

misfits remix #2



Selah
♥
Dante

jordan ford

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ISBN: 978-1-99-103427-4 (Hardback)

ISBN: 978-1-99-103425-0 (Paperback)

ISBN: 978-1-99-103426-7 (Kindle)

Forever Love Publishing Ltd

www.foreverlovepublishing.com

This book is dedicated to anyone who's been scared to put themselves out there, but did it anyway.

"It is not the critic who counts...

The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena."

~ Theodore Roosevelt

PLAYLIST



This novel comes with a playlist. If you'd like to hear the music mentioned throughout the story, you can listen to the songs on Spotify.

[SELAH LOVES DANTE PLAYLIST](#)

A STREET RAT



DANTE

I SHUFFLE IN MY SEAT, spinning the pen between my fingers and clicking it on, then off before adding another line of formula to my page.

“This sucks,” Troy mutters under his breath. “Why the hell is this not working?”

I glance to my right, studying him out of the corner of my eye.

He’s stupidly tall and I always feel like a petite dwarf next to him. He’s got tree trunks for legs, long muscly arms, and large hands that make pens look small. He’s your typical farming boy. Born onto land that’s been passed down from one generation to the next.

We don’t usually talk because we have zero in common. He grew up wearing plaid and running through fields of green. I grew up wearing scraps and surviving in a concrete jungle.

Even though we’re forced to sit together in physics class, we tend to ignore each other.

It’s not like we will ever run in the same circles. He’s an Aristocrat—or Asshat, as the Misfits like to call them—and they don’t associate with trash like us.

But Mr. Dechlin is a stickler for assigned seating, so we’re lumped together. One towering rugby player plus an average-

looking hip-hop dancer minus any common ground equals awkward to the power of infinity.

He tuts again, and I lean a little toward him, wondering what question he's working on.

Before I can stop myself, I tap my pen on his sheet of paper and whisper, "That formula's wrong. The second law of thermodynamics is S_2 minus S_1 equals..." I point to the rest of the figures on his page. "See? If you switch that around, it'll make more sense."

His eyebrows dip together, and he sits higher in his chair, making me feel way shorter than I actually am.

I'm scrappy, though. If he tries to hassle me for correcting him, I can stand up for myself.

My muscles coil, ready for attack, but then a smile breaks across his face. "Okay. Let me try it."

He scribbles out his work, which makes me cringe. My book is meticulous compared to his. Sucking on the end of his pen, he then starts writing it out again—the correct way—and comes up trumps.

"Nice." I nod, glancing at Mr. Dechlin, who is sitting behind his laptop, oblivious to the needs of his students, before looking back at my work.

"Thanks, man." He lightly slaps my arm with the back of his fingers. "Hey, can you look at this one too?"

Great, now I'm doing the cool kid's work.

I suppress my eye roll, check again that Mr. Dechlin isn't watching (he thinks test conditions should be a common practice during work sessions—idiot) and then lean over Troy's work, pointing out his errors and explaining where he's gone wrong. Yikes. No wonder he was complaining. This work is littered with mistakes.

Starting at number one, I work my way through two questions before Mr. Dechlin is approaching our table with those short little huffs he does before losing his shit.

I clench my jaw and pretend he's not there.

“What are you two doing?” he snaps.

Troy glances at me, then drops his gaze to the table, his shoulders ping-ponging back like he’s six again and the teacher has told him to sit up straight.

My forehead bunches, and I try to keep my voice even as I say over my shoulder, “I’m just helping him. He’s got a few errors here.”

“Oh, I’m sure you are,” Mr. Dechlin clips.

I spin to get a better look at his face. It’s filled with disdain, and it makes my stomach curdle. Gripping my pen, I work my jaw to the side and mutter, “You want him to get it all wrong?”

“I want you to stop messing around in my class and get on with your work. That’s what I want.”

“I’m helping him.” My voice spikes. “It’s not like we’re sitting here discussing movies or sport or some shit. We’re doing physics.”

“Watch your language.” Mr. Dechlin points at me, his jowls starting to quake while a red hue climbs up his neck. “And show some respect. I asked for a quiet working session, which means I don’t want to hear a peep out of anybody!” He moves his head, making sure his voice carries across the entire classroom.

That should be my cue to shut the hell up, but since when have I ever listened to the voice of reason in my head?

“He needs help with this stuff. Your silence rule is stupid. Aren’t we at school to learn?”

“Yes, I teach you, and you listen. That’s how you learn.”

I glance to Troy for backup, but he’s got his head down, staring at his open book like those formulas he couldn’t understand are now the most interesting thing on the planet.

Coward!

Maverick and Arlo would never do this to me.

I tut and turn back to my stubborn jackass of a teacher. “Not everybody gets the way you explain things, and I’m giving him a different perspective. You should be letting us help each other. You only want silence so you can get on with your own work and not have to stay late after school.”

Mr. Dechlin’s eyes flash a warning, but I’m on a roll now.

“For someone who’s been teaching such a long time, I figured you’d know that students don’t all learn the same way. Give us a chance to figure it out on our own instead of shoving all this information at us and expecting us to process it without any help from those around us.”

“That’s enough. This is my classroom, and you follow my rules. You don’t like it, you can get out!”

Anger brews in my belly, and I can feel my nostrils twitch. They do that when I’m super pissed.

“You know what? Just get out!” Mr. Dechlin points at the door.

I frown at him. “I’m not even saying anything.”

“Get out of my classroom! I’m not wasting the rest of this lesson on having to deal with you.”

“What lesson?” I mutter, slapping my book closed and ripping it off my desk.

Troy clears his throat, fidgeting with his pen and refusing to look at me.

“Thanks for your help, man.” My sarcastic quip makes his face muscles flinch, but he still won’t look at me. With a disgusted sigh, I shove everything into my bag and storm out of the room, slamming the door behind me when I leave.

A teacher from another class pops her head into the hallway and frowns at me. “What are you doing?”

“Just got kicked out of class,” I seethe.

Her expression crumples, and she points down the corridor. “Go study in the library until the bell rings.” Her eyes

dart back to Mr. Dechlin's door before she shakes her head and disappears back inside.

I should be grateful she isn't sending me to the principal's office, I suppose, but I'm too pissed off with Mr. *Dicklin* to feel anything other than pure rage.

Shoving my hands in my pockets, I stalk to the library. This is so freaking unfair.

I was helping Troy, not that he said anything. Seriously! Asshats are the worst. They always come off looking so shiny and innocent when they cause more trouble than any of the Misfits do.

Troy's friend Ronan Ayers is freaking case in point. Just recently, he tried to lay all the blame on my best friend for something *he* did wrong. Maverick was totally innocent, and Ronan put him through hell.

But being a charity case comes with prejudices. To most, we're just street rats. Trouble.

We come from nothing; therefore, we are nothing. That's what all the rich kids and teachers think.

Well, not all of them.

Our dance teacher, Miss Fillion, is pretty cool, and I like the librarian as well. Miss Tomes teaches some of my friends for English, and they always go on about how she's their favorite. I get it. She's nice. She doesn't treat us like we're different.

To her, we're not the ugly, bruised, and rotting fruit everyone else sees.

Hitching my bag, I think about those damn Asshats, once again lamenting the fact that they get away with freaking everything. Well, maybe not everything. Ronan, Mr. Kingpin himself, got completely slammed for assaulting Londyn, and the school actually suspended him. He should have been expelled for pulling that filth, but of course he wasn't. When your mother's the chair of the board, you get away with more than anybody else does.

But she couldn't let him off scot-free. Not after what Selah said.

Selah Dixon is one of the richest kids at this school. Her family donates a crap ton of money to this place, and she's royalty in the eyes of the senior leaders and board. So, when she came out and said Ronan was the guilty one, they were forced to listen.

I've never been more grateful to anyone in my life. Selah saved Maverick from getting kicked out of this place... and I wish I knew how to properly thank her.

She's kind of hard to talk to.

I reach the library and stare at the glass doors. Thoughts of Selah evaporate as injustice rears its ugly head again. I shouldn't be here, dammit! I should be sitting in physics, helping Troy figure out those equations and helping myself by passing the class.

Anger surges through me once more, and I storm into the library, slamming my bag onto the table and completely forgetting about my laptop. Crap.

I start muttering swear words and am about to check on it when Miss Tomes appears.

"Dante? You okay?"

"No!" I bark. "Mr. *Dicklin* just kicked me out of his physics class for being helpful!"

"Shhhh." She raises her hands to try and calm me. "I'm sorry he did that. Do you want to talk about it?"

"Why? Is it going to make that prejudiced prick any different?"

"Well... probably not." She winces.

I shake my head and mutter, "The guy's got it in for me."

"I know it feels that way." Her face is still crumpled, like maybe she wants to agree with me but knows she can't.

I huff and flick my hand in the air. "How am I ever supposed to get ahead when no one wants to see me succeed?"

Desperation flashes through me. This school is supposed to be my chance to not end up like my mother. This is my one shot to break that cycle, but I won't get there if teachers keep kicking me out and treating me like I'm not worth their time.

It kills me, and I hate this helpless feeling.

"I don't have it in for you." Miss Tomes smiles at me and steps forward. "And you will succeed, because you've got fight and spirit, and you're not going to let some physics teacher drag you down. Why don't you set up here and get your homework out of the way?" She points to the tables around her. "You're always welcome in this library."

My lips twitch with a smile before I can stop them. She really is cool. Grabbing my bag, I scan the library and pause.

Selah.

She's two tables away from me, her pale green eyes wide with worry as she stares at me. But as soon as she makes eye contact, her lips curl into the hint of a smile, and it's enough to drag my ass to her table.

She squirms a little as I pull out a chair and take a seat adjacent to her, but this is my chance to finally say thank you.

It's been a week since she saved Maverick, and even though she probably hates talking to charity cases like me, she needs to know how much what she did means to us.

A GIRL IN THE SHADOWS



SELAH

DANTE PULLS out his books and slaps them onto the table. I try to avert my gaze but can't help studying him out of the corner of my eye. He's hot. I didn't used to think that, but ever since last week, when I told the truth about what I saw Ronan do to Londyn... I don't know, my eyesight has changed, I guess.

As I was sitting on the ground freaking out about what Ronan would do to me if I came out with the truth, Dante was right there, promising that I'd be safe, that the entire Misfits crew would have my back.

It gave me the courage I needed to speak up.

And since then, I haven't been able to thank him.

It's like I used up all my bravery in that one night, and then it just evaporated again. I'm back to the girl who likes to hide behind books and silently watch people from the corner of the room.

I'd happily watch Dante all day long.

He's got this chiseled face, kind of refined, delicate features with this jet-black hair and tan skin. I like the way he spikes his hair a little at the front, like he cares about his looks but isn't obsessive about them. His uniform sits so nicely on his toned body. He's not towering like Maverick, and he's not bulky like some of the rugby players. In fact, he looks kind of

short next to them. He's probably only just a little taller than me, but I like that. If we stood face-to-face, we could look each other in the eyes. And then maybe he'd brush his fingers down my cheek and curl his hand around my neck before—

He clears his throat, and I jolt in my seat, my eyes bulging down at the table as I thank the stars he can't read minds.

His hand moves quickly as he writes stuff across his page, referring to his textbook and then back to his pad of paper.

I lightly tap on my keyboard, not really concentrating on what I'm typing. It's impossible. Dante's right there. I can smell whatever scent he's wearing. It's like one of those cheap ones you buy in the supermarket, but I like it—fresh and sporty. He probably sprays it over his body after dance class.

Oh man, I'd love to see him dance without his uniform in the way. His muscles must look amazing as they shift and move to the music.

My imagination takes flight again as fantasies swirl through my brain—arms, legs, lips locked together while we sway in an ocean of music.

His touch would be gentle. I know it would. Everything about him seems kind. I mean, yes, he has a temper, and he's not afraid to get mouthy when he's annoyed, but... his eyes have a softness about them. When he looked at me the night of Maverick's "trial," I believed with every fiber of my being that he'd keep me safe.

He taps his pen on the paper, his forehead wrinkling in concentration.

Cute!

Look at the way his eyebrows dip.

The pen flicks between his fingers, and then he starts doing that spinning thing I've never been able to master. Perching the pen on his fingers, he spins it around his thumb and catches it again. He's not even thinking about what he's doing—flick, spin, catch. Flick, spin, catch. Flick, spin... whoops.

The pen flips up and bounces off the corner of the table before rolling onto the floor.

I automatically reach for it at the same time he does. We nearly bang heads, but the only part of us actually touching is our hands. My fingers curl around his pen while his digits rest on top of mine.

My hands start to sweat as our eyes connect, and he gives me a sweet smile.

“Thanks.”

“You’re welcome,” I squeak, handing him the pen and bolting upright in my seat.

I don’t know what to do with my fingers. They want to wrap around something, fidget, distract me so I can somehow ignore the hot flush traveling through my body.

Shuffling in my seat, I snatch a pen from beside my laptop and start twirling it between my thumb and forefinger.

He’s watching me, I can feel it. I should be creeped out, but I’m too stoked that his eyes are actually on me. I mean, I think I am. It definitely makes me feel vulnerable, having someone right there watching me, but...

It’s Dante.

I glance his way, capturing the soft look in his eyes, and it settles my nerves enough to whisper, “I’m sorry about Mr. Dechlin.”

He shrugs. “What else is new, right?”

“He can be a real hard-ass.”

Dante snickers. “You got that right.”

I can’t help smiling back at him, and then he leans a little closer, and my heart rate spikes. Blood pulses through my ears, making it hard to hear him.

“Hey, um...” He licks his lips before whispering, “I wanted to tell you that...”

I hold my breath. He wanted to talk to me? Like he's been thinking about it before this moment?

His lips curl into a small grin. "I mean, I wanted to say thank you for what you did for Mav."

My eyes dart to the tabletop, and I feel like my entire body is blushing. It's really hard to look back up at him, and I have no idea how to respond.

"You're welcome" just doesn't feel right for some reason.

Come on, Selah, say something!

"Um..."

Um? That's it?

I internally groan, wishing I was more like my roommates Amera and Celeste. They're always so confident and smiley. They don't mind all eyes on them. I hate being the center of anyone's attention. It makes my skin itch and my stomach surge. I've always been like that. Being in the shadows is just easier. More comfortable.

People can't tease me as easily when I'm standing in the corner. They can't study my gangly arms and stick legs the way they would if I was front and center.

I'm not exactly pretty. When I was little, I used to get called a vampire because I was so pale. The kids would tease me about being out in the sunlight.

"Careful! You'll disintegrate!" They'd laugh and run away while my sister shouted insults at their backs.

"Don't listen to little turds like that, Selah. I like your skin."

Shiloh always had my back. Until she didn't.

A cold chill sweeps through me, and I tuck a wisp of hair behind my ear and settle for a nod and a closed-mouth smile.

Dante seems to accept this without any offense. "You were really brave," he murmurs. "And I just thought you should know how grateful we all are."

I nod and smile again, my insides dancing as I drink in his expression.

Handsome and kind. It's like the perfect combination.

He'd make an amazing boyfriend.

Not that I'll ever find out. I'm not the kind of girl who scores the guys. I'm destined to a life of solitude, and after what happened to Shiloh, maybe that's not a completely bad thing.

A VILLAIN, A DOG, AND A PROMISE



DANTE

SELAH'S SMILE is a little nervous and twitchy, but it's also kind of pretty. She has amazing eyes. They're big and green and seem to drink in everything around her. She's one of those people who'll stand at the edge of the room, not saying a word but seeing everything. People notice her but not really. She can blend into her surroundings or be flicked off as the weirdo who can't hold a proper conversation. And she's always reading. Like *always*.

I don't know if I've ever seen her without a book in her hands or at least nearby. She's kind of obsessed with reading. I've often wondered if she uses books as a shield, and then it gets me thinking, *What's she trying to protect herself from?*

Forcing my eyes back to my work, I try to stop psychoanalyzing her. Maverick always tells me off when I do that to him or any of our friends. I guess I'm just one of those guys who likes to see things on a deeper level, and not everyone appreciates it.

I hold back my sigh and try to finish off my thermodynamics formula work. I'm still pissed that Mr. Dechlin kicked me out. What a complete douche. And why didn't Troy say anything?

I was legit helping him, and he just sat there letting me get bawled out for being a nice guy.

I—

A derisive snort from over my shoulder makes my eyes dart left. My entire body tenses when I spot Ronan and Gabe sauntering into the library. Or maybe it's Troy. My upper lip curls, because it doesn't matter which twin I'm looking at... though I'm pretty sure it's Gabe. I don't like him.

Troy left me hanging.

And Gabe... well, he's just an asshole.

"Hey, snitch." He eyes Selah up like she's a rotting piece of meat. Yep, it's definitely Gabe.

I lean a little closer to her, trying to block her from Ronan's view, but the two guys just walk around the table, resting against it and gazing down at her.

She shifts in obvious discomfort. Their glares are intimidating, and I can almost feel her heart rate skyrocketing. She lets out a short breath, panic washing across her expression.

"Get lost, you guys," I murmur.

Their glares dart to me, and I meet them head-on. I refuse to be thrown by two Asshats. They can come at me with everything they've got, and I won't back down. Especially if it means keeping Selah safe.

Sure, I'm smaller than them, and I'd get completely pummeled if their fists came into play. But that night Selah told the truth about what Ronan did to Londyn, I promised her the Misfits would protect her. And I'm a man of my word.

Geez, if Ronan were a supervillain, he'd be frying me with his eyeballs right now. Not sure I've ever seen a glare that dark.

I rise to it, cocking my left eyebrow and putting on a smirk. "You want to hit me so bad right now, don't ya?"

His nostrils flare, and I lean back in my seat.

"I'd think it through if I were you. You only just got back from your suspension, right? And now you want to down some

innocent guy in the library. That is not going to look good for you. Not sure even Mummy can save you from that one.”

With a rough growl, he steps back from the table, yanking Gabe’s shirt and forcing him to stand. Gabe towers over Ronan, but it’s still obvious that he’s the kingpin’s right-hand dog.

“Let’s go,” Ronan mutters.

Gabe shoots one more glare at Selah. It’s powerful enough to make her shrink down in her chair. “Better not risk anything with this little snitch on the loose.”

“Leave her alone.” My voice comes out gruff and edgy.

He ignores me, leaning in to whisper, “You betrayed us, you little—”

I snatch Gabe’s shirt and tug him away. He flicks me off easily, shoving my shoulder before storming away from the table.

Selah stays frozen in her spot, staring ahead but obviously not seeing anything.

I shuffle in my seat, resting my elbows on the table and lean toward her. “Are you okay?”

She bobs her head, biting her lips together as she obviously lies to me.

I want to reach out, maybe brush my hand down her arm. Just some small gesture to comfort her, but I’m worried if I do that, she’ll flinch or get scared by the uninvited contact.

So I force myself to back up a little and give her a reassuring smile instead. “Don’t worry about those idiots. We’ve got your back. You’re a Misfit now, remember?” I wink at her, trying to ease some of her tension.

And that edgy little smile jumps back over her face. Just a brief second of relief before she glances over her shoulder.

“It’s okay. You’re safe,” I remind her.

It’s kind of good that we live in the same boardinghouse together. All the Misfits do, so we can keep a close eye on her.

Ronan's a day student, but Troy and Gabe are boarders like me, and there's no way in hell I or any of the Misfits will let those guys touch Selah.

On impulse, I reach out and rest my fingers lightly over her fist. She's gripping her pen so hard it looks like it might break. As predicted, she flinches at my touch, but then her gaze darts to mine, and she doesn't move her hand away.

If anything, she seems frozen.

I lightly rub my thumb over her knuckles, trying to make my touch friendly and nonthreatening. "We won't let anything bad happen to you. I promise."

I'm not actually big on promises. My mother used to promise me stuff all the time when I was little, and I used to believe every word. But by the time I was about eight or nine, I started to understand that promises were worthless. But Sully, my house parent, has never once broken a promise, and I want to be like him, so... I'm promising Selah, knowing I will do everything in my power to make sure those Asshats don't touch her. She did us a huge favor. She saved Maverick from getting expelled, even when she knew there'd be consequences.

We owe her.

But it's more than that.

I want to protect this girl, because she's kind and sweet and... she deserves a friend she can trust.

FLIGHTS OF FANCY



SELAH

IT'S KIND OF impossible to hide the fact that guys like Ronan, Gabe, and Henry scare the crap out of me. I usually avoid them at all costs, but my roommate Amara is friends with them, and she's always forcing me out of my comfort zone, trying to get me to hang with people and not be a total hermit.

That's why I went to that stupid party in the first place!

She told me that she'd tell Monica, our house parent, that I sneak out most nights to hang on the roof. Sleeping is hard for me, and I can't stand just lying in bed listening to people rustle and snore. The roof is my starlit sanctuary, but Monica would be so mad if she knew what I was doing, and the idea of getting in trouble terrifies me. I hate being the center of attention, and I hate it even more when it's negative attention.

I just can't handle being told off, so I went along—blackmailed into attending a party I didn't even want to go to. The second I arrived, I found a little hiding spot to read a book on my phone, but of course I ended up picking Henry's bedroom—idiot move—and that's how I saw Ronan trying to force himself on Londyn.

He kissed her when she didn't want him to. She pushed him away, but he was being really forceful about it.

I should have jumped out of that closet to help her, but I just sat there frozen, staring through the slats as she slapped him and he slapped her right back before she kicked him in the shins and made her escape.

It was horrible. I shook for like an hour and then went and hid in a bathroom.

When Ronan accused Maverick of hurting Londyn, I should have come forward then and there, but I was too scared. And now I've just faced the reason why.

I betrayed my peers, and they're going to make me pay.

Dante's still watching me, studying my face to make sure his sweet promise is getting through. I want to believe him. I really do. And I should. I mean, I don't know him that well, but the Misfits aren't as bad as everyone says they are. They're tough and mouthy, and yes, Maverick gets into fights sometimes, but they also seem really loyal. Like they would take a hit for each other, and that's got to mean something, right?

I don't know anyone who'd take a hit for me.

Except maybe Dante. Like just now, when he pulled Gabe away from me.

It was so protective and sweet.

It makes me want to trust his promise.

Handsome, kind, and protective.

He just keeps getting better and better, doesn't he?

And he touched my hand. I can still feel the pads of his fingers resting on my skin, his soft brush across my knuckles. He was trying to be friendly, reassuring, but he has zero idea how much it affected me. My heartbeat can't decide what rhythm to stick with. It's switching from a waltz to a tango to a head-banging mosh pit maneuver. Trying to hide whatever is zinging through me is getting harder by the second.

"I should go," I whisper, closing my laptop and packing up my stuff.

Dante nods and gives me a closed-mouth smile.

The bell rings, so he starts packing up his stuff too. And then he stands, pushes in his chair, and waits for me.

Like... he waits for me.

Is he going to offer to carry my binder or something? You know, like they do in those sweet old high school movies where the guy walks the girl to class to make sure she gets there okay.

It's chivalrous, and call me old-fashioned, but I love that kind of thing.

Dante walks me to class.

Can you believe it?

He actually walks with me to my next class. He doesn't say anything, and neither do I; we just stroll along beside each other, and I get a quick snapshot of heaven.

Guys don't notice me, and they definitely don't walk beside me, but Dante Arden is!

