Ichinose doesn't like being rejected.”

“He's going to blacklist us?” Leo, who had been by the door, slams it shut. “I'll punch that guy's nose in.”

Mr. Abrams crosses his arms over his chest and sits on the table. The look he exchanges with me proves what I had feared. It's not just Porter. Leo too. *Disrespect isn't rewarded*. He stares at me, only speaking to me. “I have a backup plan.”

“Why didn't you lead with that?” Leo slaps Wilder between the shoulder blades.

“Shut up!” Wilder whisper-shouts at Leo.

Mr. Abrams doesn't even acknowledge them. “There is another deal with an even bigger company on the table. Ever heard of Regal Dream Studios?”

“Regal Dream? If Sire Studios is owned by the forty-seventh richest man in the world, this label has to be owned by one of the top ten.” Wilder comes closer, and Leo takes a seat.

Mr. Abrams continues to ignore them. “They have a headquarters here and in California.”

Excitement fills the room, but I have a feeling the backup plan doesn't involve Porter. He made his choice though. I'm on board with or without Porter. If we get on, we could eventually bring him on later. Maybe we could help get their mom back.

I nod, more interested than ever. “I shopped your demo around to more than just a few labels because I happen to believe in your look—your sound. That's why it's such a disappointment that Porter didn't take this seriously.” He pauses, and makes eye contact with us all, one at a time. When he lands on me, my heart plummets into my stomach. “I didn't want to mention this one... because they were only interested in Sam.”

For an unmeasured moment, I can't breathe. “Me?”

He reaches into the inside pocket of his blazer and hands me a single sheet of paper, folded in three. “They think you're good enough to be a solo artist.” He hands it to me.

I unfold the paper. *Oh, shit. Look at all those zeroes.*

“There's an offer on the table but you gotta take it now. You all put an expiration date on it. The second what went down hits, that number will be reduced. Getting passed up means your damaged goods.”

I hear the scoffs and blatant disdain from the other guys, but at this point, I don't know what to do. I'm not even sure I care. The answer to all my problems is the one that can bring me more.

“You're shitting me?” Leo blurts out. But I can barely hear him over the chatter in my mind. He and Wilder's words seem

so far away.

“Anyway.” Mr. Abrams cuts off the conversation. “Like I said, time sensitive. It’s all about you, Sam.”

This brings the room to silence.

“Sacrifices need to be made. It’s your decision, Sam.” Mr. Abrams reaches into this pocket again. “I have the rough contract right here.”

Maybe if I take this, I could help Porter and Storm get their mom back home and get my mom and dad out of Downtown. I could get my car. I can finally feel like one of them. I glance at Wilder and Leo, knowing full well that the cost of fitting in shouldn’t have to be my friends.

“You can’t really be—” Leo starts, but I tune him out.

“When would I have to start?” I gulp.

“You’re fucking kidding me, right now,” Leo grunts under his breath.

Mr. Abrams adds, “I’ll get you on a conference call with the COO himself. You can negotiate the terms.”

My lips part.

“This is the only deal left, you’re sure?”

“Yes, and after what you all pulled here, I don’t think a record label would touch you for a long time.”

I avoid making eye contact with the other members of Ezra. If I take this deal, I’ll at least have my foot in the door. I could bring the others in later. Porter doesn’t want to deal with this right now anyway. It could give him time to heal, and I really could help them pay off whatever bills his mom had and

maybe even bring her back faster. Even if we had to wait a few months.

Yeah.

“You’re really thinking about this?” Leo asks, pulling me out of my thoughts.

“Don’t you want to get a lawyer or something to look it over? I was going to suggest that about our original deal. But —” Wilder says.

“Sam?” Mr. Abrams interrupts him. “Let’s negotiate. I have the terms.”

TWENTY-TWO



nothing

SAM

“MOM?” I CALL, OPENING MY PARENTS WEATHERED BEDROOM door. I glance down at my phone to check the time. “Right. She’s at work.”

I stare down at the three missed calls and two text messages. I’m too anxious to read them. I want to talk to Storm, hear her voice, see her face, touch her—be with her.

I’ll text Mom after I get to Storm’s.

I swing open the door and sigh. *Fuck, how am I going to get there?* Mr. Abrams brought me home.

I drop my eyes to the ground and frown when a pair of nice boots come within my view.

“Porter.”

His fist sends me back into the house, knocking the wind out of my chest. I fall to the floor as he barges toward me.

“You greedy motherfucker. You took a solo deal?” He pulls me up by my thin shirt and slams me against the wall. My jaw throbs, and my brain rattles. “You only think about yourself.”

“I did what I had to do,” I tell him, feeling as if I need to rearrange my facial muscles.

“What *you* had to do?” He drops his arms and steps away from me. “You act like there won’t be other deals. If these people liked us, you think other people won’t? We could have negotiated, gotten a distribution deal, a recording deal, even possibly did it independently, did more shows, got in the

studio more. We could have done this together. But you just abandoned us at the first moment of friction.”