I can't help glancing at him out of the corner of my eye. He's just a fraction taller than me, so I can see his face really easily. I love the color of his skin. It's not dark like Maverick's or Arlo's, but it has strong olive tones. He shaves already, and I bet if he was allowed to grow facial hair, he'd have a beard within a few weeks. I bet he has to shave every morning. I picture him standing at the bathroom sink, wrapped in a towel, bare-chested and running a razor down his cheeks.

Sexy!

My body flushes, and I have to force the image from my mind when he softly murmurs, "See ya around, Selah."

"Bye, Dante." I smile at him and get the sweetest look in return.

It makes me feel light and floaty. I hide my mouth behind my binder as I walk into class and find a seat near the middle. I always sit in this spot, and people seem to know it. I'm a

routine girl. I like to know what's coming. It makes me feel safe.

Amera calls it boring. I call it common sense.

“Good afternoon, everyone.” Miss Tremayne calls the class to attention and launches straight into her lesson, picking up where she left off last time.

I pull up the work and scan the notes I took for homework, loving that sense of being ahead of the game when it comes to my schoolwork. My parents expect nothing less. They don't pay stupid amounts of money to send me here only for me to fail. I have to give them my best, because... I'm the only one left who can.

Shoving the unsettling thought back down where it normally lives, I force myself to concentrate on the lesson. I usually love disappearing into history, but today my mind keeps getting teased away from the impact World War II had on New Zealand soldiers to reimagine every look and micro-expression on Dante's face. To relive the way his voice sounded when he growled at Gabe to leave me alone. And that cocky little smirk on his face when he was goading Ronan.

My lips twitch with a smile as I try and fail to continue working on my assignment. It's due next week, and I usually pride myself on finishing ahead of time... but maybe, for once, I won't be able to.

Is that such a bad thing?

I should be screaming, “YES!”

But the warmth curling through my stomach is trembling out a little “No.” It's not bad. Dreaming of Dante Arden is not a bad thing at all.

He stays with me for the rest of the day, carrying me through dinner. I can't stop stealing looks at him across the dining hall—I like the way his jaw muscles work when he chews.

You like how he chews?

You're seriously so pathetic.

I dip my head and play with my food, trying my best not to study his every move as he walks past my table. He looks my way, but I force my head down, even when I feel his gaze on me.

It only gets worse during study hall, where I once again fail to get more than two paragraphs completed on my history essay because Dante is at the table right next to mine. I love the way he scratches the back of his head, then stretches his arms high, then spins that pen in his fingers.

By the time the session's done, I've memorized the hairline on the back of his head.

Great. Now I'm turning into his personal stalker.

Sleeping is, of course, impossible, so I sneak out as usual, creeping past Monica's room and climbing out the window at the end of the hall. This is always the riskiest move because this hallway is right next to the boys' dorms, and I could so easily wake one of them. But I haven't been caught yet, so fingers crossed I keep my record intact.

From there, it's a quick dash to the drainpipe, and I ascend high enough to grab the ladder and make it to the top of the roof.

I love it up here.

The stars are vast and amazing. Unhindered by streetlights, they sparkle and shine—a dusting of diamonds in the inky black sky.

Stretching my arms wide, I do a little twirl, then head over to my spot. I've hidden a little outdoor camping chair in the back corner, and I pull it out, perch on it, and tip my head back. Rather than reading off my phone, I stare up at the night sky and let my imagination wander.

Dante fills my every thought as I daydream and fantasize over what it would be like to have a boyfriend. I've never really let myself entertain the thought. Boyfriends can be dangerous. My sister taught me that.

But Dante's so sweet.

So was Warren... at first.

I try to heed the warning, reminding myself of what Shiloh's ex-boyfriend was really like, but I can't convince myself that Dante would be the same.

How would you know? You don't know anything about the guy.

"I know he stood up for me today, and his face was so genuine when he told me he had my back."

I want to believe him so badly.

I want him to walk me to class again... and touch my hand again. I want someone in this place to make me feel like I'm part of a team.

You can't handle that. You're not a team player. You're a solo artist, remember?

"And for good reason," I murmur, a sad sigh slipping out between my lips.

Closing my eyes, I wish the war inside my head would come to a ceasefire. My parents sent me to this school for a fresh start. Haven Academy is supposed to protect me from bad influences... from people like Warren and all his friends.

But I've made no connections here.

Because you isolate yourself!

"For good reason." My voice is barely a whisper now, my argument as strong as a limp leaf of lettuce.

Is making myself a lone island really protecting me?

Or could someone like Dante, who promised he'd have my back, actually be what I need the most?

But can he be trusted?

That's the question that plagues me. People are not always what they appear to be. It happens all the time. I see it constantly.

And I don't want to get trapped in a snare the way my sister did.

I'll do anything not to repeat her sad story.

DANCING IN THE DARK



DANTE

IT'S TUESDAY AFTERNOON, and all I want is a little space.

I spent the weekend chilling with my friends. Saturday afternoon was taken up with an epic Xbox battle at Kai's place. Danny, Maverick, and Arlo were there too. We played until curfew, and then Kai's dad drove us back to the boarding house. On Sunday, Maverick *needed* to see Londyn, so we went into town and wandered the streets eating ice cream and sitting in the sunshine so the lovebirds could hold hands, giggle, kiss, and do all those things that make them oblivious to the world around them. Thank God Trixi, Alexia, Tobias, and Cedric came with.

It gave me people to talk to.

But I'm done talking now.

As much as I love my friends, I need peace and quiet too. Which is why I will slip away every now and again to find some isolation. I usually want to lose myself in a book or maybe go for a big, long walk, listening to some tunes. Any activity that involves me not having to listen to someone or respond to anything works for me.

Today, I kind of feel like dancing, so I'm heading to the dance studio on the bottom floor of the Performing Arts block.

If you'd asked me at the beginning of this year, I wouldn't have said dancing was my thing. I could do okay—I've always had rhythm—but I wouldn't have classed myself as a dancer.

But since Miss Fillion came along and we formed the Misfits dance crew, it's totally become my thing. I seriously love it. Having the music flow through me, my body moving with the tune. It feels damn good. And coming third in our recent dance comp felt even better. Now we're working toward the next stage of the competition, which will be held in Auckland in a month or two. Damn, it's gonna be so freaking cool.

I never would have thought a little street rat like me could make it onto a stage, doing my thing and getting cheered on by a crowd. It's kind of unreal.

I trot down the stairs and can hear Ms. Howlett's orchestra tuning up for their weekly practice. Wincing, I make sure I move as quietly as possible. She's called Battle Axe Beethoven for a reason, and if she finds me down here without permission, she'll slap me with detention and no doubt try to ban me from the area for the rest of this term. She seems kind of anti our dance crew, but I think it's more to do with the fact that she's all about classical stuff. Hip-hop music probably makes her skin crawl.

And then there's the fact that she's a bit of a snob, too, and assumes, like so many people do, that the Misfits are nothing but trouble—charity cases who will burn down the school one day.

I roll my eyes and duck around the corner. Thankfully the door to the orchestra's practice room is closed. Once I see that, I take a breath and slow my pace.

What am I going to dance to today?

I'm thinking I should practice what we've been working on in class, but I'm also itching for a little freestyle. I heard this awesome song on the radio the other day that I think would make a great dance number. It's been around for a while, but now that I'm starting to think like a dancer, I can picture moves I want to put with it.

I start humming “Despacito” in my head, not knowing all the lyrics but loving the Latino vibe. My hips want to sway, my feet want to shimmy, and my body wants to spin. I’ve always loved Latino music. It’s different to the stuff we normally dance to, but I like the slightly slower beat and the way the moves are more liquid.

It’s—

I come to an abrupt stop, disappointment spiking through me when I spot Maverick and Londyn hovering outside the dance studio.

Well, there goes my ‘me time.’

Londyn is peering through the narrow glass window in the dance studio door, her face dented into a frown. She looks worried. Maverick is standing just behind her, looking over the top of her head. He looks confused.

And now I’m intrigued.

“What are you guys doing?”

They both flinch like I’ve just busted them breaking the rules. Which I guess they kind of are. We’re not supposed to be down here without teacher supervision, and I doubt Ms. Howlett gave them the go-ahead.

They whip around to look at me, both relaxing when they see it’s harmless ol’ Dante.

“What are you doing here?” Maverick whispers.

“What are you doing here?” I counter.

He rolls his eyes and looks back through the glass. I step forward, nudging my way in for a see. “And what are you looking at?”

Londyn shuffles left so I can get a look. I peer into the dance studio, and it takes me a second to register who the person is.

Selah?

I frown. *What is she doing here?*

I watch her for a minute. She huffs, rubbing her forehead and then getting into a ballroom dancing position, like she's practicing with an invisible partner. Her form looks solid and well practiced, her lips moving as she counts the beat and then starts waltzing around the studio.

Huh. I didn't even know she could dance.

She falters, tips her head back in obvious frustration, then starts muttering under her breath. Moving back to her original position, she presses a button on her phone, slips it back into her pocket, and stretches her arms wide.

"Is she starting again?" Londyn asks.

"Yeah," I whisper. The orchestra music swells behind us as I turn to look at Londyn. "Why is she doing this?"

"I don't know." She shrugs. "I didn't even know she could dance."

"She can't," Maverick mutters.

Londyn elbows him in the stomach. "Stop it. She obviously can. Look at her form."

We all crowd around the window to get another peek.

"Yeah, but she's so tense," I murmur. "She looks like she'd rather be doing anything else."

"I know, right?" Londyn's expression wrinkles. "Should one of us go talk to her?"

I shake my head. "Looks like she wants her privacy right now. The lights are off. She obviously doesn't want to draw attention to herself, and if she knew we were watching, she'd probably hate it."

"That's true." Londyn nods. She looks kind of sad for a moment, and I wonder what she's thinking.

Thanks to her standing up for Maverick, she's kind of lost a bunch of her friends. It makes me wonder if she worries she'll end up like Selah—a total loner.

But that could never happen to a girl like Londyn. Besides, she's got the Misfits now.

And so does Selah.

I turn back to watch her start yet again. It's like she wants to perfect a few bars at a time, and it's obviously stressing her out that she's stumbling over this part.

She seriously needs to relax into it more. It's like her body is working against her right now.

"We should go." Maverick lightly tugs at his girlfriend's sleeve. "Let's not disturb her."

Londyn nods but then hesitates. "How long do you think she'll be? I mean, I just... Ronan and Gabe are at rugby practice, and she's here by herself. What if they spot her in here?"

"That glass is tinted."

"True, but she still has to get back to the boardinghouse."

"I'll stay." The words pop out before I can even think about what I'm saying. It's like instinct is taking over. "I'll keep an eye on her. You guys go make out or whatever you're planning to do. I got this."

Maverick snickers and takes Londyn's hand. I stay put, staring through that glass and trying to figure out the mysterious girl who looks like she's torturing herself in the dance studio.

I spare one last glance down the hallway in time to see Maverick and Londyn disappear around the corner. He's probably nervous. He's having dinner at Londyn's house tonight, and it's all he could freaking talk about this morning. I guess it's a big deal. Londyn's family is kind of upper-class. Guys like Maverick and me don't usually cross that threshold unless we're there to do garden work or something. We're not the type to date the rich men's daughters.

But Maverick and Londyn are made for each other.

I kind of love that rules are getting broken this way.

It's time to decimate the stupid class system that still exists. It may not be as bad as it once was, but you can't tell

me there aren't still preconceived ideas and prejudices lurking around every corner. Especially in a rich school like this.

I remind myself that I'm lucky to be here. Only a select few get chosen. We're here on full scholarships. Absolutely everything gets paid for, including phones and laptops. It's a sweet ride, but it comes with a cost.

You have to share the hallways with rich snobs—many who think we're nothing more than a PR stunt to make the school look good. They are more than happy to make us feel like we don't belong, which is why I want to work so hard to prove them all wrong.

I may not come from money, but that doesn't make me worthless.

Dammit, I really don't want to be worthless!

Shoving my hands in my pockets, I go back to studying Selah through the glass. She's moved a little further into her song now. I can't hear the music—she's listening through earbuds—but she's obviously up to a faster part. She twirls twice, landing incorrectly and doing her head-tipping, muttering routine before moving back to the beginning of the song.

She should be doing it by section. She's already gotten the first part down; she needs to move on instead of going back to the beginning each time. She'll totally exhaust herself this way.

I'm toying with the idea of opening the door and suggesting it. I just want to help.

But then she spots me. I don't even know how it happens, but her eyes dart to the door and she stutters to a stop, her eyes bulging wide as she backs away.

Seriously. She looks terrified, like I'm some stalker with a gun or something.

Pulling open the door, I bolt into the room, my hands raised so she can see I'm unarmed.

This is ridiculous. It's only me. Why does she look so—

Oh wait.

She's not terrified.

She's mortified.

Her cheeks are flaring red, and I stop moving in an attempt to end her shuffling backward. She's on target to walk right into the wall of windows.

"It's okay." I try to keep my voice soft and soothing. "I won't tell anyone I saw you."

She finally stops moving, dipping her head and looking at the floor.

"Um... what are you practicing?"

She doesn't say anything.

"Looks kind of like ballroom dancing or something. I didn't even know you could dance."

Her frown deepens. She won't look at me as she barrels forward, snatching her bag off the ground and muttering, "I can't. Isn't it obvious?"

Shouldering past me, she bolts out the door. I want to follow her, call her name and make sure she's all right, but I've got a feeling that won't fly.

Checking my watch, I know I can let her go. Rugby practice still has another fifteen minutes, and the coaches never wrap up early. She'll be safe to get back to the boardinghouse without an escort.

Scratching the back of my head, I stare at the polished floor. I'm not really in the mood to dance anymore. All I can do is stand here wondering how I could have played that differently. I managed to get Selah to look at me in the library the other day. We talked. She smiled. I thought we'd made a bit of a connection, but it's just been decimated, because now she probably thinks I was spying on her when all I really want to do is keep her safe.

THE ODD ONE OUT



SELAH

I CAN'T BELIEVE Dante saw me. This is so embarrassing!

My useless self trying to do this stupid dance is a nightmare of its own, but it's just been amplified by the fact that Dante Arden—smoking-hot, super-talented Mr. Dance himself—just saw me stumble over my own feet.

I want to disappear so badly right now, but I have no place to go.

I live in a freaking boardinghouse. There's zero privacy. I can't sneak up to the roof right now because people will see me. I don't have my own room. My best bet is locking myself in a bathroom stall.

And that's exactly what I do.

Plunking on top of the closed toilet, I bury my head in my hands and try not to scream. I don't want to draw any attention to myself.

The dance studio in the afternoons is the one place I can sneak to and practice without anyone knowing. I leave the lights off and everything.

Why did Dante come down there?

Had he been following me?

Unlikely.

He was probably after a dance session of his own and was just breaking the rules to get it.

I swallow, lowering my hands and staring at the back of the toilet door.

He saw me. Watched me screw up.

Ugh! How long had he been watching me before I spotted him?

And he thinks I can dance. Is he blind?

I'm useless!

I wish I didn't even have to do this, but my parents would be crushed if I quit. The ballroom competition they run every year is the most precious thing to them. My older sister used to shine like the sun. She was the talented one, placing every year since she was nine. And then she got in with the wrong crowd, broke my parents' hearts, and now it's all down to me. I have to represent Team Dixon, and I do a terrible job. I've never won anything, and the expectations are so freaking high.

I hate the dresses and the steps I always screw up.

I hate that feeling of all eyes on me.

But I can't quit.

After everything my parents have been through the last few years, I can't let them down like this. The Enchanted Ball has been an annual 'must attend' event in our town for nearly two decades. My parents started it, and it would be a travesty not to have a Dixon compete. Now that my sister's no longer dancing, it's up to me.

Unfortunately.

The phone in my pocket buzzes. I flinch out of my trance and pull the phone out on autopilot, my shoulders slumping when I read the word *Mum*.

Sucking in a sigh, I try to put my bright voice on as I slide my thumb across the screen.

"Hey, Mum."

“Good afternoon, sweetheart. How are you?”

“Yeah, good, thanks.”

“Why is it so echoey?”

“Oh.” I wince and scramble for a lie, but my rattled brain can’t think of anything, so I slump and admit, “I’m in the toilet.”

“Good God, why did you answer your phone, then?”

“I’m not actually *going* to the toilet.” I roll my eyes. “I’m just sitting in here.”

There’s a pause, and I can picture Mum’s face. It’ll be wrinkled with confusion, the outlines of disappointment pulling at the corners of her eyes and mouth.

I’m no Shiloh. I never will be.

I’m the awkward one who hides in bathrooms so she doesn’t have to face people.

Clearing my throat, I try to distract her. “How are you?”

And then immediately wish I hadn’t, because she bypasses pleasantries and just gets straight to it. “I’m ringing to make sure you’re all lined up for your practice with Clinton this weekend.”

I cringe and mutter, “Yep.”

“He’s driving across from Hamilton and will meet you in the studio at 10:00 a.m. sharp. Don’t be late this time.”

“I won’t,” I murmur, struggling to hold back my heavy sigh.

“I’ve booked the spare studio at the back of the ballet school for you.”

“Okay.”

“Make the most of the time you have together. Clinton mentioned that you weren’t that focused during your previous session and—”

“What?” I sit up straight. “He did not say that.”

“Well, not those exact words, but it was clear you weren’t as practiced as you should have been. You *have* been rehearsing on your own time as well, haven’t you?”

“Of course I have, but I can’t believe he said that to you. When did you even speak to him?”

There’s another pause, and I quickly work out that she hasn’t actually spoken to him at all.

“I had a chat with Aunty Jenny. She mentioned that you ___”

I groan, cutting her off. The worst part about having a dance partner who’s also my cousin is the family grapevine.

“Oh stop,” Mum lightly scolds me. “I’m just ringing to make sure you’re putting in your best effort. The ball is only two months away.”

“I know when it is, Mum!” I don’t mean to snap and immediately wince as soon as the words have left my mouth.

Mum goes quiet. She’s waiting for an apology. Clamping my lips together, I scowl at the back of the toilet door, narrowing my eyes at the love heart graffiti with the arrow through it before finally giving up with a soft sigh.

“Sorry,” I murmur.

“This is important.” Her voice quakes like it does every time we have this conversation. She’ll never outright say it. Ever. But I know she wishes it was my older sister competing and not me.

I’m not a natural.

I never win or place or do anything she can be proud of.

Shiloh shone.

I no doubt embarrass the family, yet still they want me in there every year.

A Dixon must dance.

A daughter of the organizers must compete.

Closing my eyes, I remind myself of the shame my parents endured when Shiloh dropped out the way she did. My mother cried for weeks. I don't want to be the one who breaks her heart. One daughter has already done that, and I'm the only one left.

Ignoring the caustic burning in my belly, I suck in a breath and force myself to say, "I'm practicing hard, and I'll give it my best. I promise."

Mum sniffs. "I know you will. You're such a good girl."

That comment always holds so much weight. She doesn't just mean I'm good. She's silently begging me to stay good. To not break the rules. To comply and be everything my sister couldn't.

"Get good grades, Selah."

"Don't fall off the tracks, Selah."

"Dance in my competition. Don't break my heart. Be the daughter I lost so I don't have to cry myself to sleep every night."

"Please, Selah, be everything I need you to be."

She never says any of that to me—not in those words, at least—but I know she's thinking them every time we talk.

"Hey, I better get going. I have... homework and..." The words trail off because I can't conjure any other excuses to end this call.

"Of course." Mum sniffs again, and I can picture her brave smile. "I hope you have a good week. Call if you need anything, and I'll look forward to hearing about your dance practice on Saturday. You're lucky to have Clinton as a partner. He's a very talented young man, and he'll carry you both through on the big day."

I nod. It's the same speech every year.

Clinton will save my ass and not make me look like a complete fool on the dance floor. He hides my mistakes like a pro. We've been competing together for three years now, and

while he's gone on to be great, I've plateaued, and I'm sure it drives him freaking nuts.

"Have a good night, sweetheart."

"Thanks. You too." I hang up and stay in the toilet stall, gazing down at my blank phone screen until I hear the bathroom door whip open.

"As if! The guy's a total loser."

"He's not that bad. You are so harsh."

"And you are so easy."

There's a pause, and then the girls start to giggle. I recognize their voices. Amera and Celeste. They're my roommates. Celeste has been away for a few months on an overseas trip with her parents, but she's back now, and Amera is stoked. I'm the boring, quiet roommate who drives Amera kind of nuts. She's a party girl, loves to sleep around, dance at clubs, and drink until she's a tipsy mess. She and Celeste are cut from the same cloth.

Me, not so much.

I can't stand that scene. It frightens me.

Give me a good book or popcorn and a movie any day. Give me peace, calm, quiet.

Give me a toilet stall I can hide in until the chatter disappears and I can sneak into the hallway without drawing any attention.

Gliding out of the bathroom, I creep down the corridor, sticking to the wall and slipping into my room, relieved to find it empty.

I change out of my uniform as quickly as I can. I always hate having to get undressed in front of my roomies. They have no problems. Amera would probably walk the boardinghouse in her underwear if she was allowed to. That girl has no shame.

And she shouldn't. Her body is perfect.

My stick figure is so gangly and awkward compared to hers.

Celeste looks pretty hot in a bikini too. Her boobs are on the larger side, and rather than hiding it the way I would, she flaunts those puppies.

I barely have breasts, and I'm kind of grateful, to be honest. I don't like anything that draws the eye. If I could have my way, I'd be Susan Storm from *Fantastic Four*. She can turn invisible whenever she wants, and wouldn't that be nice? But no matter how hard I try, I just can't do it.

Sticking to the walls, hiding in the shadows, perching in the corner of the room... people still see me. They still notice and then whisper about how I'm the weird girl.

I can't even find solitude in an 'out-of-bounds' dance studio.

Ugh. I can't believe Dante saw me messing up my steps. And then when he tried to talk to me, I ran out of the room like the weirdo I am.

No wonder people hassle me behind my back.

And it's not like it's ever gonna get better, because I honestly don't know how to be normal. I'll never fit in, so what's the point of even trying?

THE AWKWARD BETWEEN US



DANTE

SO, Selah is doing a first-class job of avoiding me. I tried to sit near her in study hall last night, but the second she saw me approaching, her eyes rounded, and she grabbed her stuff and scuttled to the very end table.

I gave up with a sigh, plunking down next to Alexia and Trixi. I ended up spending most of the session helping Trixi proofread an assignment she was working on. That girl cannot spell... and she knows it. Which is why she gets me to help her. And the sucker that I am, I always do.

While she skipped off to watch TV, I had to stay put and finish up my own work.

It happened again tonight, and when I amble into the common room an hour after everybody else, it's crammed with bodies.

The Misfits are lounging in front of the screen, watching *SWAT*. It's a good show, and although Monica and Sully, the senior house parents, always complain about how violent it is, they secretly love it too.

See? They're watching it right now.

I smirk at Sully, his ankles crossed over the back of the chair as he stares at the screen, totally rapt.

Shaking my head, I look for a perch near my friends, but there's only room on the floor. The beanbags have been commandeered by Troy and Arty. I frown and scan for a better spot. Gabe, the douchebag, is hovering nearby on his phone, shooting dark glares at the back of the room every so often.

I turn to check his line of sight and spot Selah. She's squished into the corner of the couch along the back wall like she's hoping the furniture will absorb her. Her long legs are scrunched up to her chest, and her nose is buried in a book, but I'm sure she can feel Gabe's heated glances.

I shoot him a warning look, and he meets my gaze head-on before snorting and stalking out of the room.

Dickhead.

Maverick watches him leave, then turns to find me. He points beside him, offering to shuffle along so I can squish in, but I shake my head and spin for the back of the room.

Selah is probably gonna hate me for it, but dammit, I want to sit next to her. I need a way to erase the awkward between us, maybe get back to what we had in the library the other day. She doesn't have to talk to me; I'll just read a book on my phone or something.

Taking a seat on the couch, I sense her stiffen, so I concentrate on opening the book app on my phone. I always have a book on the go, and thanks to Miss Tomes being freaking awesome, I can now borrow any e-books I want from the library. She set me up when she heard me complaining that I don't always want to carry a book around with me.

"But you've always got your phone." She grinned, wiggled her eyebrows, and then spent the next half hour setting me up.

That was two years ago now, and I have read so many books since then. I'd much rather chow through a few pages while I'm waiting around than waste my time playing a game like Trixi, who is addicted to *Homescapes*. I glance up and notice she's playing it while half watching the TV.

Selah clears her throat, shuffling beside me.

The mammoth book she's reading is still up around her face, but she's ultra-aware of my presence. I sniff, trying to *act casual* as I shift, sticking my leg out and getting comfy.

Flicking my thumb across the screen, I stare at the next page, conscious of Selah's every move.

She turns the page of *A Court of Wings and Ruin*, clears another tickle from her throat, then lowers her book. She looks at me and opens her mouth, but then she clamps her lips together and keeps reading.

I fight a grin.

Concentrating on my phone is pretty damn hard when she's sitting beside me this way. It's like a triumph that she didn't move the second I sat down.

I glance up and spot Arlo frowning at me. "What are you doing?" he mouths.

I shrug and go back to my book, acting like it's not abnormal to be sitting with the boardinghouse weirdo.

She's not that weird.

She just likes to read and keep to herself. What's wrong with that?

My lips purse as I reread the top paragraph for a third time. If I don't think there's anything wrong with her wanting her own company, then why am I sitting next to her?

Dammit, I should probably move.

But she did open her mouth before, like she wanted to talk to you.

Maybe she was trying to tell you to get lost.

I glance at her, and our eyes connect. She flinches and buries her face back in her book, but she doesn't move away.

Nestling back into the couch, I try to play it chill and not rattle her. Should I say something about yesterday afternoon in the dance studio? Or will that send her running?

Despite the fact that I'm dying to know why she was waltzing around with an imaginary partner, I should probably keep my mouth shut. Maybe she doesn't want to talk about it at all.

Maybe me sitting here *not* saying anything is what's keeping her from bolting.

I force myself to keep reading. We don't have to talk about the dance thing. I'll just pretend like it never happened. We can connect in other ways.

Why are you even wanting to connect?

I'm not sure exactly. Maybe it's because she was brave and stood up for my best friend when he needed her most.

Or maybe it's because there's something about those big green eyes, so uncertain and vulnerable, that make me want to wrap her up and keep her safe.

Or maybe—

“What are you reading?”

Her quiet question catches me so off guard that I actually jolt.

I look at her, blinking for a second.

She presses her lips together, her eyes rounding before she pulls her book back up to hide her face.

“*The Hunger Games*,” I murmur.

She slaps her book down with a gasp. “I love that book. The whole series. It's... genius.”

“Yeah.” I grin. “I love it too.”

“Wait, you're loving it, or you loved it so much that you're rereading it?” She swivels her body to face me, the fat book now resting in her lap so I can see her entire face.

I study it for a second—so long and pale, yet it makes her green eyes that much brighter. My lips draw into a slow smile. “I'm rereading it.”

Her eyes start to dance. “Isn’t that the best? Diving back into a world and reliving the story all over again?” Her voice takes on a dreamlike quality I’ve never heard before. “I always do that after I’ve read a book I didn’t like so much. I reach for a favorite, and it’s like wrapping myself in my favorite blanket while munching through a packet of chocolate-coated raisins. You know what I mean?”

I can’t stop staring at her animated expression, captured by its surprising beauty. “Yeah,” I rasp. “I know exactly what you mean. Although I’d be scarfing down chocolate-coated almonds. Can’t get enough of those things.”

Her lips stretch into a wide smile that takes over her entire face. I’ve never seen her like this before... and I want to see more of it.

“So, how’s your series going?” I point to the book in her lap, and she grabs it up, flashing me the cover.

“It’s great. I’m racing through it. Lots of action and tension and intrigue.”

“Nice. Fantasy and dystopian offers so much of that. It’s why I always reach for it, although I love a good thriller too. Anything with a mystery that keeps me guessing.”

“Definitely.” She runs a hand through her hair, making the long silky waves pull back, then float down around her face again. It’s so shiny... and long.

My eyes travel to the tips, which are nestled around her waist, one lock curling over the page of her book.

“I love how it can transport you to another time and place.” She taps the pages of her book. “I’m living in a completely different world right now.”

“Yeah.” I lift my phone. “I love that the unreal becomes normal in books like this.”

“And how ordinary people can do extraordinary things.” Selah points at my phone. “I love Katniss. She’s one of my favorite characters ever, because she’s not like this kick-ass assassin who’s been trained since birth. She’s just a really capable human being with an unwavering loyalty and

determination. She never lets fear stop her from doing the right thing, and I love that about her.”

“Yeah, she’s pretty cool.” My voice is coming out kind of croaky, and I clear my throat. “I also love the world that’s been created. This idea of districts and how these tributes from one of the poorest ones rise up to help fight the injustice. I love seeing a class structure fall like that.”

“It’s pretty triumphant.” Selah nods. “Although Katniss loses a lot along the way, which is sad. She ends up with Peeta, which is cool, but still... she loses so much.”

I shrug. “Sometimes you have to lose to win, and it makes the story more realistic that way.”

She nods and looks down at her lap. I’m getting the impression that she’s one of those *feels everything* kind of readers. I bet books make her cry and laugh and swoon and rage. It’s funny because she always comes across as void of emotions, but maybe when she’s in a book world, that all changes.

“Why do you love reading so much?” Her question throws me.

“Uh...”

“It’s just that most people our age don’t seem to enjoy it the way I do. I mean, I *love* it. So much. And the fact that no one else really seems to makes me feel like there’s something wrong with me.”

“There’s nothing wrong with you.” I shift, rotating my body so I can look at her directly. Our knees are nearly touching, and I can feel the energy surging between us. Does she notice it too?

She’s not moving, but was that a catch in her breath?

“I read because it helps me escape.” I say it simply, throwing in a shrug for good measure. “It takes me to a different place for a while.”

Her eyes smile in a way that tells me she understands completely. It makes me wonder why she needs to escape so

much.

I have my reasons, and she'll never know them.

I can't tell her I got into reading when I was a kid because books don't need electricity to work. I can't admit the nights I spent on the streets with my mum or the times I begged the book to suck me into its pages so I didn't have to hear what was happening in the room next door.

Selah could never understand that.

She comes from one of the wealthiest families at this school. She's grown up in a life of privilege and will never experience what it's like to live with an addict and the lengths they'll go to to get their next fix.

WHAT'S YOUR NUMBER?



SELAH

DANTE'S EYES dip back to his phone, and he goes quiet for a moment.

I wonder if that's a sign that he wants to stop talking and get on with reading again. I should respect that. I shouldn't enjoy talking to him so much.

Disappointment niggles, but I do my best to ignore it. You don't sit next to Selah Dixon because you want to dive into conversation. He probably chose this spot for some peace and quiet.

I go to swivel back into my position when he murmurs, "Have you heard of that Goodreads reading challenge?"

"Yes." I grin.

His eyes take on a light of their own, and he leans toward me like this is top secret. "What's your number?"

"Three hundred and sixty-five," I whisper.

"What?" He jerks back, his mouth dropping open. For a second, I can't decide if I'm looking at awe or that surprise that will soon morph to confusion and then pity. You know, that *you are such a loser* look I get from so many.

I hold my breath, waiting for it.

But it never comes.

Instead he starts shaking his head, his lips rising into an impressed smile. “That’s... Three hundred and sixty-five?”

I let out a breathy giggle. “What’s your number?”

“Fifty. I usually hit around sixty-five-ish.”

“That’s impressive.”

“Not three hundred and sixty-five impressive.”

My cheeks feel on fire when I dip my head and softly admit, “I usually hit around four-fifty.”

He lets out a choking cough and smiles again. “That’s more than a book a day.”

“The summer holidays can be... long.”

“You must speed-read.”

I shrug. I don’t feel like I do, but I guess the more you read, the faster you get. I have been known to get through three books in one day. Admittedly, I did absolutely *nothing* else.

Amera would probably roll her eyes and call me totally lame if she knew something like that. I wonder if Dante would too.

Biting my bottom lip, I slide my thumb over the pages of my book and watch him. I like the shape of his face, the color of his skin. He must have Arabian blood in him. He’s got a Middle Eastern look, and I wish I had the courage to ask him about his family.

But he’s a Misfit. A charity case, as some like to call them, and that probably means he comes with family issues. Painful ones that gave him a chance to be here. Things have to be pretty dire for these guys to get a full scholarship, and I can’t imagine him wanting to talk about it.

I certainly don’t like opening up about Shiloh.

“I thought my fifty was freaking impressive.” Dante shakes his head, looking a little glum.

“It is,” I quickly counter. “Most of the people in this place probably read about five to ten, if that. Fifty’s awesome. And you actually said it was closer to sixty-five. Plus, some of the books I read are like novellas or on the shorter side. I count everything.”

He turns to study me, his dark eyes smiling before his lips do. “I’m gonna look you up.”

Opening the Goodreads app on his phone, he types in “Selah Dixon” and comes up empty.

I fight a smile. His frown is kind of adorable.

“A Girl With A Book,” I whisper, leaning toward him before I even realize what I’m doing.

He smells nice.

Is it his shampoo, or maybe his deodorant? Whatever. I like it.

“A girl with a book,” he murmurs, typing it into the search bar and finding my icon. It’s a cartoon picture of a girl reading. I drew it a few years ago when I first joined Goodreads and have never bothered changing it.

“Cute.” He grins, pointing at the image. He then scrolls through my Favorite Books page and checks out my Read list. I’m on 1,432 at the moment. I’m kind of proud of that. My rating system has definitely changed over the years. I used to give everything four and five stars, not wanting to offend anybody, but the more I read, the more selective I am, and I’ve started to be honest. I never write anything mean in my reviews, and if I’m giving a low star rating, I always explain why without tearing the author down or making it personal.

At least I try to do that.

Dante clicks on my latest one star and gives it a read before nodding. “You finish every book, even if you’re not enjoying it?”

“I feel like I owe it to the author. I can’t not finish it, even if it’s not my style.”

“Your review is pretty kind considering it’s a one star.”

I wince. “I was trying to be honest in the nicest way possible. Do you think I should have rated it higher?”

“If you hated the book, then no. I guess that’s why I don’t leave comments. I only ever leave a star rating.”

I nod, then point at his phone. “Do you want to be friends?”

As soon as the question leaves my mouth, I hear how freaking loaded it is. I’m meaning on the app, of course, but... maybe I don’t just mean the app.

My eyes round, my palms going instantly sweaty as I hold my breath and wait for his response.

It takes an age to come. He’s too busy staring at me like he’s trying to decipher some code embedded in my skin. I hope my expression is bland enough. I don’t want him reading me. Can he hear my racing heartbeat? Can he tell my lungs are burning but I’m too afraid to exhale right now?

“Yeah, that’d be cool.” He clicks on Add Friend, and I dig out my phone, immediately accepting his request, then skimming through his read list.

“Wow, you’ve read some cool stuff.” My eyebrows shoot up as I scan the list. “I loved The Maze Runner series, but *Lord of the Flies*, I could have lived without.”

He snickers. “Oh come on, it’s a classic.”

My nose wrinkles before I can stop it. “It was gross and creepy and ugh. I did *not* like it.”

“Oh yeah? What’d you rate it?”

I groan and tip my head back. “I gave it a four, but that was when I was extremely nice about every book I read. The annoying thing is, it was well written, but I just didn’t like the content, so it was really hard to rate because I couldn’t fault the actual prose. It was just my subjective opinion on that creepy island and how twisted the characters became.” I shudder, and his smile softens to one I don’t quite understand.

I wish I could read his mind, because people don’t look at me the way he’s looking at me right now, and I’d love to know

what it means.

Sully grabs our attention, clapping his hands once, then twice in that rhythmic way of his. “All right, you lot. Time for bed.”

Monica rises on the other side of the room, calling over the chatter, “Teeth brushed, pajamas on! I’m turning out lights in thirty minutes. Let’s go!” She whirls her finger in the air like she always does, then laughs at something Alexia mutters. “Oh, stop.” With a playful swat to Alexia’s shoulder, she guides her toward the girls’ wing while I reluctantly stand up and get ready to say goodnight to what has been a surprisingly pleasant evening.

I’m kind of not sure what to say or how to end my time with Dante.

Do I thank him?

Is that normal?

The fact that I don’t even know what normal people do has ants crawling around in my stomach. I tip to the edges of my feet and hug the book to my chest. My hair slips off my shoulders, creating a curtain around my face.

“Hope you sleep well.” Dante’s voice is soft and sweet.

I look up at him, noticing that we’re basically the same height. He’s just a touch taller than I am. If I were in heels, we’d be even, and that thought makes me feel like a giraffe. I’m always the tallest girl in the room—long and skinny. Dad sometimes jokes that I’ve been stretched out like a piece of gum.

I wonder what Dante thinks about that.

Does it bother him that we’re so similar in height?

He’s one of the shortest guys among his group. Not Henry McDonald short, but he has to look up to talk to Maverick. I wonder if that eats away at him. I wish I could ask. It’s probably kind of personal though, and I really don’t want to say anything that will decimate the ground we’ve made today.

We’re friends on Goodreads. That’s, like, huge.

Well, for me it is, anyway.

It's probably no big deal for someone as cool as Dante. Someone with a small army of friends.

My eyebrows dip together, and I hang my head again.

"Hey." He lightly brushes my elbow, and I can't help flinching. "Uh, sorry." He winces, tucking his hand into his pocket. "Just checking that you're okay. You're kind of frowning." He points to his forehead, and I try to smooth out my expression but of course go too far and lift my eyebrows way too high.

Great, now I look like an idiot.

"Yeah. I'm fine," I mumble and rub my forehead, ordering my eyebrows to start behaving themselves.

"I had a really good time hanging out with you tonight. It's nice to meet someone who loves books as much as I do. Although..." He tips his head when I look at him again, a smile toying with his lips. "You are probably a little more obsessed than me."

His twinkling eyes tell me that he's only teasing, and I can't help a grin.

Bringing my thumb and forefinger together, I wrinkle my nose and admit, "Maybe just a little bit."

He laughs, and I think my heart just grew a pair of wings.

It starts flapping around in my rib cage while Dante gives me a sweet smile and then walks off toward the boys' dorm. "Night, Selah. Sweet dreams."

Oh, that will be a guarantee.

Whether I sleep tonight or not, I will most definitely be dreaming about Dante Arden... and that will be the sweetest thing ever.

"You coming?"

I jolt and spot Amera across the room. She's watching me with a smile that demands answers.

Answers I am not about to give her.

Dipping my head, I squeeze the book to my chest and scurry across the room. She follows me, super close, and my shoulders begin to prickle.

Ugh. What's she going to ask?

"So, you looked like you were having fun tonight."

I whip a look over my shoulder in time to see her eyebrows wiggle.

"Don't," I plead. "It was nothing. We were just talking about books."

"Right."

"I'm serious!" My voice pitches as I step into the room. Celeste must be brushing her teeth already, and I hunt the walls for some kind of escape.

Amera's expression kind of crumples the longer she studies me, and then she sighs and shakes her head. "The sad thing is you are totally serious, aren't you?" Rolling her eyes, she starts stripping off her clothes, exposing her bright pink bra like it's no big deal.

I always get changed as quickly and subtly as I can, but Amera does not have that problem. Her body is curvy in all the right places, so she has no reason to hide it.

Averting my gaze from her shapely form, I lay my book on the nightstand and pull my pajamas out from under my pillow.

"Books." Amera snickers. "Seriously, Selah, you're never gonna get laid."

"I don't want to get laid," I counter. "I'm not like you, remember?"

"Oh, I don't need reminding of that fact," she snips.

I pause, slowly turning to look at her. She's doing it again. That thing where she starts out friendly and then suddenly turns into a grump.

I think I know why it's happening, but I don't have the guts to call her on it. Ever since Londyn chose Maverick over her, it's been like this. I mean, it's not quite that simple, but thanks to Ronan, Londyn was forced to pick a side, and she went with her boyfriend, which was the right move. The Misfits have absorbed her into their group, and it's left Amera in a really awkward position. Her best friend has crossed sides while she's tried to remain Switzerland in this whole thing, and it's seriously not working.

I could tell how much it was killing her when Celeste got back and wanted the whole explanation and Amera could barely get her sentences straight. She wants things to go back to the way they were before, but that is never going to happen. And it makes her grumpy at the oddest moments.

In spite of the fact that she puts on this strong, unyielding front, I think Amera's got a really soft side, and she feels vulnerable without her bestie beside her. Londyn has tried to keep the lines of communication going, but she doesn't understand how Amera wants anything to do with Ronan after the way he behaved. My guess is that she's afraid to come into the line of fire. I get it. Ronan and Gabe keep firing death rays my way, and it's very unsettling. Maybe Amera feels like she just can't handle it. She's not as tough and aloof as she tries to appear.

I press my lips together and get changed without saying a word. I wish I could find a way to tell her I understand, but I don't completely get it. I'd rather be a lone island than have to pretend all the time. Sure, it makes me awkward and a target for teasing, but at least it keeps me safe.

Celeste swans back into the room, humming a happy tune that slices right through the tension. I welcome it, hoping it'll distract Amera and pull her out of her funk. Shimmying up to our roommate, Celeste does a little dance, then starts belting out "Classic" by MKTO.

I grin, quietly invisible while Amera is quickly won over by our roomie. The two of them are soon dancing around each other, singing and laughing. A part of me wishes I could join them, but I don't know how to do that.

The idea of freestyle dancing makes me break into a cold sweat. I wouldn't know what to do with my arms and legs. Talk about awkward.

No, I'll just stick to being the twitchy nerd who no one seems to understand. The girl who can't string more than two sentences together.

Although, I did have a nice time talking to Dante tonight.

Grabbing my toothbrush, I pop it in my mouth and head for the bathroom, fighting a grin the entire way.

MILD FASCINATION



DANTE

I SAUNTER into the dance studio, dumping my bag against the wall of mirrors and shuffling over to my friends. They're in a clump in the middle of the room, waiting for Miss Fillion to arrive. She's usually late about once a week. It's kind of funny watching her bolt through the door all frazzled, muttering apologies as we hassle her for being a slack ass. She takes it pretty well, even laughs and makes some self-deprecating comment about how she and the alarm clock were not on speaking terms that morning.

Finding a spot next to Maverick, I watch him eye up his girlfriend while she stretches and gets ready for our session. She's not usually in our morning classes. Her parents are kind of strict and say she can only do dance if she joins us during lunchtimes or after school, but Miss Fillion went to bat for her and has managed to move her schedule around so she has one free period a week during our dance class so she can join us.

It's still not enough for Maverick's liking, but at least it's something.

I nudge him when his eyes start roving over her body with this hungry, yet adoring look. "Watch it or you might start drooling."

Maverick snickers and looks down at me. "What can I say? My girlfriend's a hottie."

“Heard that,” Londyn calls over her shoulder.

“We all did,” Alexia complains. “Do you seriously have to keep rubbing your loved-up energy in our faces all the time? You guys are gross.”

I laugh at the disgusted look on her face. Alexia cracks me up. She’s like the toughest of us all, and romance of any kind seems to repel her. Oh man, I hope I’m around the day she does fall in love. I am going to get so much mileage out of it.

Londyn goes quiet, focusing on bending her body in half and touching her toes while Maverick laughs and tells Alexia to shut up. “If I want to tell my woman she’s hot, I can do that whenever the hell I like.”

Alexia rolls her eyes and flops down next to Londyn, copying her stretches with a little scowl.

“So...” Trixi skips over, tucking a purple strand of hair behind her ear before dumping me right in it. “We all know that Maverick loves Londyn, but what I want to know is what Dante thinks of Selah.” She wiggles her eyebrows at me, and my gut sinks. “You two looked kind of cozy last night.”

“I’m surprised you noticed between the TV and your phone.”

She simpers at my lame attempt to deflect.

“What were you two flirting about? I mean, talking about.”

I roll my eyes as she laughs and manages to draw the attention of every freaking person in the room.

“You and Selah?” Londyn’s eyes light up.

Ugh, she’s such a romantic.

“It’s not like that.” I give her a pointed look in a desperate attempt to hide my squirming insides. Like I can admit that I spent half the night staring at the ceiling and recapturing every comment Selah made and each expression on her face. Why was I dreaming about this girl when...

“I’m just trying to look out for her. Be her friend. That’s it. Seriously.” They so don’t believe me, so I lay it on a little

thicker. “The way Gabe was glaring at her... you guys didn’t see because you were watching the TV, but it was dark, and I wanted to sit next to her and let him know that he’s not touching her. Ever.” My voice grows with strength until I’m practically growling the words.

Maverick nods and crosses his arms. “He’s not laying one finger on her.”

“Neither is Ronan,” Londyn spits. “We’ll protect her.”

“Yet we can’t always do it.” Alexia throws her hands up when we all turn to her with incredulous scowls. “What? We’re going to be her protection detail from now on? Take shifts? Please! That girl hates being around other people. Just saying ‘good morning’ makes her skin start glowing neon red. She probably has heart palpitations every time we look at her.”

“She’s not that bad.” I frown. “Give her a break. Look what she did for Maverick and Londyn. She’s braver than you think she is.”

Alexia shares a look with Trixi, who starts to giggle behind her hand.

“Hey,” I snap at them both. “Stop it. You hate it when people share looks like that about us. Don’t go doing it to someone else.” They both look suitably ashamed, and I cross my arms with a little huff. “She could use some friends like us. She doesn’t have anyone else, and she may think she doesn’t need us, but everybody needs somebody.”

“Agreed.” Londyn stands up, brushing her hands on the back of her dance leggings.

“But she disappears and takes herself off alone all the time. We can’t shadow her.” Arlo shakes his head. “She’s weird. Come on, we’re all thinking it, right?”

I open my mouth to protest, but Alexia starts talking before I can.

“What she needs is some self-defense lessons. If we really want to help her, we should be teaching her how to fight without us there.”

I open my mouth to protest again, but nothing comes out... because that's not a bad idea.

"If she gets cornered by Ronan or Gabe or any of those jerk-offs..." Arlo nods. "That's a good idea."

"But those guys are strong." Londyn shudders, crossing her arms and kind of curling in on herself.

Maverick's face crumples with a pained frown. Stepping over to his girlfriend, he wraps his arm around her, pulling her to his side and kissing the top of her head. "He's never going to touch you again. I promise."

Londyn sniffs and looks up at her man with an expression that can only be described as pure love. "I know. But Selah doesn't have a Maverick."

She's got me.

The words fire through my brain so fast I nearly blurt them out loud, but I manage to clamp my lips together in the nick of time. I can just imagine the reaction I'd get if I said something like that.

My friends don't mind me sticking up for Selah, but falling for one of the richest girls in the school? The weird one who can't really talk to anybody?

Yeah, that's not gonna fly.