“I... *I*? Abandoned Ezra? I abandoned you?” I snap back, slashing my hand through the air. “What do you think you did? The first time we get something good, you bail. You’re supposed to be this business savant, but when it came down to handling Ezra business, you put us on the back burner. You’re the manager—were the manager.”

“My dad died, you asshole.”

“Okay? Don’t you see? Even if Ezra isn’t getting signed, I got signed with a huge bonus. I could get your mom back now and still move the fuck out of this shitty house.”

“Never! And owe you? I’d rather she stay over there for the rest of her life than be indebted to a selfish, greedy asshole like you. You don’t worry, I’ll get my mom back and I’ll take care of Storm. We don’t need you or your money!”

“Ezra was supposed to be a band of friends, brothers who trust one another, but one thing goes wrong in your life. Yes, it’s big I know, but it’s *your* life. Do you plan on not going to work tomorrow because your father died? No. You’ll be there. Just tell the truth, this isn’t important to you.”

“You’re damn right, it’s not more important than my family.”

“Just like everybody else, you think you’re better than me, that you have better morals. When you could take care of me it was okay, but now that I’m able to do something for you, you can’t see how much of a hypocrite *you* are?”

“You still don’t get it!”

“You act like me choosing this is the end of the world. Like I’m the worst person in the galaxy, but you’re going to go

right back to that stupid job tomorrow. All it would have taken was a few hours.” I move toward the couch, and stand opposite him. One of us on each side, but with distance between us. “You’re the asshole. You’re the hypocrite. If you can’t be in control and the one on top, you’re too damn prideful to admit you need help right now. And I get that more than anyone, but you shouldn’t be thinking about your own insecurities you should be thinking about your mom and Storm.”

“What if it was your dad who died? Would you have gone? Would you have left your mom there to grieve alone?” He reaches for one of my mother’s raggedy handsewn throw pillows. One with a faded picture of them on it.

“Yes. I don’t need any time to think about it.” I grit my teeth. “And my mom would understand. She wouldn’t feel like I left her. She wouldn’t hold it against me. God forbid anything happens to my dad, but if it does, I’d be the one responsible for holding the family together. I’d go in an instant to make sure I could put food on my family’s table, make sure they’re safe.”

“You still don’t get it.” He tosses the pillow at me and I catch it mid-air. “The person who raised me and my sister is dead. He’s not coming back.”

“I do get it! But you, your mom, and Storm have to keep living, don’t you?” I place the cushion back on the couch grab my temples with my hands. “I can’t go another day with my mom working her fingers to the bone, us living in this mold-infested, falling-apart house. Me choosing between getting a decent pair of cleats or our lights being shut off.”

“Sa—”

“Let me finish! I can’t go another day with my dad looking for bullshit-ass jobs just so I can go to college and not have to work sixteen-hour days for pennies.” I drop my hands to my sides. “I can’t go another day with Storm paying for our dates or not being able to go on date because I have nothing to give her and no way to take her out. I’m tired of her having to pick me up or drop me off. Or telling her she can’t come over because it’s not safe.”

“You mean *me* paying for your dates?”

That makes me pause.

“She doesn’t have any money. I bought that car. I pay for it. The money in her accounts? I put it there. *I* worked hard to make sure I was taking care of my sister while my parents weren’t here. I’m dishing out the cash, and you’ve been the one reaping all the benefits.”

I can’t even look at him. “Then let me pay you back,” I mutter.

“That little sentiment at the restaurant.” He moves on as if what I say has no impact on him or even that he doesn’t care. “You think we don’t see how much you guys are struggling. We do. And because I’ve always looked at you like a brother. I’ve *always* tried to do what I could without breaking your pride.”

Tears well up in my eyes as I clutch my jaw shut and sniff the air.

“Then how come you don’t understand why I had to take this deal? Why won’t you let *me* help *you* now?”

“Where is your moral compass?” He shakes his head at me, the look on his face stabbing me in the heart.

“Where is yours? You can’t understand because you’ve never had to struggle. Your parents have good jobs, you’ve always lived in a gated community hell even your apartment is better than the house I live in.”

“So what, you’re jealous?”

“Jealous? Just more proof you couldn’t possibly understand what this means for me. You never had to wake up in the middle of the night with a bat in your hand, hoping no one is in the kitchen. Hoping your mom gets home safely because she catches rides with random coworkers.”

“We could have helped with that, Sam,” Porter says. “You never want to tell us anything. You pretend like everything is good.”

“Right. Because when you walk into a gas station and pay for your gas there aren’t groups of people behind you talking about your run-over shoes or dingy clothes. No one bullies you for being in situations you have no control over. No one thinks your parents are trash.”

“What?”

“How did we meet? Did you forget? I didn’t have shoestrings in my shoes, remember? It was my sixth-grade graduation and your mom had to give my mom a dress to wear because she didn’t have a nice enough one based on what all the other moms were saying. You and Storm came to my graduation because your dad was at work and your mom had to be there because she was my teacher. And what did you do when my own classmates were making fun of me.”