Not that I really care about what my friends think, but we gave Maverick a pretty hard time for hanging with Londyn, and Alexia still struggles with the fact that an Asshat has joined our ranks. She's really protective of our little group, and she should be. We've only ever had each other. Every time we bring in an outsider, it creates a new risk, a new dynamic... another chance to tear our group apart.

I can't lose these guys.

They're all I've got.

And besides, I'm not falling for Selah. So I like the fact that she reads a lot, and her eyes are pretty, and I want to run my fingers through her hair. That doesn't... I mean, I don't...

It's not a crush, okay!

It's just... a mild fascination.

That's all it can be.

Right?

BARKING ORDERS AND THE BIGGEST LETDOWN



SELAH

IT'S SATURDAY. My least favorite day of the week.

Yes, I know that makes me different to everybody else at the school, but what else is new?

So I love the routine of classes and learning. I love the structure of a school day. The weekends are loose and unpredictable. It's unsettling.

Sure, I have more time to read, and I do love that part.

But I also have to go to dance practice with my cousin, and I hate that part. Thankfully it's not every weekend. But today, it's happening, and as per usual, I'm detesting every second of it.

"The Skaters Waltz" wafts through the small studio we're using. It's a spare room at the back of a ballet academy in the middle of Cambridge. My mother arranged it for us as soon as I moved up here. Clinton studies at Waikato University, and she convinced him to be my dance partner since we only live thirty minutes apart.

Since my parents helped fund the building of the dance studio at Haven Academy, they've been trying to get me to practice there, but I've managed to resist. The idea of being caught at school dancing with Clinton is humiliating. How will I explain it to everybody?

I don't want another living soul knowing that I have to compete in this stupid ballroom competition. It's bad enough that Dante spotted me. Thankfully, he's never asked about it, but I'm sure he's curious. It was a good wake-up call. A perfect reminder to be more careful when I sneak to the studio to practice.

Saturdays would most definitely be the worst time for it. There are rugby and soccer games happening on the fields, not to mention the fact that the boarding students are loitering around. I don't want them catching me, which one of them no doubt will. Even though I have my own key to the studio and a special alarm code designated to me, I can't risk getting caught down there.

"Straighten your back," Clinton snips. "And tighten this arm. It's floppy." He gives my left arm a waggle, and I do what I'm told, tipping my head the way he tells me to while trying to remember the steps. He's leading, but I need to know what I'm doing and—

"Ouch!" he barks, releasing me with a huff and limping over to his phone. "That's the third time today! My feet aren't made of titanium, you know."

"I'm sorry." I cringe. "I don't know what's wrong with me today."

"Or every day," he mutters under his breath, but I still hear it.

Staring at the floor with a little frown, I beg my eyes not to water. Clinton's being especially snappy today, and it's just making me worse. I wish I could tell him that, but he'll get even more snotty with me, and I'll do anything to speed up this session. I want to get out of this stuffy little studio and catch an Uber back to school. I want to grab a book, sneak onto the roof, and curl up, disappearing into the pages for a few hours.

"Let's do it again. We'll take it from the double reverse spin, and try not to stand on my toes this time."

I nod, not trusting my voice to say anything.

He starts the music and walks over to me. I rest my hand on his shoulder, then take his other hand, trying to keep my form firm and stay out of his dance space. Rising to my tiptoes, I follow his lead, and we move around the room. I'm struggling to keep up with the steps, my brain focusing so hard on not screwing up that I inevitably do.

"Dammit! Stay in time!" Clinton barks, and I fumble again, screwing up the next turn and crashing into him when he pulls me back.

He lets out another expletive and starts muttering about the fact that we never win and I'm the reason why.

"I'm sorry you have to partner with me." I say it as soon as the music cuts off. "I know you don't like dancing with me, and I'm sorry you have to."

He sighs, his head tipping forward.

"I swear I'm trying. I've been practicing at school. I just... I'm probably trying too hard to get it right, and that makes me nervous, and I end up ruining it for everyone. I'm sorry."

"Stop apologizing." He turns, his look kind of agonized. "Please."

"Sorry," I whisper, then wince and bite my lips together so I don't accidentally say anything else.

"It's not just you. I..." He shakes his head, sliding his hands into his pocket with a heavy sigh. "I... I don't think we should dance together at the competition this year."

"What?" The word pops out on a gasp.

"I..." He winces and then says it all in a rush. "I've found another dance partner, and I really want to compete with her. She's my girlfriend and she's really into this stuff, and it feels wrong dancing with my cousin when I could be dancing with a person I love." His lips twitch with a smile.

I gape at him. "You didn't tell me you had a girlfriend. Since when? And you love her already?"

"Admittedly, it's happened kind of fast, but yeah, I love her. We started dating a month ago, and everything's just

clicking so perfectly. We've got so much in common, and spending time with her is so easy and wonderful, and... she's a really great dancer."

"Of course she is," I murmur, crossing my arms and looking down at the floor.

My black shoes, purchased specifically for ballroom dancing, feel tight and uncomfortable. I want to rip them off and throw them across the room, maybe smash them into that mirror that's determined to mock me right now.

Like I want to compete in my parents' stupid competition, anyway.

But I don't have a choice.

And now I'm losing my partner, probably the only person on this entire planet who was willing to dance with me. Ugh. I should be thanking him for putting up with me for so long.

"Look, I know this is awkward. And I know I'm bailing on you."

"The competition's less than two months away."

"I know, but Libby and I should be performance-ready by then. We've kind of already started working on it."

I glance up with a frown, wanting to shout, "I don't care about freaking Libby! What about me?"

But I don't. All I seem capable of doing is shaking my head and fighting tears.

"I'm sorry, Selah, but you hate this stuff anyway. Maybe this is your chance to get out of it, you know?"

I huff, anger sparking quickly. "Yeah, right. My mother will so be okay with that."

"Well, what do you want me to do?"

Dance with me. Keep your word and not put me in this horrible position!

But of course I can't say that either. He wants to dance with his girlfriend, and he should be able to do that. As

annoyed as I am, I can't stand in the way of love. He'll have a far better chance of placing if he's dancing with a girl who is into this stuff. Haven't I made him suffer enough?

"Mum's gonna hate this," I murmur, working my way toward saying that maybe he's right and I should quit.

But he speaks before I can. "I'll call her if you want. Take the heat."

I glance up and notice his expression. That's the last thing he wants to do.

And it's not like Mum will just let me bow out. She'll rush to find me a new partner, go into a frenzy desperately trying to make this right while her delicate emotions wreak havoc on her. The pain of Shiloh, which always sits so close to the surface, will rear its ugly head again, and... and I can't put her through it.

"Actually, can you not?" I clench my jaw and nod. "I... I'll find someone else. Just don't say anything to her."

"You'll find someone else?" His skepticism is a little insulting, but I ignore it, forcing myself to nod.

"There's a dance group at school. Maybe I can ask one of them to help me."

Yeah, right! Like I can do that. Like any of them would want to waltz!

Oh, I am so screwed.

But I can't let my mother down. I can't make her relive the tragedy of losing another daughter from her precious Enchanted Ball. I'm just gonna have to find a way to make this work.

"I might have another person I can ask." Clinton's smile doesn't hide the fact that he knows he's being an ass by bailing on me. "Libby's got a few friends who are dancers. One of them might step up if it's a short-term thing. It won't solve it for next year, but it would get you through this year's competition."

"Okay." I nod.

“I’ll ask around and see what I can do for you.”

I nod again, my throat swelling as he slips his phone into his pocket and starts packing up his stuff.

I guess we’re done for the day, then.

I should be relieved, but it’s hard to capture that emotion when you’re fighting outright panic.

I’ve lost my dance partner.

I’m going to have to dance with someone who doesn’t even know me.

Someone who won’t get me. Who will judge me and make me nervous, and then I’ll screw up the steps even more, and they’ll dump me because I’m useless, and I’ll have to show up to the competition by myself and break my mother’s heart.

“I’ll be in touch with some possible partners for you, okay? But let me know if you find anyone else in the meantime.” He waits until I nod before smiling and walking out of the room like he hasn’t just sent my universe spinning out of control.

I try to inhale a calming breath, but all I can manage is a few short intakes that sound like I’m fighting off a panic attack.

Maybe I am.

My head is spinning. My heart is racing. I feel like I want to puke.

Is that a panic attack?

Crap! What the hell am I going to do?

UNFAIR ASSUMPTIONS



DANTE

SPENDING a lazy day wandering around town with my friends is just what I needed. We don't play Saturday morning sport like most of the school, so it frees us up to hang without worrying about bumping into jerks like Ronan or Gabe. They're busy getting muddied up on the rugby field while we saunter down the Cambridge streets.

Trixi's lamenting all the things she can't afford to buy while Alexia rolls her eyes and tells her to stop being so girly. This makes Arlo laugh while Tobias swings his arm around Trixi's shoulders and plays his best friend card like a pro.

He's kind of into fashion himself and understands what she's going through. He'd probably buy up half the street if he could. I'm pretty sure he wants to be a designer when he leaves school. I hope he can get in somewhere. I hope that for all of us.

It's not like any of us have the means to pay our way, so we're all relying on getting financial support or winning a scholarship to wherever we want to go after high school. There are no guarantees, and it makes me nervous. I can't waste my chance here at Haven Academy, just like I can't get to the end of high school and have no place to go.

I will *not* turn out like my mother. I have no idea who my dad is, and I never will. My mother doesn't even know the guy, so I can't track him down.

There are no grandparents, no aunts, uncles, nothing. It's always just been me and her, and I will do everything in my power not to end up like the deadbeat she's become.

I mean, she's trying, I guess, but still. I want a life. A decent one.

And I have no idea how I'm going to get it.

"You okay, man?" Maverick nudges me with his elbow. "You've got your dark face on."

"Sorry," I mutter, shaking my head. "Just thinking."

"Don't go doing that." He snickers. "Not on a sunny Saturday. That's just wrong."

I grin and snatch the bag of chips out of his hand, stealing a few before giving it back to him. He's right. I can't go getting all morose and worried about the future when it's still a year and a half away.

Be in the moment, Dante. That's what Sully is always telling me to do.

Trying to step out from under the cloud that's hanging over me, I look down the street and spot the gym Jack works at. Jack is Miss Fillion's boyfriend, and he helped us choreograph most of the performance for our first DanceMania competition.

"Think he's running a dance class this morning?" I point across the street.

Everyone turns to look, and instant smiles start appearing.

"Hell yeah! Let's go!" Alexia darts across the road, not even bothering to check traffic.

"Careful!" I shout at her, but she just laughs and keeps running.

We follow her and pile into Body Health. The lady behind the desk gives us a surprised blink until Maverick steps up to the counter.

"Hey." He raises his chin. "Is Jack doing any dance classes today?"

“Ye-ah.” She draws out the word, eyeing us up like we’re trouble.

I cross my arms, instantly irritated. People never just look at us and see a bunch of happy teenagers. We’re always trouble, and it pisses me off.

“It’s already kind of full this morning.” She puts on a polite smile.

“We know Jack. I’m sure he’ll make room for us.” I step up beside my friend, resting my hand on the counter.

“It’s ten dollars a session, and I don’t know if there is room, actually.” She gives me a pointed look and moves around the counter. “But I will go and ask.”

I huff as she walks off, sharing an irritated frown with Maverick.

Arlo slaps me on the shoulder. “Chill, man. It’s Jack. He’ll let us in.”

Arlo’s always so positive and upbeat about this stuff. It takes a lot to faze the guy. I wish I could be more like that.

Instead I’m standing here just waiting to be kicked out.

“Hey! It’s the Misfits crew!” Jack’s voice booms across the gym, drawing everyone’s attention. Heads swivel our way as ripped guys with dumbbells pause their sets to take a quick look, and the lady on the exercise ball stops her sit-ups to peek at our motley gang.

I can’t help a grin as Jack walks toward us with open arms and a huge smile. “What are you guys doing here?”

“Just hanging.” Maverick gives him a handshake that turns into a shoulder-slapping hug. “Thought we’d come check out your dance skills.”

He laughs. “Of course you can. Come on.”

The lady beside him clears her throat.

“Don’t sweat it, Suze. These guys are gonna help me out today.” He winks at her, and we trail after him.

I flash her a smug grin, and she tips her head at me, her droll look making me snicker.

Jack's the best.

When Miss Fillion first brought him along to help her with our dance class, I immediately assumed he'd be a douche. But he turned out to be a total dude, and thanks to him, we placed third in the competition and got automatic entry into the next round. That's coming up in Term Three, and we've already started preparing for it. Miss Fillion wants it to be sensational, and we're trying to think of different things we can add to really make us stand out.

"Everyone, I'd like to introduce you to the Haven Academy Misfits." Jack gets all eyes on us, and we stand in a line, giving the class awkward smiles and waves. "These guys placed at the DanceMania competition earlier this year, and they're gonna help me out with the session today. So, find yourself a spot, and let's get started."

I move to the back corner while Maverick takes a place near the front with Alexia. Trixi and Tobias end up near the middle, and Arlo swaggers across the room, taking up post next to a hot brunette with a flirtatious smile.

Oh yeah, he's gonna have a fun session.

I grin, my smile growing even wider as soon as the music kicks in. The steps are simple enough, Jack calling out the moves while we all work up a decent sweat. At one point he beckons Maverick up to the front with him, and my best friend pulls off a couple sweet moves that has the room cheering for him.

Damn, that feels good.

The look on Mav's face is freaking triumphant, and he deserves it. After all the shit he's had to put up with this year, it's nice to see him get a chance to shine. We all deserve it. People are always assuming the worst about us, and I love sticking it in their faces and proving them wrong.

Wiping an arm across my brow, I dip into an easy move as "Replay" by Iyaz starts up. It's an easier number, the beat

slowing down so we can try out some smooth steps, my body turning to liquid as I adapt Jack's instructions and add in a little something of my own.

The girl beside me tips back, nearly falling over while she tries to copy Jack and Maverick. I steady her arm and grin, showing her how to pull off the move without falling over. She thanks me and then quickly catches up with everybody.

Again, I show her how to do the next move, and she nods, trying again and pulling off a sweet twist.

"Nice." I grin and give her a thumbs-up, which makes her blush.

I swallow and shuffle a little closer to the door. I'm not here to flirt with her. Unlike Arlo, who is taking full advantage of the fact that he's a freaking good dancer. The girl beside him is giggling and purposefully falling against him any chance she can get.

I roll my eyes, and when the song comes to an end, I slip out the side door. I need a glass of water. Heading to the water cooler near the front, I try to avoid the woman behind the desk, but I can feel her eyes on me the whole time.

Gulping back the icy cold liquid, I make sure I throw the cup away so she can't go complaining about me. I even give her a polite smile, but it drops off my face the second I spot something out the large window. Staring past the row of treadmills, I see Selah shuffling along the street.

No, not shuffling, pacing. Her long hair billows in the wind, and the look on her face is a heartbreaker. I have no idea what's got her so upset, but like hell I'm ignoring it.

Spinning for the front door, I bolt outside and walk toward her.

A SERIOUS CASE OF FOG IN THE
LUNGS



SELAH

“SELAH!”

I jerk as soon as I hear my name, glancing up and wanting to shrivel into an invisible ball the second I spot Dante.

No, no, no!

My stomach twists into a tight knot. He looks worried, and he’s going to ask what’s wrong, and then I’ll have to explain myself and...

“Hey.” His smile is soft and sweet, and he’s so freaking hot. Good-looking. Handsome.

I stare at him, having no idea how I’m going to open my mouth and actually form words.

And then my phone rings.

It vibrates in my hand, and I glance down at the screen, my stomach unraveling and turning to a liquid goo.

“Mum.” I whisper her name under my breath.

“That’s okay. You take it.” Dante smiles at me again. His kind eyes are so sweet as he steps back to give me a little privacy.

Great. Now I feel like I have to take the call.

With a quiet tut, I slide my thumb across the screen and lift it to my ear. “Hi, Mum.”

“How did the dance session go?”

I wince and rub my forehead, scrambling for a good excuse. Dante’s watching me. I can feel it. I steal a quick glance at his face and try to force a smile, but that just makes his expression buckle. He looks really worried.

Is that for me?

I swallow and turn my back to him. “Um... good.”

“Is Clinton helping you tighten up those steps? I know you’ve been struggling with the double reverse spin.”

“I’m getting there.” I nod, my heart starting to pound as I lick my lips and try to form the words I know I’m supposed to.

He dumped me. He’s dancing with his girlfriend instead. I don’t have a partner anymore.

But all I can imagine is her reaction to those words, and I can’t say them. She’ll freak out. She’ll be angry with Clinton. She’ll be annoyed with me that I couldn’t hold on to him, that I didn’t argue and fight to keep him.

Then she’ll call her sister and demand her nephew stop being so selfish. It’ll cause tension, strife. I—

“Well, that’s good. You just keep working on it. Maybe you guys will place this year. Wouldn’t that be fun?” Her voice is stretched tight with strained hope.

Shiloh used to place every year.

I’ve never placed.

I don’t win things like this because I’m just not very good. Yet still I have to compete. Because I’m a Dixon, and Dixons ballroom dance. Apparently.

“Yeah, I... I’ve been working really hard. But you know, Mum...” The words freeze in my mouth. I stretch my lips apart, trying to get out the truth but it’s stuck.

Breaths punch out of me, fast and erratic.

“What is it, honey?”

I rub my forehead, the air in my lungs feeling like fog. It’s hard to breathe, let alone speak.

Do it, Selah!

“I-I was just wondering if I should bother... competing. I never do that well, and I—”

“Oh, stop talking nonsense,” Mum cuts me off. “It’s just nerves. You get them every year, and every year you overcome them.” She sighs. “I was hoping they’d lessen with time, but you’re obviously not wired that way. It’ll be fine, sweetheart. Stop worrying so much. You just keep practicing and you’ll shine like the star I know you can be.”

I cringe, hating it when she uses sweeping statements like that. I’m no star. I never will be. Shiloh was her star. I’m just... I’m...

Shaking my head, I fight a sudden onset of tears, pursing my lips and begging them not to start leaking out of my eyes.

Dante is shuffling behind me, and I can’t help glancing over my shoulder again. He gives me a sweet smile, one of those gentle, closed-mouth ones, but it just makes me want to cry even more.

I dip my head and mumble, “Mum, I have to go.”

“Okay. Well, just keep me posted on your progress.”

“Yep. Okay.”

“Love you.”

“You too.” I hang up, pressing the phone into my stomach and closing my eyes.

I didn’t tell her.

Which means you still have time to find someone else.

Clinton said he’d ask some of his dancing contacts.

Ugh. The idea of having to fumble my way across a dance floor with a perfect stranger is—

“Are you okay?” Dante’s voice is soft and gentle, like he’s trying to coax a scared puppy out from behind a couch.

I slowly spin to face him, and the second I drink in his sweet expression, my eyes start to water. Much to my horror, the first tear slides free. I brush it away before it reaches my nose, but that doesn’t stop the ones leaking from my other eye.

Pull it together, Selah!

I sniff and try to rein it all in, but Dante is still watching me like he actually cares about why I’m crying, and I’m not used to such open concern.

Most people avoid eye contact, shooting pitiful looks my way.

Dante’s standing there staring at me like he’ll do anything to solve my problem.

A SNAIL ON THE PARK BENCH



DANTE

OH CRAP, she's crying.

I wince, hating that sad look on her face.

I was doing my best not to listen in on the phone call, but whatever Selah was trying to say to her mother, she couldn't do it.

Something bad happened today, and I want to help.

I'm desperate to help.

Stepping a little closer, I shove my hands in my pockets and wish I had a tissue or something I could give her.

"Do you want to sit?" I point at the park bench behind me, and she nods, shuffling over to it and taking a seat on the end. The sun is pouring over us. The sky is so blue and cloudless, it looks like it goes on forever. It's the perfect winter day to sit on a park bench and enjoy watching the world go by.

Unless you're struggling with some kind of crisis, of course.

Which Selah so obviously is.

The second her butt hits the wood she curls in on herself. I swear, if she was an animal, she'd be a cute little snail, coiling into her shell and trying to hide from the world.

I get it. I feel that way sometimes too.

I take a seat beside her, resting my arm across the back of the bench and lightly touching her shoulder. She flinches, and I move my hand away, but then she kind of leans toward me, so I place my hand back on the wood, my thumb tucked just behind her shoulder.

“Not to state the obvious, but... you seem upset.” I try to keep my voice quiet and smooth, the way I do with Mum when she’s having a bad day.

Except this isn’t Mum losing her shit.

This is Selah looking sad.

Both scenarios break my heart, but in slightly different ways.

Licking my lips, I shuffle a little closer and softly ask, “Is there anything I can do to help?”

Selah lets out a scoffing laugh and shakes her head. Swiping the tears off her cheeks, she holds up her phone and frowns at the screen. “That was my mum.”

“Do you guys... not get along?”

“She’s okay. As far as mums go, I’m sure she’s not the worst. She’s... she’s a good mum.” Selah nods like she’s trying to convince herself that this is true.

“You don’t look like you agree with what you’re saying.”

She lets out a short, self-deprecating laugh. “She *is* a good mum. I love her. It’s just... well... there’s this ballroom competition that my parents organize and host every year. It means the world to her, and... she always wants me to participate. I have to dance because I’m their daughter, and there’s just so much pressure.” She makes a face. “I really hate it.”

“So, you’re trying to get out of it?”

Selah nods, then shakes her head and shrugs again.

“If you hate it so much, you should tell her.”

“I can’t.” She sniffs. “It’d break her heart. I won’t do that to her.”

“Okay.” I nod. “I get that.”

She slashes another tear off her face and sniffs, staring across the street. Her arms are crossed tight over her body now, like she’s trying to keep it all in. The tension radiating off her hits me in waves, and I swear her ligaments are going to start snapping if she doesn’t relax. I want to tell her to take a breath, but it makes me want to punch something when people say that shit to me when I’m riled.

So I take a different tack. “Why do you hate dancing so much?”

She scoffs. “Because it sucks. *I* suck. And I have to go up there, and everyone’s watching me and judging me, and the expectations are so high. It freaks me out, and I always do so badly. The only reason I ever get through it is because my partner’s good and he carries us.”

“Okay. Well, he’ll be able to do that again this year, right?”

“No.” Her expression crumples, and she covers her eyes with her hand. Her long fingers tremble as she grips her face and starts crying in earnest.

“Hey.” I touch her shoulder again, smoothing my hand across her jacket and lightly squeezing the back of her neck. “What is it?”

“He just dumped me,” she squeaks. “He wants to dance with his girlfriend this year, and now I have no one, and the competition is in less than two months.” She sucks in a breath and then blubbers, “And now I have to find a new partner, and I should have told my mum, but I couldn’t because she’ll freak out. And then she’ll be mad at me and then Clinton, and then she’ll go into a frenzy trying to make sure I’m able to compete. I don’t want to dance with a stranger. Dancing with my cousin was bad enough—how am I supposed to survive someone I don’t even know?” She turns to me, desperation making her almost unrecognizable. “I stand on toes. I fumble my steps. I’m not good. My new partner will hate me, and I can’t do it.”

She’s working herself into a right panic.

I rub my hand down her shoulder, giving it a light squeeze. “Selah. It’s gonna be okay.”

“How?” she snaps. “How is this possibly going to be okay?”

I’ve never seen her green eyes so bright and vibrant. Staring into them, I say the only thing I can. “Because I’m gonna be your partner.”

HE'LL DO WHATEVER IT TAKES



SELAH

HIS WORDS TRIP ME UP, and I blink, jolting back from him with a soft gasp. His hand slips off my shoulder, and I immediately miss the connection, but... what now?

What did he just say?

He's gonna what?

"I mean..." His confident expression starts to wane. "Only if you want me to."

I swallow, trying to find my voice, but it seems to have gone into hiding.

I hate it when it does that.

Licking my lips, I clear my throat and try to find it.

"Um..." I rasp, then let out a soft breath. "Do you know how to ballroom dance?"

"Well, no, but I'm sure you could teach me."

How cute is his smile right now?

I want to say yes. It would solve all my problems, although my parents would probably be horrified if they knew I was recruiting a complete novice. Like *I'm* good enough to teach someone else. And what would they think if I started working with a Misfit? After everything Shiloh went through, they're

pretty protective of me and who I hang out with. That's why they sent me to Haven Academy in the first place.

But Dante's not bad. I mean, sure, he gets into trouble for arguing with teachers and stuff... and he hangs out with Maverick, who sometimes gets into fights, but... he's not a bad person. He won't lead me astray, will he?

I swallow and try to capture some of the wild thoughts flying through my brain.

The loudest one comes back to me with a sharp whack to the temple. "I'm not very good. I don't think I could teach you. I mean—

"I'm a quick study," he cuts me off with a smile that makes my heart melt. "And I'm sure you're better than you think you are."

"No." I shake my head, trying not to be so affected by his sweet words.

"I'll work hard." He tips his head, and now I'm falling in love with that kind look on his face.

Selah, stop it! Get a hold of yourself.

"Give me one week, and if you still don't think I can learn fast enough, I'll help you find someone else. I'll do whatever it is you need me to do. Whatever it is that will make this okay for you."

I drink in his expression and believe every word he's saying to me.

I can't believe he's doing this.

Why would he want to help me?

He's a nice guy. He helps everyone.

I sniff, wiping a hand over my face and fighting a smile. Could this work?

Could my problems be solved?

Probably not, but the idea of dancing with sweet Dante Arden over a total stranger is kind of comforting.

I should say yes.

I'd be a fool not to.

Nerves scatter through me as I suck in a breath and try to find my voice again.

“One week,” Dante repeats his offer.

And I start to nod. “Okay.”

A smile stretches across his face, and it fills my chest with sunshine. Before I know it, I'm smiling, too, and then I let out this goofy laugh that's downright embarrassing.

Clamping my lips together, I look down, and my heart melts all over again when Dante lightly tucks my hair behind my shoulder. I could get used to his soft touches.

A happy little zing tickles my stomach as I fast-forward to our first dance session and what it'll be like to stand close to him, holding his hand and spinning around the floor in his arms.

THREE BASIC STEPS AND A WHOLE LOT OF RULES



DANTE

I HEAD to the dance studio the next day. Because I know Selah's such a private person—you don't have to be Einstein to figure that one out—I don't tell my friends what I'm up to.

Instead, I just kind of slip away. I do that sometimes, so it won't totally surprise them.

They always come looking for me eventually and, more often than not, find me holed up in my room reading a book or watching a movie on my laptop.

But not today.

I doubt they'll even be able to find me today because the dance studio is most definitely out-of-bounds without a teacher present. I mean, sure, we sneak down here sometimes after school when the buildings are already unlocked, but on the weekends, the place is sealed up tight with alarms set to blast if we try to break in.

Because Selah's parents funded the building, she's been allowed a key and alarm code, so I'm meeting her there, and all I can hope is that no one will see me sneaking in.

I play it extra safe, checking my six and scanning the area before slipping through the door, which she left unlocked for me.

We probably could have walked over here together, but that would have drawn a lot of eyes and started up a bunch of rumors that will stress her out. She's probably spent the night freaking out over her decision to let me in. I don't know why she's so twitchy and nervous around people, but I'm hoping to change that. For me, at least.

I want her to feel comfortable—like she can smile and laugh and be herself around me.

I'm not sure what's driving me, to be honest.

I did love the sound of her laugh yesterday and the way she clamped her mouth shut after it popped out. She looked kind of embarrassed, and it was adorable. There's more to her than she lets people see, and I want to be let into the Selah Club. I think I'm gonna like it there.

Trotting down the stairs, I whip around the corner and head to the room that I initially hated and quickly grew to love. When I first found out we were being lumped into a dance class, I was insulted. The teachers couldn't be bothered having us in their classes, so we get formed into some lame-ass dance group?

How was I ever supposed to get ahead when I wasn't being given the chance to learn?

But it's turned out to be a good thing. Miss Fillion is awesome. Dance class is my favorite, and now our group of Misfits is closer than ever. Plus, I'm not falling too far behind. Miss Fillion and Miss Tomes are making sure I'm not missing out on anything, and I've been doing a few extra assignments for homework and during free period so I can get the credits I need. I've already been told that I can skip out on dance next year to free up my timetable for other classes, but I'm not sure I want to do that yet. It's been a pretty special experience so far.

Easing the door open, I slip into the dimly lit room and spot Selah on the other side, standing in front of the floor-to-ceiling mirror and gazing at her reflection.

“Hey,” I greet her softly, flicking on the lights so I can see her properly.

She spins with a gasp. “You can leave those off.”

“Why?”

“Um, I just... don’t want people to know we’re in here.”

I let out a soft snicker and shake my head. “I doubt anyone is going to be looking for us here. This building is out-of-bounds. Plus it’s sunny outside, so the lights on in here shouldn’t draw any attention. Besides”—I shrug—“I want to be able to see you.”

Her lips flash a quick smile before she dips her head and hides it from me.

My footsteps echo across the wood floor as I make my way toward her. They sound like an ominous clock ticking down, and my heart beats faster the closer I get to her.

What’s this going to be like?

Will I seriously be able to help her?

Stopping a few feet away, I take in a breath, then try to break some of the tension that grew in my walk from the door. “So... Miss Dixon... you ready to teach me a few moves?”

Her laughter is a soft breath, and she glances up at me with a smile that’s more of a grimace.

“You can do it,” I remind her.

She doesn’t look convinced.

“You ever seen *Dirty Dancing*?”

“Of course I have.”

“Well, if Johnny can teach Baby how to dance, then you can definitely teach me. I know I need to stand like this, right?” I hold my arms out in a ballroom dancing pose, lifting my chin and trying to play the part.

She grins, then bites her lips together and moves toward me. Adjusting my elbow, she then pulls my shoulders back and murmurs softly, “Straighten your back, and lock your arm

here.” Her fingers brush my chin, adjusting the tilt of my head. Her hands are cold. I wish I could grab them and start warming them up for her.

“Okay,” she whispers. “And I step in here.” She takes up position in front of me, her fingers folding over my hand while her other hand rests behind my shoulder. “Your arm needs to move up here.” She adjusts my hand behind her back, moving it up to rest just beneath her shoulder blades. “Good. Okay. Okay. Um...” Her breath whistles between us, and I can’t help a smile.

“Relax. You’re doing great.”

She gives me a droll look that tells me she doesn’t think she is, but it just makes my smile grow even wider.

Biting her lip, she looks down and mumbles, “So we’ll start with a basic waltz.” Her eyes bulge as she’s obviously just thought of something, and she steps away from me. “I should go over the rules first. That’s important, right?”

“The rules?”

“Yes. Competitions like this have very strict rules.” She starts rattling them off, and I’m impressed she knows them all by heart. I’m guessing her family has been involved with this Enchanted Ball thingy for years now.

“So, we’ll be doing a waltz and a cha-cha.” She lifts a finger for each dance and then continues talking in high speed, telling me stuff I don’t even understand.

I raise my hands to get her attention, and she stops midsentence, biting her lips together.

“Why don’t you teach me how to dance first, and I can learn the rest of the rules along the way. I’m struggling to process everything you’re saying, and I’ll probably have a better chance if I know what I’m doing first.”

Her cheeks tinge pink and she nods, looking to her feet.

“Come on,” I murmur with a grin. “Let’s dance, chica.”

Her green gaze darts up to mine, and I step back into the position I had before, remembering to lift my elbow and

straighten my back.

“That’s good,” she mumbles, stepping up to me. Her arm comes around my shoulder, and I adjust my hand on her back. “Good.” She nods, her smile kind of twitchy. “So it’s three beats, three steps. One, two, three. One, two, three.”

“Okay.” I nod, counting along with her until I pick up the rhythm.

“We’ll start with a basic box step. You’ll be leading, so, with your right foot—I mean your left. Your left. Your left foot comes forward, and I go back.”

I do as she tells me, and she smiles. “Good. Then you step sideways with your right and then together. Good. Then it’s back with the right, step with the left, together.”

I follow her simple instructions, and we practice this box move a few times. I like the way it flows, and I can imagine music swirling around us.

“That’s good. Remember to kind of float over the floor and slide your foot rather than completely lifting it when you do the side step. You want it to be as smooth as possible.”

I follow her instructions until she gives me a blinking smile. “That’s perfect. Wow. You’re... you’re picking this up really fast.”

“Thanks.” I grin, resisting the urge to tell her not to look so surprised.

She dips her head, flicking her ponytail over her shoulder before clearing her throat and taking up position in front of me again.

“So, we obviously can’t just box step in one place the entire time, so let me teach you how to turn. There’ll be other dancers on the floor with us, and we have to avoid crashing into them.”

She talks me through a turn, which is pretty simple.

“Got it.” I gently glide us in a different direction, smoothly turning past the mirrors and back to where we started. I keep my head up the way she instructed me to even though I’d

much rather look her in the eye. But I want to get this right as quickly as I can.

I want her to relax and realize that me being her dance partner is a good solution.

After a few more practices of the turn, I ask, “Are there other moves as well?”

“Yeah.” She nods, pulling us to a stop and scratching her forehead. “The three basic steps are the box, the progressive basic, and the closed twinkle.”

I snicker at the funny name, and she blinks in surprise, then starts to smile. “I know. Dance moves always have the stupidest names.” Then she laughs, and the sound is a light song that fills the space between us.

Her shoulders relax; I watch them drop as she pulls in a breath and grins at me. “Want to learn them?”

“Of course.” I stretch my arms, and she moves back in front of me, talking me through the steps. They’re easy to pick up, probably because we’re dancing at the speed of snails right now. But I’m happy to take it slow.

We go through the combinations a few times.

“So, the man leads, and if it was just dancing, he’d need to let his partner know what he’s planning to do next without actually saying anything.” Her green eyes find mine, and I hold her gaze. “So, um, so Clinton would put a little pressure on my back when he wanted to move into the progressive step and then turn his head slightly when he’s moving into a closed twinkle.”

I nod, and we try it out.

Thankfully, I’m killing this session, and I can sense her relief that I’m not a total screw-up.

“That was good.” She steps away from me. “But, uh... because this is a competition, I’d feel way better if we can choreograph the entire thing, and that way we both know what’s coming. I know you have to be a little bit flexible, because there are other dancers on the floor, but... I would feel

more confident if we could have our sequence down pat, you know what I mean?”

I nod and cross my arms. “Sure. Do you already have something in mind, or...?”

“Kind of. I mean, Clinton used to plan to some degree and let the rest flow. We’d run through all the steps he might do, and then I just had to be hyperaware of which ones he was going to lead me into.”

“But you’d feel better if you knew in advance.”

She nods, obviously relieved that I’m not fighting her on this.

“Okay, well, you just tell me what you want, and we’ll make it happen.”

“O-Okay. Yeah. I can, um... I can do that.” Her voice disappears at the end, and I only just catch what she says.

Aw, she doesn’t think she can teach me.

“Let’s not stress too much about that yet.” I try to ease her stress. “We’ve got time, right?”

She nods and starts chewing her bottom lip.

“For now, why don’t we try with some music?”

“Okay.” Her head bobs, and she moves to Miss Fillion’s desk, grabbing her phone and selecting a piece of classical music.

“Blue Danube,” she murmurs. “My favorite.”

The song starts feather soft, slowly building. She takes up position in front of me, pulling her shoulders back and making sure her stance is statue-like.

“Straighten up,” she murmurs. “Good. Here we go. One, two, three. One, two, three.” She counts me in, and I make my first move, leading her in the simple box step.

It’s fun with music, although this song is kind of fast, and we’re soon fumbling and apologizing to each other.

“Oh, sorry!” she whines after stepping on my toes.

“That’s okay.”

“No, it’s not okay.” She pulls away from me and hurries back to her phone, killing the music. A sad silence settles around us, and I can feel her panic rising.

She thinks this is going to be a bust.

She thinks she can’t do it. She thinks *I* can’t do it.

And I’m about to prove her wrong.

“Can I borrow your phone for a sec?”

“Huh?”

“Your phone.” I reach out for it, giving her a gentle smile while I quickly Google *slow waltz songs*. The first song I recognize the title of is “Moon River.” I don’t even know how I know it, but I search it on Spotify and find an acoustic version that’s soft, mellow, and, most importantly, slow.

Selah watches me with a confused frown as I lay the phone down and step toward her. “Let’s do this.”

Her forehead bunches even more. “It’s not really a waltz song.”

“It’s three-four time, and it’s slow and easy. And who says we have to dance to classical music?”

“Um... for this round? It’ll be classical, guaranteed.”

“Okay.” I nod, then grin. “But who says *we* can’t dance to this song, right here, right now? Come on.” I beckon her into my space with a little flick of my fingers.

After a hesitation that’s long and, yes, just a little painful, she finally gives in, placing her hand in mine and letting me slowly lead her across the dance floor.

I pull off the moves with ease, the slower beat helping me along as we float across the floor.

“We’re like Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers.” I grin.

Selah dips her head, her soft giggle making me feel like the man. We keep time the entire way and don’t fumble once. Man, I’m tempted to pull her a little closer. Wouldn’t it be nice

to have her body pressed against mine? We could nestle our cheeks against each other and just sway to this song.

But that's not what this moment is about.

I'm helping her so she can do this competition for her parents.

I won't let her down.

Turning into a closed twinkle, she follows me, and we're back to floating across the floor. The song fades and we stop, staring at each other for a breathless beat.

"We'll get there," I rasp. "A little more practice and we can totally pull off those faster songs."

"I wish they were all as slow as this one."

I drink in her sweet smile—so shy and uncertain. "Want to try another one?"

"Okay." She nods and lets me pick another song.

One of the first on the search list is an Oasis song I don't know, but I love the title—"You've Got the Heart of a Star."

I press Play, pull Selah into my arms and start to dance before she can even react to the music. After a few box steps, I start to improvise, throwing in a spin that surprises her at first. She fumbles through it, then laughs as I catch her again, moving back into a box step. Free-forming is fun, so I do it again, and she relaxes into the next turn.

She looks surprised when we pull it off without fumbling it, and I smile at her adorable expression.

"These aren't technically the proper steps," she murmurs.

"Yeah, but we're having fun, right?"

She blinks and eventually nods, then starts to smile. It's like she's not used to smiling this much, and I kind of want to make her smile for the rest of the day, but tension is creeping back in, and I can't seem to counter it.

"What's the matter?" I eventually pull us to a stop.

She sighs. “I have to teach you the proper steps. It’s not about having fun. It’s about getting it right.”

“Can’t we do both?”

By the expression on her face right now, the thought has obviously never occurred to her.

I snicker and run a hand through my hair. “I think we can do both.”

“But we have to get it right. The pressure is huge, Dante. This can’t just be us messing around for fun. My parents are going to be livid when they find out Clinton dumped me, and the only way I can smooth this over is if I find someone as good as him.” Her green eyes flash with panic, and I take her hand before her chest starts heaving.

“Hey, it’s okay. I don’t know Clinton, but I know me, and I can be one determined, stubborn ass if I put my mind to it. I won’t let you down. I promise. I’m gonna work hard and do the steps you tell me to. Don’t stress.”

She frowns, resting her hand on her forehead and eventually nodding.

“What do you want to work on now?” I step over to her phone and pause the music. “You pick the song, you pick the moves. We’ll do whatever you want, okay?”

She stares at me, like she’s trying to figure out if I mean it.

Holding out her phone, I offer it up like an olive branch, and she’s just about to step toward me when the dance room door clicks open.

“There you are!” Alexia booms into the room. “We’ve been looking for you everywhere. What are you doing in here?”

Selah’s green gaze hits mine, her eyes rounding with pure fear. My heart starts to sink as Alexia is followed by Trixi, Tobias, and Arlo.

Great. How are we going to explain this away?

A FEISTY ALLEY CAT AND A TIMID
SNAIL



SELAH

MY HEART IS GOING to explode. I can feel the timer ticking down, each heartbeat getting a little faster as I await the inevitable.

Dante's going to tell his friends the truth, and I am going to implode, shame scorching me with such intense heat that I'll be a pile of ash on the floor any second now.

"Uh, hey, guys." Dante looks past my shoulder.

"I thought this area was out-of-bounds?" Tobias mumbles. "You little rule breakers."

I keep my eyes on Dante's chin. It seems a safe enough spot right now. I can tell that Tobias is surprised by the fact that I'm here.

With Dante.

Oh my gosh. What are they going to assume we were up to?

Could this get any worse?

"Surprised to see you here, bookworm." Alexia moves around Dante so she can see my face.

Confirming that yes, it can get worse.

I squirm in my shoes, gripping the sides of my jeans and not knowing where to look.

“Seriously, Dante, what are you guys doing in here? How did you even get in?”

“The same way you did.” He shrugs while I rub my sweaty palms together. I should have made him lock the door behind him. Why didn’t I do that?

Because he needs a key, dummy. And you’re the only person who has one!

“Yeah. Kind of bizarre it was unlocked already. Mr. McTavish is gonna get told off tomorrow,” Trixi singsongs while Alexia starts scratching her chin.

“It’s weird, because he’s kind of anal about school lockups and stuff.”

I avert my gaze, hoping Alexia can’t smell panic.

“Something must have been distracting him on Friday afternoon.” Tobias shrugs, then turns back to Dante, his eyes flicking over me first. “Seriously, though, man. You’re lucky he forgot to alarm the place. You would get in so much trouble for being down here.”

“So why the hell are you down here, then?” Dante’s right eyebrow arches as he crosses his arms.

He probably has zero idea how sexy he looks when he does that.

Sexy? Selah! Shut up!

Alexia snickers and shares a look with Arlo, who’s rubbing the back of his neck.

“What?” Dante’s eyes narrow while Alexia rolls hers.

“Arlo tracked your phone and saw you were in here. So, we decided to investigate.”

“You tracked my phone?” Dante tuts.

“We didn’t know where you were!” Arlo flings his arms wide. “And you weren’t answering my texts, man. Usually

when you want to go dark, you tell me to piss off, but you weren't giving me anything, so I had to come looking for you."

"And we were bored, so we tagged along for the ride." Alexia crosses her arms and matches Dante's pointed look. "Now, stop avoiding the question and tell us why you're down here."

Dante sighs and finally answers the feisty blonde. "We just needed a private space."

"To do what?" Alexia's sharp features lift into a quizzical smirk, and my insides start shriveling.

"To... teach Selah some fighting moves. It's not like we can do it anywhere near the boardinghouse. She's a private person and doesn't want an audience for this kind of thing."

I blink, surprised by the lie and how easily it falls out of Dante's mouth.

But Alexia's looking impressed right now. She's looking like this is a good idea and—

Wait a second. Fighting moves?

What's he talking about?

"Nice." Alexia smirks again, nodding and then turning to me. "So, what's he shown you so far?"

I bulge my eyes at him, a silent plea for help.

His lips twitch, and he quickly mouths, "Punching" before Alexia turns to glance at him.

I make two fists and hold them up, trying to picture fight scenes from movies and how the actors stood. I bounce on my toes a little, feeling like an idiot until Alexia steps up, eyeing me critically and correcting my stance.

"Good." She nods. "Show me one."

I give her a hesitant glance, then throw a punch into the air and score a snicker that tells me I'm pitiful.

Dante frowns and nudges Alexia in the shoulder. “Be nice. We’re here to help her, remember?”

Now it’s my turn to frown. Have they been talking about me?

Why do they think I need help?

Guilt flashes across Dante’s face as he rushes to explain, “We just want you to be safe. To be able to defend yourself if douchebag idiots try to intimidate you when we’re not around.”

Arlo steps up, crossing his arms and making me feel small and stick-like next to his shapely muscles. “You can do it. Alexia’s like an alley cat, and she’s got some sweet moves. We’ll make sure you’re like the karate kid before we’re done with you.”

“Um... I’m not sure I want to be a karate kid,” I whisper. My voice is running into hiding. I can feel it escaping down my throat.

“But you want to be able to look after yourself, don’t you?” Alexia snatches my arm, forcing me to face her. “Now, when you punch, it’s got to come through your whole body. You get your power from your hips, and that travels through your body so your fist is like this explosion when it connects. Like this...” She shows me, and I study her body as she explains it all again. She does it in slow motion so I can really see the movement.

“How do you know this stuff?” I ask.

Her expression hardens, making her even scarier than she normally is.

I share a quick look with Dante, who glances to the ground when Alexia finally mutters, “Necessity.”

That one word weighs a ton. I catch Alexia’s gaze for a fleeting moment before she turns away and barks, “Show me.”

“Um...” Licking my lips, I swallow, then try to copy her stance, powering the energy through my hips and then into my fist. “Good. Again.”

She turns into a drill sergeant, forcing me through a bunch of moves, and I'm soon working up a sweat as I punch air and duck imaginary attacks. It helps that everyone gets into it as well, and we're all following Alexia's lead, fighting invisible assailants.

It's actually kind of fun.

And, okay, a little empowering.

I'm better at this than I thought I could be. It helps that Dante keeps telling me I'm doing great, and then Alexia agrees with him.

She agrees with him!

No one ever thinks I'm great at anything.

Alexia brings the session to a stop, then runs me through a few scenarios. Arlo has to pretend to be a bad guy, and then Tobias takes his turn. Alexia talks me through what I'd do if I'm attacked from behind, then in front. I'm careful not to actually hurt anyone, but Alexia keeps reminding me that if I'm ever really in this situation, then I should go for it and inflict as much pain as possible.

I frown, not liking that idea.

"Come on." She tips her head. "If Ronan comes at you the way he did Londyn, wouldn't you like the satisfaction of making him bleed?"

I flinch and cross my arms. "Londyn pushed him away and slapped him... And he just slapped her right back."

"And then she kicked him in the shins and got away," Dante reminds me. "That's all we're trying to help you with. Give you a chance to get away before he hurts you."

"Why do you think he's going to hurt me?" I murmur, crossing my arms a little tighter.

"He might not," Trixi chirps. "It's just if he does, you'll know how to defend yourself and get somewhere safe."

"The way Gabe keeps glaring at you makes us all nervous. We can't shadow you every minute of the day, so you need to

know this stuff.” Tobias gives me a kind smile, and for some reason, I want to cry.

Blinking to counter the sting in my eyes, it takes me a minute to work out this emotion.

I’m being crazy! I shouldn’t want to cry when they’re acting like they care about me.

And that’s it.

That’s what’s throwing me.

They seem to care. About me. About my safety.

People at Haven Academy don’t do that.

“You okay?” Trixi tips her head, studying me.

“Yeah.” I sniff and start nodding. “Yeah, I just...” Shaking my head, I give up, knowing I’ll have no chance in hell of ever explaining myself to these people.

They have each other. They’re friends.

They don’t know what it’s like to be a total loner. To assume that no one genuinely cares about you.