Porter’s jaw clenches. This story we never tell.

“I gave you mine and dared them to make fun of me,” he admits.

“Then your mom got my mom that job at the nursing home.”

“Yep.”

“I’ve never been the type to go around complaining about how fucked up my life is—I change it. That’s what I’m doing. I’m changing my circumstances, so don’t tell me anything about having a moral compass. We’re not going to struggle anymore.”

“You’re still missing the point. Are you seriously just giving up on Ezra?”

“I’m not giving up. I’m doing this for my family, for Storm, for—”

“You’re doing this for yourself. You’ve even got Storm believing your lies.” Porter shakes his head at me, a look of disappointment penetrating me.

I wish I could hide. “Porter, I could help you guys. You’ve helped me so much. Let me try and help get your mom ba—”

“We don’t need anything from you. Let me worry about my family.” He grunts. “In fact, stay the hell away from Storm.”

I furrow my brow. “I thought you didn’t want me to break her heart.”

“Do whatever you want. That’s what you’ve been doing anyway.”

TWENTY-THREE



remember

STORM:

SOME TIME LATER, AT PROM.

My rose gold prom dress shimmers in the last beams of the day. My hair is pulled up into a beautiful, messy bun with platinum diamond studded hair pins. Sam steps out of the long black limousine, and positions his arm, so I can hook my arm through. For the second time, my heart skips. In his fitted, charcoal suit, and rose gold bowtie, he looks made for the red carpet, rather than my prom.

As I hook my arm through, he presses a soft kiss to the side of my head and whispers. “You look stunning, baby.”

“You already said that...” But damn do I love hearing it.

“But I didn’t tell you how much I can’t wait to take that off you.”

The heat climbs to my cheeks as he leads me toward the entrance. People who made fun of me at high school stare at me, at us. At perfection. “Sam... we need to make it inside. Don’t say stuff like that until later.”

“I can’t promise that... I’ve thought about you naked more times than I care to admit.” He fiddles with my corsage. “You can keep this on later. And the necklace, and those pointed-toe blush pumps.”

My eyes veer toward the ground as we make our way to the photographer at the grounds of Lebanon Ferry—the same garden I had glanced through right before Porter caught us.

Then, the lights had twinkled in the distance, but today we're the ones shining.

I still can't believe after everything that happened these last few months, we're standing here. Together. At our best since the awful day I lost my world. I haven't forgotten how much I miss him, but for today I just pretend like he's still here with me.

"You ready to smile?" Sam brushes his nose against my cheek and twirls me around, my dress catching on the wild Love-me-Nots. He plucks one and twirls it in his fingers. "When we're old, our grandkids are going to see these pictures one day. So we got to make them count."

I snort and slip the flower from his hand as we get in line. He presses his chest against my back and wraps his arms around my waist, dropping his chin to my shoulder... his lips to my neck.

Kisses. Soft and delicate. Like the petals of the flower.

"Just remember you have nothing to prove, baby." His words fall against the nape of my neck.

I glance around us; the girls from my high school stare in jealousy, but I don't even care what they think. I'm not here to prove anything to anyone. Not anymore. Being here at prom, as his official girlfriend, means more to me than anything else, even if Sam paired his sleek and stylish modern suit with sneakers.

I snort. He wouldn't be caught dead in loafers or derby shoes.

"What's so funny?" he asks as we take our spot in front of the camera, facing each other.

“I was just thinking how ridiculous it is that I love you so much.” I glance up at him just as the photographer snaps his photo, both of us with a huge smile on our faces. I said it first, and I don’t regret it, not one bit.

Sam positions me as the main attraction, my back against his chest. After he gives my butt a little pinch, he whispers. “I love you more.”

For our third pose, as if he had planned it all along, our lips lock in pure bliss.

“See I told you: I’m going to give you everything you ever wanted.”

We’re told the next one will be a video for social media. A short fifteen second clip so we get in position. Me holding the daisy, him holding me in his heart.

“I already have what I want Sam,” I tell him as we get our queue to start. We take turns plucking the little flower, petal by petal. “She loves me, She loves me not... She loves me, She loves me not.”

I toss the flower to the side because it doesn’t matter. “She definitely loves you.”

He smiles wide. “This will be a night to remember.”

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. .

At least that’s how I imagine it would have been... if Sam bothered to show up. If he had chosen to stay and fight for

Ezra. For me.

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acknowledgments

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about the author

CONNECT WITH ME. I CAN'T WAIT TO HEAR FROM YOU!

Laine Watson is a published author of three novels and dabbles in graphic design. She enjoys writing, reading, singing and video games—whenever time permits.

Laine resides in the St. Louis area, where she also grew up. To learn more visit www.lainewatson.org where you can find her expanding works collection, collaborations and a few pieces of her heart.

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