They’re acting like my friends... and I haven’t had any of those since my sister lost the plot and inflicted a gaping wound that will never fully heal.

WEEDING OUT THE TRUTH



DANTE

“SO, SELAH’S WEIRD.” Alexia takes a seat beside me at the breakfast table.

I frown at my short friend, but she just laughs at me.

“Oh come on, you know I speak the truth. I thought she was going to cry yesterday when she asked us why we were helping her. What is up with that?” Her wild curls rustle as she shakes her head and starts adding stupid amounts of brown sugar to her porridge.

“What were you doing with Selah yesterday?” Maverick leans his elbows on the table. He’s sitting across from us, his ears obviously burning after Alexia’s unorthodox morning greeting.

“Well, while you were making out with your girlfriend, Dante was teaching Selah some fighting moves,” Alexia answers for me. “And he was doing a pretty crap job of it too. So, I stepped up. Did my thing.” Her shrug is meant to show humility, but we all know it’s fake.

She’s fiercely proud of the fact that her small body can take down a grown man.

At least she thinks it can. I’ve never actually seen her do it, I just know that for her own mental health, she needs to believe she can.

I give her a sideways glare and mutter, “Selah’s not weird. She just isn’t used to being around people.”

“She’s a boarding student at Haven Academy. She’s around people *all the time*.”

“No.” I shake my head. “She isolates herself all the time. Yesterday, you were forcing her to interact. It was probably super stressful for her.”

“Stressful enough to make her cry? We were being nice! Helping her out!”

“She didn’t actually cry, okay? Give her a break.” I pick up my toast and take a big bite, crumbs spilling over my chin as I rip the bread away from my mouth.

Maverick snickers, chewing his cereal and giving me a knowing look.

I warn him off with a glare, but he doesn’t let up. His eyebrows start wiggling as he teases me. “So, where were you and Selah practicing these epic fight moves?”

“The dance studio,” Alexia answers for me *again*. “I can’t believe Selah was willing to break the rules like that.”

“She wasn’t—” I nearly tell them all about Selah’s special permission but catch myself in the nick of time.

“I’ve spotted her down there before. She—”

I kick Maverick under the table before he can give away Selah’s secret. His words cut off with a hiss, and he glares at me. I bulge my eyes at him while Alexia looks between us.

“What?” she asks.

I shake my head and mumble, “Nothing.”

Her porridge quickly gets cold as she pushes her bowl away and leans her arms on the table. “Okay, what were you really doing down there yesterday?” Her pale blue eyes try to sear right through my skull. She wants to get inside my brain and watch every memory floating around up there.

But it’s not happening.

Selah would be mortified if I tell my friends she's teaching me to waltz.

"I've already told you," I grumble, focusing on my toast. I use my finger to spread the honey to the very corner of my next mouthful.

"Liar." She shakes her head at me. "You like this girl."

I shrug. "She's nice."

"N-o." Alexia draws out the word while Maverick leans a little farther over the table. "She's not just nice. You're throwing out some crush vibes, dude." Her face scrunches like this is the most bizarre thing ever. "I don't get it. She's such a weirdo. And she's like stupid rich."

"What's wrong with being stupid rich?"

"Do you really want to go there? Please. She was born with a silver spoon in her mouth, and those people are automatically douche because they have zero understanding of how the real world works. A crisis for them is a broken nail or the internet being down for a few hours. Or, in Selah's case, having to hold a conversation that involves more than two sentences strung together." Alexia shakes her head and mutters, "So weird."

"Would you stop calling her that?" I nudge her with a scowl. "She's not that weird. You just don't know her."

"And you do?"

"More than you." I give her a pointed look. "And teaching her how to fight was your idea."

"Which you took upon yourself without telling any of us."

"Because I knew it would embarrass her. She's a very private person." Without meaning to, I glance over my shoulder and quickly spot her.

I saw her the second I walked into the dining hall this morning. We shared a very brief look before she hid her fleeting smile behind a curtain of hair. She hasn't looked at me again since, and it was driving me so crazy that I chose to face

away from her so I wasn't tempted to try catching her eye every two seconds.

But here I am again, checking in to see what she's doing.

Her cereal bowl is empty, but she's so engrossed in her book, she hasn't moved to clean it up. She's always one of the last to leave the dining hall. Always has to be reminded to get her nose out of a book and get on with the day.

A soft, tingling sensation moves through my chest, and I turn back to my friends, dipping my chin so they won't spot my smile.

Okay, so maybe I do like her a little.

But it's not a big deal.

I'm just helping her out with this ballroom competition, not asking her to date me.

Clearing my throat, I shuffle in my seat and finish my toast, dodging smirks and glances from my friends who do their best to weed a little more truth out of me.

But they fail at every turn.

Like I told Selah, I can be a stubborn ass when I want to be.

BOOKS = HOME



SELAH

I CAN'T STOP HUMMING “Moon River,” and it’s really annoying.

And also kind of not.

Because it makes me think of yesterday and that beautiful moment before Dante’s friends barged in. Not that I minded the fight lessons. Although, I’ve got to say, the fact that they think I need them is really disconcerting.

But back to my warm fuzz... the dancing. Floating across the floor with Dante while “Moon River” played—that’s the fluffy, marshmallow stuff dreams are made of, and I want to wrap myself in that memory for the rest of the day.

“I’m crossing you in style,” I sing under my breath while I shelve the books Miss Tomes gave me.

She’s been in a super chipper mood today. I’ve heard this rumor that she’s dating Mr. McTavish. He’s our school caretaker and kind of scary. I couldn’t believe it when I first heard. Sweet Miss Tomes with that grumpy man?

But she’s been really smiley and happy... Maybe there’s more to the scary Scotsman than meets the eye.

I guess you can say that about a lot of people.

One look at the Misfits and all kinds of assumptions can be made. People think they’re trouble, that they don’t care about

anything.

But that's not true.

They cared enough about me to teach me how to defend myself.

My throat thickens like it does every time I think about it.

They care.

It's a weird thought. Most people avoid me like I'm a walking plague.

Or maybe you avoid them.

I wrinkle my nose and check the number on the back spine of the book, making sure I'm shelving it correctly. Slipping the book into place, I then head down the next aisle but stutter to a stop when I spot a girl dashing out of the back corner.

She speeds past me, smoothing down her hair and looking kind of flustered. Her cheeks are red, and there's this little smile curling the corners of her mouth.

When she spots me watching her, the impish expression morphs into a sharp frown. "What are you staring at?" she snips, then brushes past me, muttering, "Weirdo."

I turn my back, ignoring the sting. I'm used to it now. And like I always tell myself, it's better to be alone than caught up with a bunch of people who will only pull me into trouble.

Grabbing the next book, I grit my teeth and read the numbers on the spine, only to be interrupted by a movement to my right. My head jolts up, and I glance over in time to see Henry McDonald strutting out of the back corner. He's looking kind of smug, straightening his shirt, and my mind starts racing with what he might have been up to in that back corner of the library.

I narrow my eyes at him, and he does a double take when he spots me.

An arrogant sneer twists his face as he ambles up to me. I'm taller than him, and I know he hates that fact. Glaring at me, he makes me feel like a squishable bug.

Height means nothing when someone's firing daggers from their eyeballs.

"Hey, snitch. Or should I call you betrayer?"

I shrink away from his dark gaze.

"You think you did the right thing, don't you? All justified in trying to take down Ronan. But all you did was prove that you're not one of us. You chose the wrong side, you traitorous bitch. And we will never forget it."

His words are a sharp slap to the senses, and all I can do is stand there blinking at him. With a scathing huff, he walks away from me.

I stay put, hugging the stack of books to my chest and trying to breathe.

It's kind of hard.

I wish I was tough like Alexia. She would have put him in his place. She has the tongue of a viper.

But I'm not inclined that way.

Fear seems to be my first port of call for most things, which makes me feel pathetic.

It doesn't matter how many fighting lessons I take, I'll still be the scared, twitchy girl who freezes when faced with that kind of wrath and hatred.

I really did put a target on my back when I stood up for Maverick over Ronan. But it was the right thing to do!

And the Misfits are grateful.

But you'll never be one of them.

I shake my head, trying not to be bothered by that fact. I'm happy to be a lone island.

Or I was, at least.

Until I spent an afternoon teaching Dante how to waltz and then hung out with his friends. He's so close to them. They're like a little Misfits family.

And I'll never be able to be a part of that.

Books are my friends. My safe place. My home.

But they can't hold you. They can't smile at you and make you feel like you mean something to them.

I swallow, turning back to my job and shelving the rest of the books with robotic efficiency.

“Moon River” whistles through the back of my mind, but it’s quieter now, like the sound is floating away from me, never to return.

Reaching the end of the aisle, I pause and wonder if I should go check out that back corner. Henry and that girl must have gotten up to some mischief back there.

But I turn the other way.

Let them keep their secrets. I don’t want to know.

I don’t want to give them any more excuses to call me “snitch” or “bitch” or whatever other disgusting insults they’ve no doubt come up with.

Secrets.

They can be so dangerous.

When the truth comes out it’s so destructive and painful.

I think about my secret with Dante, and even though it makes me want to smile, it also scares me.

What will happen when the truth comes out?

It’ll have to at some point. If he does dance with me at the competition, my parents will see. They’ll know.

And to even get to the competition, we’ll have to tell Sully and Monica. People are going to find out the truth eventually. There’s no way around it.

Honestly, I’m not sure I can handle it.

So, where does that leave me?

Do I reject Dante’s help now, before things go too far?

But then you’ll have to tell your parents about Clinton.

I shudder, my body twitching as I try to walk calmly back to the front desk.

Okay, this is bad.

No matter what I do, I'll have to face the consequences. I guess I just have to decide which consequences are the worst and stick to the safest option.

WANT TO HAVE SOME FUN?



DANTE

SELAH'S LATE.

It's making me twitchy.

I don't know her that well yet, but I'm pretty sure she's the 'on time' type because she wouldn't want to draw attention to herself by bustling into a room after everybody else.

But she is only meeting with me right now, so maybe she's not so worried.

I don't know. Something's off.

The fact that she's not standing in the dance studio with me right now feels like an ominous sign.

We agreed to meet here for my next lesson.

So where is she?

Irritation ticks through me as I pace from the mirrors to the windows.

Has she chickened out on me?

A flare of disappointment cuts through my annoyance, but I try to ignore the sensation. I shouldn't really want to dance with her anyway. This should be a relief. I have better things to do with my time than help out the school weirdo.

She's not weird!

I stop short, resting my hands on the bar and frowning at my reflection.

Pulling my phone from my back pocket, I check the time again. Then, even though I don't have any notifications on my screen, I go into Messages anyway and make sure she hasn't left me one I've missed.

Nope.

Nada.

"Dammit," I mutter under my breath and go back to pacing.

The concert band is tuning up for their afternoon practice in the room next door. If Ms. Howlett finds me in here, she'll be pissed. I'll get a dressing-down, then sent away with either a warning or an actual consequence. I'm not in the mood for either scenario, and I'm this close to sneaking out of here when the door swings open.

"Finally," I murmur, willing my anger to dissipate, but the second I turn around it flares all over again. "What are you doing here?"

Maverick frowns at my snappy tone, instinctively moving in front of Londyn to create a barrier.

I roll my eyes and push away from the bar, stalking toward them. "You're not supposed to be down here."

"And neither are you," Maverick counters.

Londyn peeks her head around his arm and smiles at me. "We thought we'd sneak in a little dance practice. Nothing formal, just messing around. Is that why you're here? Because you're welcome to join us."

Maverick's eyebrows dent into a V as he looks down at his girlfriend. She smiles up at him, and his expression instantly melts to the gooey one reserved only for her. "I thought it was just gonna be us."

Her cheeks tinge pink, her eyes dipping to the floor as my mind conjures images of exactly what Maverick had in mind for their dance session.

“And I’m out.” Racing over to my bag, I hitch it onto my shoulder while Londyn makes half-hearted murmurings of how I don’t have to go.

My best friend stays silent, which tells me everything.

I will not play third wheel when he already finds it hard enough to spend time with his girl.

Jealousy scratches the back of my neck, but I will myself to ignore it.

It’s not like I was asking Selah down here so I could make out with her. I’m helping her out, that’s it. I don’t have to be jealous knowing that my best friend will be getting it on with his girlfriend, making out and dancing. Two of his favorite things.

Probably two of my favorite things. If I can just find a girl to make out with.

The door swings open before I reach it, and Selah races into the studio, her cheeks flushed. She’s out of breath, and all I can do is jolt to a stop and stare at her wide mouth, imagining what it’d be like to plant my lips on it, hold her face in my hands, and kiss her.

Okay, so that’s a little unexpected.

I shake the vivid imagery from my mind while she stares at me with her big green eyes and puffs, “I’m sorry I’m late. I—”

Her voice cuts off the second she spots Londyn and Maverick behind me.

Grabbing her fingers, she starts twisting them around each other, looking to the floor and no doubt wishing her hair was down so she could hide behind it. Thankfully it’s up in a ponytail, and I can still see her entire face.

“It’s okay,” I murmur.

“What are they doing here?” Her face crumples like she thinks I’ve betrayed her, and I instantly close the gap between us.

“I didn’t say anything.” My words are a soft whisper, but obviously not soft enough.

“Didn’t say anything about what?” Maverick folds his arms, his eyebrows rising with expectation.

I try to warn him off with a look of my own, but we usually tell each other everything, and busted lies always lead to arguments between us.

Turning to face him head-on, I cross my arms as well, creating a barrier between him and Selah.

Londyn glances between us, then steps into Maverick’s path before he can approach. “You don’t have to tell us.” Her smile is kind.

“Like hell.” Maverick steps around her. “Are you down here for another fighting session?”

Selah sucks in a quiet breath. I glance over my shoulder, and her cheeks are flaming. Her green eyes are wide and vulnerable, and part of me wants to lie for her again, but...

Lightly brushing my finger down the side of her hand, I lean in and whisper, “They’ll understand. They won’t judge. It’s okay if we tell them.”

“But... it’s so humiliating.”

“No it’s not.” I’m still whispering, keeping my voice calm and feather-soft. “It’s Londyn. She likes you. She loves dancing. She’ll think it’s cool.”

“I will.” Londyn steps forward, and I growl in my throat, annoyed by the interruption.

Selah winces and shrinks back.

“I saw you practicing ballroom dancing without a partner the other day. Is that what this is about?” Londyn’s lips lift into the sweetest smile. “Is Dante your new partner?”

I’m about ready to deny it when Selah softly murmurs, “Yes. He’s helping me. I have to compete in a ballroom dancing competition that my parents host every year. It’s a family tradition that...” She shakes her head, cringing and

rubbing at her temples. “I just lost my partner, and Dante’s helping me, but I kind of don’t want anyone to know because I... I’m... it’s... well, I...” Her voice trails off, her frown pained and desperate.

There’s a heavy pause while Maverick lifts his eyebrows at me, and I scratch the back of my neck.

I know what he’s thinking. Ballroom dancing?

It’s so far from the hip-hop scene it’s embarrassing.

But then Londyn lets out an enthusiastic laugh and starts gushing. “That is so cool! I’ve always wanted to try ballroom dancing. I mean, I know the basic steps, but those beautiful dresses and... oh my gosh, I would *love* to learn the tango. Do you know it?”

Selah bobs her head, obviously mystified by Londyn’s enthusiasm.

“And the cha-cha?” Londyn grins, moving her hips and stepping back and forth.

Maverick grins at her, grabbing her hips and moving with her. They start doing a few moves that look cha-cha-ish, but I’m not sure they’re 100 percent accurate.

I glance at Selah for affirmation, and she watches them for a moment, nodding and murmuring, “That’s actually kind of good. Those steps are close to correct.”

Londyn looks triumphant as she grins from Selah to Maverick. “Go us, babe.”

He grins and murmurs something that includes the words “pretty girl” before planting a kiss on her lips.

I share an awkward look with Selah, who gives me a twitchy smile before glancing at the floor.

“Okay, you two. Get out.” I point my thumb at the door. “We’ve got work to do.”

“Aw,” Londyn whines. “Can’t we stay? Please. We can learn too. I’d love to learn. Please let us.”

She sounds like a five-year-old spoiled brat, and I'm seconds away from telling her so when Selah shocks the hell out of me. "I guess so."

I whip around to gape at her. She shrugs. "It'll be okay. Maybe it'll help me relax if they're dancing too. I don't know." She cringes and starts to second-guess herself. "But I'm not a very good teacher."

A wave of panic crests over her face, and I reach for her hand, about to reassure her that she's great and I picked up heaps in our last session.

"You don't have to teach us. Let's just dance for fun." Maverick grins. "Throw on some music, and we'll see what our bodies do, right?"

Selah looks mystified by this concept while Londyn jumps on her tiptoes and says, "Oh, I really want to try that style we saw the other night. You know the movie we watched over the weekend?" She pulls out her phone and starts scrolling.

"Oh yeah, yeah, yeah. Swing or something." He sheds his jacket while I share a dubious smile with Selah.

Her lips twitch before her teeth scrape over the bottom one.

"You up for this?" I quietly ask her. "Want to have some fun?"

NICE SAVE, RICH GIRL



SELAH

THEY ALL KEEP SAYING the word ‘fun’ and associating it with dancing.

I seriously don’t get it.

Dancing is like torture to me. But the look on Londyn’s face when I told her what I had to do was... so enthusiastic.

She doesn’t think it’s lame that I have to do ballroom dancing.

If anything, she made the cha-cha look sexy and fun. And now she wants to try out some swing moves. I for sure thought a girl as cool as her would think old-fashioned dancing would be the dumbest thing on the planet.

But look at her, taking off her blazer and getting ready to be all old-school with her boyfriend.

They’re so in sync.

I watch them, envy creeping over my shoulders at the easy way they touch each other, the simple way he can make her laugh, and the little wink she gives him.

What must that be like?

To hang out with someone and not feel like you’re gonna puke from nerves.

You hung out with Dante the other night and didn't feel like puking once.

I glance at him. He's watching me, silently waiting for me to "have some fun" with him.

But dancing's not fun.

I inch toward the edge of the room as an upbeat song starts to play. Londyn lets out a little squeal as she runs into Maverick's arms and they start jiving together.

The song is modern but with a forties-style swing beat, and they're trying out moves from that era. He picks her up and swings her around. Her blonde ponytail flies in an arc over her shoulder.

I touch my long strands, pulling them over my shoulder so I can play with the ends while I watch. Dante settles in beside me, leaning against the wall with his arms crossed. Stealing a sideways glance, I drink in his profile and have to force my eyes back to Maverick and Londyn before he senses that I'm ogling him.

They screw up a step, Londyn fumbling and hitting the floor.

"Babe, you good?" Maverick reaches down to help her up, and she's laughing. He joins her. "Want to try that again?"

"Oh yeah." She grins and jumps back into his arms while I stand there completely baffled. She just totally screwed up, and they laughed about it.

Those two have no idea what they're doing. They're just messing around with steps and trying stuff out. They're...

"Having fun," I whisper under my breath.

Dante glances at me, studies my expression for a moment, then stands away from the wall and holds out his hand. "Wanna try?"

No!

And maybe yes.

I stare at his open palm, nerves clattering through me like falling dominos.

Clamping my lips together, I glance past his shoulder and watch Maverick mistime his step. He crashes into Londyn with another grin, catching her before she falls, and they just keep twirling like nothing happened.

If I screw up right now, will Dante smile and laugh the way Maverick is?

I glance at his face and spot the playful twinkle in his eyes. “Could be fun.”

Before I can get control of my body, my hand slips into his, and he’s dragging me into the center of the room.

Can I do this?

I want to try, but I’m not sure I can.

“Just breathe.” He winks at me. “And follow my lead.”

“Do you know what you’re doing?”

“No idea.” He laughs and takes my other hand as well.

A weird sound pops out of me. I think it’s a laugh, but it’s hard to tell. I sound more like a squawking bird and am pretty sure I want to die right now, but Dante doesn’t even notice.

He just grins and starts stepping the way Maverick is, trying to follow his moves. I watch Londyn and soon find myself being swung around the room. I don’t even know what my legs are doing, but they’re keeping time, and it’s kind of fun being spun around this way. Dante’s arms are strong, and it seems safe to follow his lead, even when he pulls me close and grabs my hips, lifting me up and doing a quick turn before dropping me back to my feet.

My gasp of surprise makes him grin, but he doesn’t falter his steps, and soon I’m grinning too.

A new song starts up straight after the last one—“Stutter” by Marianas Trench. I love this song, and my heart does a happy little trill as the quick beat travels across the floor.

I glance at Londyn's feet, watching the way they shuffle side to side, then back and forth. I copy her and then look at Dante. He wiggles his eyebrows at me. "Ready to try another spin?"

"Um..."

Before I can properly reply, he pulls me forward, lifting me and spinning me over his back. I land without falling and blink away my surprise as he takes my hands again and keeps going.

Oh my gosh. I can't believe Maverick's right. This is fun.

Really fun.

I think.

Dante pulls me toward him again, trying a lift Maverick just pulled off with Londyn, but I don't get my leg up in time, and we end up stumbling. My butt hits the floor, and I end up bringing Dante with me.

"I'm so sorry." I start apologizing on repeat as Dante stands and pulls me back to my feet with a playful laugh.

"Let's try that again, shall we?"

His amusement cuts through my panic, and he lifts me again. This time I get my leg over his arm, and he dips me back before quickly flipping me up against him.

I let out a little laugh, feeling like I'm at a carnival.

Dante spins me around, and I spot Maverick and Londyn trying a move that I want to do too. I look to Dante for confirmation, and he nods, beckoning me forward. I jump into his arms again, and he swings me to one side, then throws me over to his other hip. We're dancing just like a couple in the forties; all we're missing is the brass band. I let out a laugh that sounds like an actual laugh this time.

I can't deny it anymore. I am having fun.

It's nothing like the tension I usually feel when I'm dancing with Clinton, who's constantly correcting my every move. Right now, I'm just going with it, and I have never done

that before. I thought it'd freak me out, but this is... well, it's... liberating.

I match the smile Dante's flashing me as another song with a sick beat starts playing. When the brass section kicks in, I'm transported back in time as "Zoot Suit Riot" steals the floor.

My feet take on a mind of their own as I forget about the steps and just dance with Dante.

I don't know if I've ever felt this alive.

Until...

"What is going on in here!" The words bellow across the room, and I'm pretty sure my heart scuttled into my stomach, sending a terrified beat throughout my entire body.

We all jerk to a stop as Ms. Howlett stands in the doorway looking ready to dish out a little fury. Her fist is resting on her hip, her tall, plump body looking formidable as it takes up most of the frame.

Londyn runs to kill the music, and the second it stops, all I can hear is my heartbeat between my ears.

"You four are disturbing my practice. None of you should be down here!"

"Actually, Ms. Howlett." I step forward, raising my shaking hand in the air. "I have permission to practice down here. Mr. Van Weiss said it's okay."

"Oh really? So if I call him right now, he'll tell me that fact?"

"Yes, ma'am." I nod and share a quick glance with Dante. He's smiling with his eyes, and it gives me the courage to raise my voice a little so it carries across the room better. "I'm preparing for a competition, and these guys are helping me."

The teacher harrumphs like she doesn't believe me, then pulls out her phone. Her eyes zero in on me, narrowing to thin slits. "*What* is your name?"

"Selah Dixon." I know I shouldn't be scared. If she calls the deputy principal the way she threatened to, he'll tell her

that I'm allowed to be here.

But she doesn't.

Because she must recognize my name.

"Dixon," she murmurs. "Right." Pulling her shoulders back, she gives me a superior look like she's desperately trying to save face. "Well, thank your parents for me, will you?"

"Yes, ma'am."

She nods, lifting her chin. "We appreciate the funding." Her words are getting short and clipped as she eases back out the door. "But I do ask that you keep the music down."

"Of course." I nod again, this unusual sensation bubbling in my stomach.

As soon as she disappears out the door, it bursts out of me, a nervous giggle that morphs into a loud laugh.

I slap my hand over my mouth and spin to face the others.

They're all snickering, and the second our eyes connect, we all start laughing for real. Dante steps across to me, throwing his arm around my shoulders like it's the most natural thing in the world.

"Nice save, rich girl."

I can tell he's only teasing, and I lean into him for a second before pulling back and looking at Londyn. My nose wrinkles as nerves pile through me, but it's not enough to stop me from glancing between the three of them and asking, "Wanna keep dancing?"

SHE'S A PORCELAIN PRINCESS



DANTE

SHE WANTS TO KEEP DANCING.

I share a look with Maverick that only he can read.

He lifts his chin, feeling as triumphant as I do while Londyn runs for her phone and starts up the music again. She turns it down a few clicks, but it's still loud enough to enjoy.

Grabbing Selah's hand, I swing her back onto the floor and revel at the expression on her face. She wants to keep dancing.

She handled Battle Axe Beethoven like a freaking queen, and now she's dancing in my arms again.

I try another lift, and we pull that one off but screw up the next one. She starts apologizing, but I cut her off before she can.

"It's all good." I wink, and she blushes. Then something in my chest starts to stretch and pull.

It's a new sensation.

A really good one.

And I'm pretty sure it's all Selah's doing.

After another few songs, we're all out of breath and reaching for our water bottles. Londyn gulps hers back like she hasn't drunk anything all year.

I glance away from her and study the way Selah's throat moves as she rehydrates. Her neck is so long and swanlike. I want to run my fingers against her pale white skin. It looks smooth, inviting. My pulse ticks up, and when she looks at me, a flush runs through my body.

Turning away, I catch Maverick's eye and tip my head toward the door. "Not to kill the party or anything, but Selah and I need to get down a few more steps for this competition."

"Yeah. I get it." Maverick stands, grabbing Londyn's hand and pulling her up.

"When is it?" she asks Selah.

"End of July."

"Oh good. So, you've got some time, then."

"We'll have to work pretty hard." Selah winces. "You lose points for any missteps or screw-ups. It's not free and easy like..." She points at the floor.

"We'll make it fun," I promise her.

Her crumpled expression tells me she doesn't believe what I just said.

Standing up, I brush my hands on the back of my legs and walk over to her. Crouching down by her feet, I make sure she's looking at me before I say it again. "It's gonna be fun."

She bites her lip and tries to look down, but I won't let her.

Tipping her chin with my finger, I gently force her head back up and promise once more, "I will do everything in my power to be the best dance partner you've ever had. And it won't matter if we're dancing swing or waltzing or doing the cha-cha. We'll make it fun because we'll be together."

She blinks like she can't believe I'm actually saying this stuff to her.

I'm kind of surprised by the words tumbling out of my mouth right now, too, but I'm still flying high on the energy we created in this room.

"We just have to forget the steps and go for it." I smile.

Her lips twitch, rising at the edges, and I love the way her eyes start to sparkle.

Maverick clears his throat. “We’ll get out of the way.”

Threading his fingers between Londyn’s, he guides his girlfriend to the door. She smiles at us, a knowing look in her eyes. Before Maverick can pull her out the door, she tugs him to a stop and talks to Selah. “I know you hate all eyes on you. I know that dancing in a competition is probably some kind of torture, but... you were good today. When you’re ready, I’d really love to see what you guys are going to do.”

Selah’s breath catches, and I glance at her. “It’ll be okay,” I whisper. “Maybe dancing in front of them will be like a safe practice run, you know?”

She nods, her head a little unsteady as it bobs up and down. “We’re not there yet, though.”

“I know.” I help her to her feet. “But we will be.”

She smiles, her eyes first and then her lips.

“Let’s get to work.” I pull her onto the floor as Londyn and Maverick slip away.

I lead the session in spite of the fact that she’s supposed to be teaching me, but I get the sense that she’s happy for me to take on this role. I tell her what I need to know, and she shows me, corrects my mistakes, and then we run through the routine. Now that I’m getting a handle on the basic steps, she wants me to learn the dance she and Clinton were preparing.

I decide to keep my mouth shut and not throw in suggestions. I’m still in the learning phase and want to make sure I’ve got the moves down before adding in my ideas.

As “Waltz of the Flowers” fills the air, I lead her around the room, pulling off the turns smoothly and leading us from the mirror to the window without one misstep. She starts to relax in my arms, and the more she lets the music take charge, the easier the moves become.

“That’s it.” I smile. “Let the music lead.”

She nods, her fingers gripping my hand for a moment. “I just need to stop thinking about the steps so hard.”

“Exactly.”

She closes her eyes and lets me glide her across the floor.

I stare at her face, drinking in her porcelain skin and thinking *She's beautiful*.

The unattainable rich girl is beautiful and sweet, and I shouldn't be thinking this stuff because... unattainable.

The word rings through me, disrupting my waltzing mojo with that clanging reminder. I'm a dark-skinned street rat, and she's a porcelain princess.

It can't be about anything more than this competition, but when she opens her eyes and her green gaze hits mine, I can't deny the fact that it could be about *everything* more.

IT'S FUN... UNTIL IT'S AWKWARD



SELAH

DANTE'S EYES can be so intense sometimes. Not in a scary, intimidating way. More like an *I can see your soul* kind of way, and I can't decide if it thrills me or makes me nervous.

I can feel my cheeks heating with color, so I dip my gaze back to the floor, focusing on his chest. An image of him shirtless suddenly pops into my mind, and I flush even harder. I bet he's strong. He may be smaller than his friends, but he lifted me before like it was no trouble. Sure, I'm skinny, but I'm not petite like Londyn. I must weigh more than her with my long, gangly limbs. But Dante didn't make me feel like a giraffe. He threw me around like I was meant to be his partner.

His partner.

That could mean so much more.

As he waltzes me back toward the windows, I let my imagination take flight. It's silly, but I'm suddenly in a wedding gown, and he's my groom. This is our first dance, and hearts are melting all over the place as we share this moment together.

The Misfits are all grown up and standing in their finery, smiling at us. And my parents are—

Frowning. They'd be frowning.

Because they have no idea how amazing Dante is, and they will never want to find out because he's a charity case, and I'm not supposed to associate with anyone who could cause trouble.

I trip over my own feet, managing to step on Dante's foot in the process. He catches me against him, and I cling to his shoulder, staring past him into the mirror behind us. I can't hold my own gaze and instead look to the side of his neck, trying to catch my breath and ignore the writhing in my stomach.

"You okay?" Dante tries to lean back and look at me, but I won't let him.

Dipping my head, I rest my cheek against his shoulder, and before the song can end, he wraps his arm lightly around my waist and we gently sway to the three-step beat.

It feels so freaking good.

I should pull away, let reality back in, but I just want to sway.

Stand here leaning against this gorgeous, beautiful, smart, funny guy.

Yeah, I've scored myself a big ol' crush.

It hasn't taken much, which probably means I'm weak.

Weak like Shiloh.

I push away from Dante and head to the speaker, pressing it hard enough to kill the music.

He's watching me, but I can't meet his gaze.

"I think I'm done for the day," I mumble.

"Okay." He's trying to keep his voice light; I can sense it. He's probably wondering why I'm such a weirdo, but he's nice enough not to ask as he gathers his stuff... and mine.

I take it from him and try to smile, but I'm doing that grimacing thing again. I'm sure of it.

His lips curl into a closed-mouth grin that looks kind of glum, and I impulsively blurt, “You did really good today. You’re an amazing dancer, and I’m sure you’ll pick up the cha-cha superfast. We can start working on that next time.” I nod, focusing on the buttons of his shirt until my eyes can’t stand it anymore. They’re seeking out connection, and I find it the instant I murmur, “I’m lucky to have you.”

His brown eyes sparkle just the way I like. “Thanks for letting me help.”

We nod at each other, my heart trilling in ways it shouldn’t. “It was fun,” I croak, then bolt for the door before I start giving myself away.

I can hear him trying to catch up to me, and I know I’m being totally rude, but my fluttering heart won’t let me slow down. It drives me back to the boardinghouse, coiling my body into a tense mess while I hide out in my room, ignoring his *Are you okay?* texts while I wait for the dinner bell to ring.

It then jumps around my chest throughout the entire meal, making it impossible to eat. I sit on the other side of the room from the Misfits, trying to read my book and avoid Dante’s gaze. I can feel him trying to catch my eye, but I bury my nose even further into my book, managing to smear a forkful of potato and gravy across the page.

I tut and desperately try to clean it off. With my face exposed to the room, I can sense Dante’s stare, but I keep my eyes down.

He’s going to hate me now. What kind of person thanks someone for their help, then turns into the ice queen, bolting from a room and blatantly ignoring the person she’s so grateful for?

Why can’t I just get over myself and act like a normal person?

But I’ve made everything all awkward now. Dante deserves an explanation for my odd behavior, but I don’t even know how to give him one. It’s not like I can just look him in

the face and say, “My parents are gonna judge you before they even meet you. They won’t like you because they think you’re trouble, which means this crush I’ve got going on... yeah, that can’t happen.”

For one, admitting the fact that I like him is terrifying.

And secondly, who wants to hear someone say that they’ll be automatically judged and found wanting?

After a painful study hall, I bypass the common room, going to bed and reading until lights out.

And of course I can’t sleep.

I try. I really do.

But at eight minutes past midnight, I give up the fight and creep out of the boardinghouse. Tiptoeing up to the roof, I stop and gaze up at the moon. It’s full and bright and beautiful. Wrapping my sweater a little tighter around my body, I let the cool breeze kiss my face and tell myself I’ll only stay for a minute. It’s the middle of winter, and I can’t go catching a cold.

I’m about to head for my hideout and the blanket I have stashed there when I hear a movement behind me.

A cold flush travels down my body and I freeze, nearly jumping out of my skin when a hand brushes my shoulder.

BREAKING THE RULES



DANTE

“DON’T SCREAM,” I whisper, lightly covering her mouth, then quickly realizing that’s the worst idea ever.

Way to come across like some stalking creep, Dante!

I take a step back and hold up my hands like two white flags.

“I didn’t mean to scare you,” I rush to explain. “I was just coming out of the bathroom when I heard a sound at the end of the hall, and when I went to investigate, I saw someone slipping out the window. I ran to check it out and spotted your long hair. Then I got worried that something was wrong, so I followed you.”

Scratching the back of my neck, I give her a pained frown, suddenly realizing that the ease with which she shimmied up to the roof probably spoke of how often she does this.

It was most likely her attempt to get away from everybody, and I’ve just gone and followed her.

But I couldn’t help it.

We had this awesome afternoon together, and then she just went and ignored me for the rest of the night. What the hell is up with that?

I tried to catch her attention, I even texted her, but she ignored me and... why?

She told me I did good. That she's lucky to have me. But then she acted like I didn't exist.

Opening my mouth, I try to explain where I'm coming from, but she tips her head and beckons me to follow her.

I watch her hair lift in the breeze as I trail her to a corner of the flat-top roof. I had no idea there was so much space up here. A vast stretch of concrete covers the majority of the roof, only interrupted by a few metal structures that must be some kind of ventilation for the boardinghouse, and at the very end is a stretch of solar panels.

Selah crouches down and tugs something out from underneath the far panels. It's a plastic-covered lump held together with ropes. She undoes the knots and flicks back the tarpaulin to reveal a stash of supplies. She tugs out a thick, woolen blanket and throws it at me, then grabs out another one to wrap around her shoulders.

I follow suit and wrap the blanket around myself.

"I've only got one chair, so..."

I snicker. "You're pretty well supplied."

She bites her lip, looking down at her feet. I'm grateful for the bright moonlight. It makes it easier to see her face and try to work out what she's thinking.

"I'm happy to sit on the ground."

She nods, covering her supplies and shoving them back into place.

"Over here," she murmurs, finding a perch near the edge of the roof.

I sit down beside her and lean back against the concrete edge, which is high enough to go halfway up my back. Glancing over my shoulder, I take in the shadowy view below.

"So, you come here often?" I look around, wondering just how much she does come up here and how come she's never been busted.

She clears her throat, drawing her legs to her chest and hugging her knees. The blanket is her cocoon, and once again, I thank the moon god for smiling down on us.

If there is a moon god.

There must be. Or at least some kind of god, because her face in this soft, glowing light is ethereal.

The way the light illuminates her skin when she turns to answer me makes this tingling sensation spread through my chest.

“This is my secret place. No one knows about it. Not even maintenance. I hide this stuff under my bed during the holidays. That’s the only time anyone really comes up here. As far as I’m aware, it has its annual maintenance check over the summer break and that’s it.”

“Nice.” I nod, trying to decipher her expression.

“I come here... a lot.” Her smile is bashful and sweet. “I don’t sleep so well, and I can read up here without disturbing anyone.”

“And you’ve never been caught?”

“You’re the first.”

I wince. “Sorry about that.”

“No, it’s okay.” She shakes her head. “I don’t mind it being you.” She looks like she regrets saying that and looks away from me, resting her chin on her knees and cringing.

“Do you really mean that?”

She shrugs.

“Because...” I sigh, fidgeting with the edge of the blanket. “I’m kind of confused. I thought we were having a really awesome afternoon, and then you just took off and iced me out. Did I do something wrong?”

“No.” She jolts to look at me, her green eyes wide with panic. “It’s not you, it’s—”

“Please don’t say ‘me.’ That’s so freaking cliché.”

She lets out a sound that could be a snicker, but I'm still figuring out her little quirks.

After a shuddering breath, she admits, "It's my parents." Her sigh is deep and heavy, and I'm annoyingly not surprised by this revelation. I try to hide it by clenching my jaw and not saying anything. "When we were dancing today, I was picturing..." Her eyes bulge, her breath catching before she manages to rasp, "I was picturing us dancing together. You know at the..." She lets out another short breath, then licks her lips. "Um... anyway, everyone was smiling, and then I got to my parents, and they were..." Her entire expression crumples.

"They were unhappy, because you were dancing with me," I finish for her. May as well say it like it is.

She grabs my arm, her long fingers curling around my bicep. "It shouldn't be that way."

"I'm used to it," I mumble.

"No, but they're not completely awful. I wouldn't call them racist or anything. They just... they're cautious about who I spend time with."

I let out a hard little laugh and shake my head. "I bet they would be freaking out if they knew what you got up to this afternoon. Dancing all crazy with me, Mav, and Londyn." I shrug. "Londyn would be okay, but..."

"No." She shakes her head. "Londyn's part of the popular crowd. She goes to parties and drinks beer and..." Her shoulders slump. "I guess she doesn't do that as much anymore, but she did. Ronan and guys like that are dangerous." Her forehead bunches. "Misfits are... well, they no doubt think the same thing about you guys too. I know I'll need to explain it to them before the competition, but I guess nerves got the better of me today, and that's why I ran. I don't always know how to *be* around people." She opens her mouth to keep going but then shuts it again, curling even more until she's practically a ball beside me. Her hand slips off my arm, and I feel the loss immediately.

I stay quiet, waiting for her to say more.

But she doesn't.

So we just sit there—her staring out at the darkness, me studying her moonlit face.

I want to break this somber silence, lighten things up a little. Pursing my lips, I run through a few different things to say and end up settling on “You had fun today. You were great around us. You looked relaxed and happy. It wasn't so scary, right?”

Her long oval face lifts into a soft smile and she steals a glance at my face. “Yeah. Once I got into it. Once I forgot what I was doing and let the music guide me. That *was* fun. And you never made me feel bad for screwing up.”

“Of course I wouldn't. That's what practice and learning is all about. Besides, we were just messing around, you know? And sometimes I think that's the better kind of dancing, no rigid rules and regulations forcing you to behave a certain way.”

“Yeah, well, that's what the creative round's for, right?”

“The creative round?” I turn to face her, the move bringing her face that much closer to mine. How easy would it be to brush my lips over her milky white skin right now.

I swallow and clench my jaw, resisting the urge.

Selah shuffles back, her fingers curling even tighter into the blanket. “Yeah, it's a round at the end of the competition. You have to audition and be invited to compete, but basically you can do whatever you like... within a ballroom context, of course, but the rules are very liberal. Only the best dancers go for it, though.”

“Sounds awesome.”

She shakes her head. “I could never... Clinton and I never bothered to try to get in, because, well, you have to be really awesome, you know? Clinton's not a rule-breaker.”

A smile tugs at the corners of my mouth as I reach for her hand, sliding my fingers between hers and giving them a gentle squeeze. “But I am.”

NOT IN REAL LIFE



SELAH

MY HEART COMES to a standstill as I gaze at our fingers threaded together and soak in Dante’s words.

It’s so obvious what he’s implying right now.

We should audition for the creative round.

But no.

Just... no.

We can’t.

I can’t!

I’m not good enough. I... You dance as an individual couple for that. Which means *all* eyes are on you. You’ve not moving around the floor with a group of others—you’re front and center. Only six couples get in. That’s why you have to audition first.

“We could totally do it. Come up with some cool moves. We could even throw in some of that swing stuff we were doing today.”

“But... we couldn’t win.”

“It’s not about winning.” He lets out a soft laugh, and I love the shape his mouth is making right now. “It’s about having fun. It’s about creating something different and cool and dancing for us, not your parents or the judges. It’s kind of

like, like..." He clicks his fingers and points at me. "Like that old movie—*Strictly Ballroom*."

And my crush has just amplified to full-on falling in love.

"You've seen *Strictly Ballroom*?"

"Yeah, I watched it last weekend, after I offered my help. I figured I should try and learn a little more about this competition thing, and that was the first movie that popped up on my Google search. It is one crazy-ass movie, but I did love the ending. That statement. The way they broke all the rules together."

"It's one of my favorite movies ever," I admit, not even caring if he thinks I'm lame.

His smile tells me he gets it, and as much as I want to throw my arms around him and shout *Let's do this!* I can't bring myself to say anything.

I just sit there, squeezing his digits and scrambling for a way out.

"It's only a movie," I finally manage to murmur. "We can't do that in real life."

"Why not?"

"Well, because..." I blink, wishing I could access the best excuse in the world, but I'm coming up blank. "I..."

"Why wouldn't you want to?" His confusion is endearing, and my already-defenseless heart scores another few hairline fractures.

"I don't think my parents would like it."

"So?" Dante's face lights up. "That's the perfect reason to do it, then."

I frown and he wiggles his eyebrows at me, his smirk cute and kissable.

Biting my lips together, I turn away, giving myself a chance to recover and gain control of my wild imagination. But then his fingers are gently touching my face, guiding me back to look at him.

“Selah, be honest with me. What’s the truth? Why don’t you want to enter the creative round? It can’t be that you’re not good enough. I’ve seen you. You’re amazing.”

I let out a breathy laugh and shake my head. “I’m not as good as Shiloh. And only dancers as good as her audition for the creative round. We’d have no shot.”

“We’ll definitely have no shot if we don’t at least try.” He tips his head, his fingers brushing down to my chin before his hand slips away. “Who’s Shiloh?”

“My older sister,” I croak, reeling at the fact that I even said her name. What am I doing? I never talk about my sister with anybody. Why am I opening up to Dante?

It must be the cold air or the fact that it’s after midnight. Maybe it’s the full moon making me do stupid things.

Or maybe it’s the caring look on his face that pulls the words from my mouth.

“She used to win everything, and she deserved to. She was an amazing dancer. She lit up the floor, and everybody loved her.”

He studies me for a long beat, and I hold my breath, wondering what he’ll ask next.

“You keep talking about her in the past tense.” His voice is feather-soft. “Is she still alive?”

My chest constricts, the aching pain I try to keep buried rising to the surface like oil in water. It coats my insides, crawling up my throat and making it hard to speak. “Yes. She’s still alive.”

But she’s also not, because I lost her, and she’s making it impossible to get her back.

My nose starts to tingle, and I sniff, not wanting to shed any more tears. I should hate her for what she’s done, but I can’t. Because she’s the sister I used to adore. The one I’ll love forever, no matter how much hurt she throws our way.

“What happened? Why doesn’t she dance anymore?”

NOT THE ONLY ONE



DANTE

SELAH'S BREATHS are shallow and ragged. I start second-guessing myself, wondering if I should have even asked.

Maybe backpedaling is the right move here, but I can't quite make myself say, "It doesn't matter," because I'm so intrigued by the look on her face.

She's in pain.

Her sister has hurt her, and I'm desperate to know how.

I want to make it better, even though I probably can't.

Gently rubbing my thumb across her knuckles, I'm relieved she hasn't shrunk away from me. She sniffs, gazing down at our connection, her voice barely audible when she begins.

"She got in with the wrong crowd. In Year Thirteen she met this guy." Selah licks her lips and shakes her head. "She was the shining star of our family. Mum couldn't have been prouder. She was always going on about how perfect and pretty and talented Shiloh was. Maybe the pressure got to be too much, I don't know." She shrugs. "But she got together with Warren, and he became her everything. She started coming home late and skipping school and being really secretive. I couldn't figure it out because we'd always been so close. Even though she's four years older than me, I always considered her one of my best friends. She used to let me trail

her around, but then... that all stopped. She cut me off and..." She sniffs again, and my heart starts to hurt. "Not long after that we found out about the drugs. She was arrested, and my parents did everything they could to help her, but she just kept going back for more. She became someone I didn't recognize. Gaunt and so skinny and..."

Sucking in a ragged breath, she pulls our hands to her lips, pressing my knuckles against her mouth before squeaking out the rest. "We tried an intervention, and she went to rehab for a while. I thought we'd gotten her back, but only a few months later, she was waking me up in the middle of the night, begging for cash. Dad caught me helping her steal some money from his safe, and..." Her chin bunches. "I shouldn't have done it, but it was the first time Shiloh had spoken to me in weeks, and I was only thirteen and..."

I squeeze her hand, leaning my forehead against hers for a moment.

I get it.

Oh man, do I understand.

"They sent me to Haven Academy right after that. They wanted me to be surrounded by well-behaved people. They wanted to keep me safe and as far away from my sister as possible. My mother was heartbroken, and my dad's never been the same. They don't like talking about it, and they don't want others to know either. It's so shameful. They are constantly trying to cover it up and not draw attention to the fact that they lost their shining star. I mean, they haven't lost her completely. They still call her once a week, but... it'll never be the same. She doesn't shine anymore, if you know what I mean. And..." She lets out a shuddering sigh. "And I'm not enough." Her lips pull into a wonky smile. "But I can try to be, you know? So, I work really hard to get good grades, and I compete in this stupid competition every year, and I try not to get mixed up with people who will lead me astray."

Her chest is starting to tremble, like she's fighting tears. Instead, these dry sobs punch out of her, and all I can do is smooth my hand down the back of her hair.

It's hard to know what to say, and when I open my mouth, the words feel rusty and dented. "I know what that's like."

I never talk about this. With anyone. Not even Maverick.

The truth gets locked up tight when I step onto the school grounds, but Selah just turned the key.

"My mum's an addict. She got into drugs when I was little. I think having to cope with raising a toddler on her own was too much. She had no money, and she started..." I swallow, then murmur the ugly truth into the cold night air. "She started turning tricks to pay for food and stuff. That killed her soul, and drugs were a sweet escape, I guess. But then it became an expensive escape, and we got evicted. She didn't want to lose me, apparently, so I grew up not knowing from one day to the next where I'd be sleeping. Sometimes we had a roof, sometimes a shelter, sometimes a public toilet or a bus stop," I croak. "She managed to keep me off child services' radar for a long time."

Now it's my turn to sniff. I gaze out into the darkness, dodging haunting memories that like to bury me on a bad day.

"What about your dad?" Selah's question is one of the ones I hate the most, but it's not her fault for asking.

"I have no idea who he is. His name's not on my birth certificate, but I have to guess that he must have Middle Eastern blood flowing through his veins, because... look at me. My mother's blonde. Blue eyes. I could pass as a pale Arab." I let out a harsh scoff and shake my head. "For all I know, he was just passing through. I could have a whole family on the other side of the world. I don't know. I just... don't know. And she won't tell me."

"Why won't she tell you?"

"Because she probably doesn't even know who the guy is." The words come out of me in savage sound bites. "Or maybe he was married. Or he forced himself on her. I don't know. I don't know." I shake my head. "I've wondered so many times why she even bothered to keep me, but like you, I... I can't give up on her. I hate her, and I love her, and I still

find myself wanting to keep tabs on her to make sure she's safe."

"Because she's your mum." Selah leans into me, her breath skimming my chin. "And no matter how much you might want to, no matter how many times they hurt you, it's so hard to give up on family."

I swallow and draw comfort from her cool skin resting against my cheek.

I can't believe we've both had to survive addicts. I guess it doesn't matter what side of the tracks you come from, people hurt in similar ways.

Clenching my jaw, I battle the shaking in my stomach. I won't cave. I won't cry.

If anything, I'm grateful. Selah gets me in a way that none of my other friends can.

We all come from shitty backgrounds, but as far as I'm aware, I'm the only true street rat. The only son of a prostitute.

Mum's clean right now, but I never know how long that will last.

And Selah understands that. She understands the gnawing fear that lives in the back of your mind, that torturous waiting as you wonder when the next phone call from the police will come... or the one you dread the most. A call from the morgue.

The blanket wrapped around me suddenly feels like it's made of concrete.

Flicking the fabric off my shoulders, I suck in a breath, trying to pull myself out of this pit. I'm sitting on a moonlit roof with a pretty girl and wallowing.

I can't stay here.

I hate this place of sadness.

Pulling away with a speed that makes Selah gasp, I jump to my feet and hold out my hand.

"We need to dance."

She blinks at me, her face crumpling with sweet confusion.
“You want to dance?”

“I *need* to dance. With you.”

WHISKED AWAY ON A DREAM-FILLED
CLOUD



SELAH

I COULDN'T HAVE DENIED him even if I'd wanted to.

Rising to my feet, I place my hand in his and step out into the open. The cool wind whips at my pajamas, but then Dante pulls me against him. His arm wraps around my waist, his chin nesting into the crook of my neck as we sway together on this moonlit roof.

It feels weird without music, and after a few awkward moments, I decide it's worth the risk to get some music playing.

"Let me just..." I ease out of his arms and snatch my phone off the blanket.

Turning the volume down low, I open up my playlist and smile when I spot a song I know he'll get.

I press Play on "Time After Time"—the version from *Strictly Ballroom*.

His lips rise into an appreciative smile, and I step toward him, letting him swing me in a wide arc before pressing my body against his once more. I know the exact dance from the movie, but he's only just seen it, so I don't expect him to remember. Whatever way he leads me, it won't matter.

So I go with the flow, whisked on a dream-filled cloud as he guides me around the roof. He twirls me, dips me, lifts me, and guides me across the open space. We keep time with the music, mostly; a few missed steps seem to go unnoticed as our eyes lock in on each other.

We're one with this dance floor, and when he pulls me close and spins us around, I forget how to breathe for a moment.

We dribble to a stop, his arms winding tighter around my waist as we stare into each other's eyes and let the music float around us.

His fingers find my face, gently cupping my cheeks and exploring the shape of me. A shaky breath whistles between my lips as he leans forward.

I start to worry that I'm going to faint.

I've never kissed anyone before, and I don't know if I'll be any good at it.

Pausing just before he reaches me, his soft voice tickles my senses. "Is this okay?"

I can't speak. All I can do is nod, and that's when it happens.

He goes all the way, his lips pressing against mine. They're soft and smooth and supple. I sink into the sensation, my body relaxing against his as his fingers glide into my hair. They curl around the back of my head while my arms take on a life of their own.

They weave around him, drawing him as close as he can get.

Our bodies are glued together while our mouths take on a life of their own as well.

When his tongue skims against mine, I think I might die from sheer pleasure.

My insides are squealing, my stomach is jumping, and all I can think is *I'm kissing a boy! And not just any boy... I'm kissing Dante Arden!!*

LINGERING KISSES AND LAME EXCUSES



DANTE

I DON'T KNOW how long we kiss for, and man, do I *not* want to stop, but the air is only getting cooler up here, and when Selah starts to shake, I force myself to pull away.

“You’re freezing,” I whisper against her lips.

“Not on the inside.” Her words make me smile, but her chattering teeth are a concern.

So, I do the right thing, quickly helping her pack away her stuff and climbing back down and through the window.

My arms linger on her hips once we’re back inside. I can’t seem to let her go, and she doesn’t seem to mind.

With a delicious smile, she steps back up against me, pressing our mouths together and sending another adrenaline rush spiking through me. I deepen the kiss, unable to help myself. Her tongue is my new favorite candy, and I want to taste it from every angle.

If we get busted right now, we’ll be in so much trouble, but I can’t make my brain compute that all the way. It’s too busy stuck in this moment.

Pushing my fingers through Selah’s hair, I lightly grasp the silky strands as she nudges me back. I hit the wall with a soft smack that could wake Sully.

Oh man, please don’t wake up, Sully.

Stay asleep.

Stay oblivious.

I beg the universe to rest, to let us linger in the moment.

But then a door creaks.

The sound jolts us apart—a Taser strike jerking our bodies in opposite directions.

“Wait, wait, wait,” I whisper, catching her wrist and tugging her back just enough to brush my lips against hers. “Thank you for... *everything*.”

Her smile could light this entire hallway. I bask in the glow, my eyes adjusted enough to see the curve of her lips and relish the sparkle in her eyes. “Good night, Dante. Sweet dreams.”

“It’s a guarantee.” I peck her nose, one final touch before I force myself away from her.

Creeping back to my room, I stick to the shadows, pressing my back against the wall and hoping Selah doesn’t get caught either.

When I slip back onto my bed, I hear a rustling from the other side of the room.

“Where the hell have you been?” Maverick mumbles.

My heart stutters out of place as I glance at the time and wince. “Bathroom.”

It’s a lame excuse, but the only one I’ve got.

Arlo snorts from his bed by the window. “Yeah right, dude.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I frown, sweat prickling my skin as I try to figure out how to lie to my friends.

Maverick sits up with a huff, hurling something at me. I hear it coming rather than see it, and it hits my face and shoulder with a soft thud. I catch his sweater against my chest, then drop it on the floor. “It means we both know it doesn’t take over an hour to take a dump.”

“They must be some big elephant dumps, dude.” Arlo starts laughing, which makes Maverick snicker.

It’s hard not to join them, and eventually I let out a groaning kind of laugh. “All right, fine. But I’m not telling you right now. We need sleep.”

“You better tell us in the morning,” Maverick warns, and I know there’s no way out of this.

“Fine,” I mumble, slipping under the covers and resting my head on my pillow. Closing my eyes, I will sleep to take us all quickly.

As my mind starts to float, this insane tickle starts working through my system. A warm kind of fuzz that walks me into dreamland with a smile curving my lips.

I'VE GOT MYSELF A BOYFRIEND



SELAH

IT'S BEEN JUST over a week since Dante kissed me on the roof, and as much as I wanted to keep all of it a secret, the rumors flared in record time.

I was lucky enough to sneak back into my room unnoticed. Celeste was quietly snoring while Amera murmured in her sleep. Having lived with them both for the past year or so, I was used to their noises and could tune them out. Although, it still took me an age to finally go to sleep. I couldn't stop reliving every moment on that rooftop. I didn't want to sleep; I just wanted to remember. Eventually exhaustion stole over me, and I woke up feeling kind of groggy. But then, of course, I struggled not to skip into the dining room when I realized that the night before hadn't been a dream. Dante danced with me in the moonlight, he told me intimate things about his life, and he kissed me.

It had been real.

And I wanted to do it over and over again.

The idea made me giddy, but that bubbling sensation was squashed when I spotted Dante, Maverick, and Arlo deep in conversation.

Fear flashed through me, and I ended up freezing on the spot. Amera bumped into the back of me, grumbling about

something, and I let her nudge me forward, my eyes locked on the trio.

When Dante spotted me staring at him, he gave me a reassuring smile that lit my insides in spite of the fact that I was worried. He wandered over, took my hand, and whispered in my ear, "I'm sorry, but they caught me. I had to tell them. They said they won't say anything to anyone, okay?"

I nodded and whispered back, "Except for the fact that you're holding my hand right now and everyone is watching."

He blinked, his surprise almost comical, and I ended up letting out this weird little laugh. He joined me, the apologetic look on his face too adorable to be mad at.

Letting go of my hand, he shoved his in his pockets and rocked back on his heels. "So... what do you want to do, then?"

I don't know where this bravery came from, but I tipped my head, looked him in the eye, and whispered, "I want to kiss you in the moonlight again." I shrugged like it was no big deal, even though my heart was racing. "And I guess if I want to do that, it kind of means I want to be yours... and I want you to be mine..." I trailed off, raising my eyebrows in question. Was I being too cheesy?

His lips curled at the corners as he stared back at me, and I wish I could have photographed the look on his face in that moment. I tried to take as many mental snapshots as I could, because his sweet elation was beautiful.

Slipping his hand out of his pocket, he took mine and pulled me into the breakfast line. And we let the whispers fly around us.

Sure, I hated every eye in the place darting our way. But the feel of Dante's hand holding mine took the edge off. I focused on him... even sitting with him and the Misfits while we ate breakfast.

Alexia kept looking at me funny, then throwing questioning glares at Dante. In the end he huffed and muttered, "Deal with it."

“I’m just trying to understand it,” she mumbled into her cereal bowl.

Dropping his toast on the plate, he gave her a pointed look. “I like a girl who I have heaps in common with. She also happens to be beautiful, and spending time with her makes me happy. What’s not to understand?”

I couldn’t breathe. No one ever spoke about me that way.

Alexia’s pale blue eyes darted to me. I gave her a quivering smile, which made her snort and shake her head. “Whatever.” Abandoning her breakfast, she got up and stalked away from the table.

“Don’t mind her.” Trixi winked at me. “She’s like a porcupine until she gets to know you, and then she’ll let you stroke her soft belly.”

Tobias snickered and started to laugh. His smile was kind and welcoming. I focused on that until Maverick started talking about the upcoming long weekend and asking what everyone was doing.

That’s when my heart began to sink, because I had to go back to Napier and spend four days with my family. Dante seemed to sense my tension, his hand gently squeezing my knee under the table.

“You okay?” he asked with his eyes.

I nodded and then told him later when we were all alone.

We’ve talked a lot since our kiss.

We’ve kissed a lot since our kiss.

We’ve danced *a lot* since our kiss.

Yes, he passed his one-week trial with flying colors, and I now have a new dance partner for the Enchanted Ball. But I can’t think too hard about that, because as happy as it makes me, it’s also kind of terrifying.

So, I’ll just keep focusing on the kissing, then. That’s something my parents never need to know about.

Boarders are not encouraged to make out with each other. We're allowed to sit together in the common room and hold hands or snuggle on the couch, but if Sully or Monica ever catch couples kissing, they bring a quick stop to it.

But Dante and I have found ways around that. We end each dance practice with a long kiss that turns into twenty or so. It's like our little reward for working so hard.

It's impossible not to be addicted to his mouth and tongue and arms and body. I love it when he presses me against the wall, his fingers tangling in my hair, his little moans of pleasure sending thrills racing through my body. I hold his wrists, glide my hands down his arms, around his waist, and I'm home. I swear I've never experienced anything like it, and I want more, more, more.

Each night after study hall, we've ignored the looks and comments, sitting together on the couch and talking books and movies we love. He's read extensively, and I love how much he knows. He's supersmart and knowledgeable. He'd make an amazing quiz team member.

All this hanging out with Dante definitely cuts into my reading time, but it's so nice to have someone to talk to. I'm hanging out with a person who knows my family's darkest secret, and he didn't judge or try to weasel more out of me, because he understands.

His childhood must have been harrowing. He's told me a few brief stories, but we never linger on the darkness. It does worry me that he's leaving to see his mother this long weekend. I hope she's still in a good place. I hope she hasn't slipped back into her old ways.

I can tell it's weighing Dante down as he sits beside me, reading off his phone. His lips are drawn down at the corners. I glance up from my book, abandoning the story halfway through a scene to check on him again. I think he knows I'm watching him, but he's choosing to stay in his own head.

The TV is playing in the background. Students are scattered around the common room. Tobias and Trixi are flicking through a fashion magazine while Arlo and Maverick

play cards with Sully and Cedric. Alexia's watching the TV with this bored look on her face while Amera sits there filing her nails. Celeste is glued to her phone screen while Troy sits in the corner with Gabe and Arty, huddled around a laptop screen watching some sports game I can't quite see.

Everyone's distracted, so I lean forward and softly brush my knuckles down Dante's cheek. "Are you worried about tomorrow?"

He glances at me, flashes me a fleeting smile, then looks back down at his phone with a shrug.

"I wish we didn't have to go. I'd rather hang with you all weekend... dancing, sneaking up to the roof." I say the last part so quietly that there's no way anyone will be able to hear me.

Placing his phone on his lap, he turns to face me, his eyes sparkling with a smile. "I wish we could do that too."

"This whole week has been so..." I shake my head, biting my bottom lip and grinning. My stomach does this little dance, and I fight a giddy giggle. "You are so unexpected that I have to keep pinching myself. I've gone from loner, weirdo girl to having a boyfriend." I mouth the last word because I'm still too shy to say it. I'm not even sure if I'm allowed to call him that. Is it too soon to say the B-word? I mean, we act like a couple, so I guess we kind of are, but we've never officially talked about it.

Pulling my hand out of my lap, he threads our fingers together and leans his head against mine. "You don't have to mouth it."

"I wasn't sure if that's what you officially are."

"Well, what else would I be?"

"I don't know. I've never had a boyfriend before. This is new and weird and wonderful, and I wish I didn't have to leave you tomorrow. We've only had one weekend together and already I'm going away."

"Only for four days, and I'll have my phone on me the entire time. You can text and call whenever you need me."

“Ditto.” I give him a serious look, and the pained expression washing over his face makes my heart hurt. “Do you really have to go? Why can’t you stay here during the school holidays instead?”

“Because.” He sighs. “I need to check in, and I’d rather spend four days with her now and have my longer holidays here. Sully said I can stick around over the two-week break if I want to. He’s not going anywhere, and Mav says he’s gonna stay, so... I’ll hang with him.”

“I wish I could stay too.” I pout.

He brushes his thumb across my lips, gently poking the sides of my mouth and trying to raise them into a smile. I push his hand away with a little laugh and smile for real.

“I’m gonna miss you too.” He kisses my nose and then a little throat-clearing action starts up from Sully’s card table.

I glance over my shoulder and flash him an innocent smile. He gives us a dry glare and shakes his head. “Don’t make me separate you two.”

“We’re not kissing,” Dante argues.

“I just saw you peck her nose, Mr. Loved-Up. This throat-clearing is simply me telling you to check yourselves.”

“Dude, you need a girlfriend.” Arlo laughs, slapping his shoulder.

“Excuse me.” Sully warns him off with a playful glare. “I’m just following house rules. Could you imagine if I let you kids give in to your impulses whenever you wanted? Good God, save me now.”

His dramatics make me smile. Sully is always so funny. Sure, he’s firm and sticks to the rules, but he loves us. It’s so freaking obvious, and that’s why we pretty much do everything he tells us to do.

I lean away from my *boyfriend*—eep!—but keep holding his hand. Our fingers do a waltz of their own as we sit there smiling at each other, talking without saying a word. We’re

both sad to be going our separate ways tomorrow. It's like we're heading off to war, and we're worried for each other.

He doesn't know what he's going to find, and it's eating at him.

While I'm sitting here being devoured by the fact that I know exactly what I'm going into. I have to tell my parents the truth about my new dance partner, and I'm pretty sure their reaction is not going to be an easy one to manage.

I squeeze his digits, and we share a pained, sad frown.

Thank God we have each other.

Thank God he's only a phone call away.

THE FORGOTTEN CHILD



DANTE

I'M FEELING sick as I take my seat on the bus.

Selah's eyes filled with tears when I kissed her goodbye. I held her close and promised her it would be okay. She's so nervous about telling her parents about me. I should be insulted, but I get it. I'm not the guy you bring home. I wish I could be, but that's never gonna happen.

I plunk into a window seat and turn to face the outside world, not really wanting to engage with whoever will take a seat beside me.

My phone buzzes, and I pull it out of my pocket, relieved when I see Selah's text.

Selah: I know it's cheesy and sappy and I don't even care cos... I miss you already.

I snicker and send her a kissing gif before typing back.

Me: I'm counting the days. Only four. We can do this.

Selah: Can I keep you company on your bus ride?

Me: YES! Please! Tell me something I don't already know about you.

There's a pause, and I can picture her face. She'll be sitting in the back of the car her parents sent to collect her, her long legs crossed, her wide mouth pursed as she tries to come up with something good. I smile and watch those gray dots blinking on my phone screen.

Selah: I once ate a tadpole. My cousin dared me to, and I did it. Then he started wailing that I'd actually gone through with it, and he freaked me out by telling me a frog would start growing in my stomach. I screamed and ran home crying. It took ages for my parents to calm me down. I swear, I had nightmares for weeks, just waiting for this frog to start croaking in my belly.

I snort, disturbing the person next to me as I fight my laughter. She flashes me a little frown, then glances at my phone screen. I swivel my body toward the window so she's looking at my back. Leaning my head against the glass, I type...

Me: That is too funny. I'm sorry it happened to you, but I can't stop laughing. How old were you?

Selah: Five.

Me: Aw. I bet you were the cutest five-year-old. You'll have to show me a picture sometime.

She sends me a blushing Bashful dwarf gif, and I smile, aching for her in ways I never thought I could ache for a person. How did it all happen so fast? I don't even care. All I know is that Monday night can't come fast enough. Screw the rules. I'm kissing her the second she steps back onto school grounds. I hope she's up for sneaking onto the roof, because I'm gonna need my fix after this weekend.

Thanks to Auckland traffic, it takes me nearly two hours to reach the central bus station. Of course my mum's not there to greet me. She said she would be, but I'm not surprised as I hitch my bag onto my shoulder and start walking. At the end of last year, she moved into an apartment building near downtown. I thought she was moving up in the world, but the cramped accommodation is a bit of a shithole. It's all she can afford on her meager wage, and it kills me that she can't do better. But at least she's clean.

Please still be clean.

My insides writhe as I trudge through the streets, walking past the homeless guys sheltering in doorways and busking near the road. I give a few of them the last of my cash, taking a minute to talk to them. I remember what it was like to spend the night in the open. I can still remember the stink on me after weeks of not showering and washing my hair. Those were dark days, yet not as heinous as the stint where Mum was bringing customers home every night and earning what she could in our dingy little apartment.

Man, I hated it so much. She always told me to lock my bedroom door, but the paper-thin walls didn't hide what was going on. I heard the moans, the grunts, and sometimes the screams when they got a little rough. I was ten when the worst of it happened, and I broke all the rules, busting out of my room and running at the guy like a banshee.

He bloodied me up pretty good before Mum begged him to stop, telling the guy he didn't have to pay if he'd just leave.

I was holed up in bed for a week after that. My entire body hurt.

Mum wouldn't let me leave the apartment until my bruising had gone down, and she swore it'd never happen again. And it didn't.

Until it did.

Just one last time.

But the police were called in, and after being in hospital for two days with fractured ribs and an egg-shaped bruise on my cheekbone, I was finally taken by child services. Mum screamed and wailed, out of her mind on drugs. It took two policemen to contain her while I was led out the door.

Part of me wanted to run back and tell those men to let her go.

But I didn't do it, because maybe a part of me was relieved. It felt like a rescue.

Foster care sucked, and I spent a year causing more trouble than I was worth until finally my caseworker got me into Haven Academy.

"Don't you waste this chance," she warned me, and for reasons I will never understand, I didn't.

Maybe it was meeting Arlo. He was my roommate, and something about the guy made me laugh. Then Maverick came along, and the three of us seemed to get each other without having to talk about it. Sure, we had to sit through group counseling—that was part of the deal in our first year. That's how Alexia and Trixi were brought into the fold. That awkward, horrible circle where we had to talk about our feelings.

That counselor had the patience of a saint, I swear.

But we got there in the end, became this close-knit group of misfits. A little army of wounded warriors that no one could touch.

Until Londyn found a place in Maverick's heart.

And now Selah's finding a home in yours.

I shake my head, still struggling to wrap my head around the fact that I've fallen for one of the richest girls in the school. She doesn't act like she's rich. Maybe that's how it's happened, because like Alexia, I really struggle with wealthy, pretentious pricks who think they're better than us.

But Selah's not like that.

I pull out my phone, texting her as I walk.

Me: I'm here. Just walking to my place now. Where are you up to?

Selah: I've got an hour to go. Good luck. I hope it's better than you're expecting.

Me: Ditto xx

Stopping outside Mum's apartment building, I look at the door and steel myself for what's to come. An old guy who reeks of alcohol stumbles out the door, and I snatch it before it can close on me. Trudging up the stairs to the third floor, I dribble to a stop outside Mum's door and rap twice.

It takes an age for someone to answer, and for a second, I wonder if she's even home. I'm about to check my phone to see if she's texted me when the door pops open and her face appears.

She's cut her hair. It's short around her ears, like a boy's haircut, but it looks pretty good on her. Unfortunately it's not long enough to hide the hickey on her neck. I wince and start worrying about who gave it to her.

Please don't be selling yourself again.

Or please don't have some douchebag boyfriend.

She's wearing a baggy sweater that comes past her hands and looks four sizes too big on her petite frame. I should take

that as a good sign. When she's working or dating, she's usually dressed in the skimpiest clothes imaginable.

"Hey, Mum," I rasp, worry eating through me like I've just ingested a school of piranhas.

"Dante? What are you...?" Her voice trails off, her dull expression slowly dawning with realization. "Is it Thursday already?"

"Yep." I keep the word short, nudging the door open and slipping inside.

"I was gonna come meet you. At the bus."

"Yep." I dump my bag by the couch I'll be sleeping on. It looks dirtier than last time, and I force my mind not to wonder what's gone down on those cushions.

My stomach roils, and I turn back to face my mother. She's young but looks old. Her battle-weary face is haggard from years of smoking and punishing her body. She was only sixteen when she had me. She never talks about her parents, but from the odd comment here and there, I'm guessing they weren't around. I don't even know where we lived for the first few years of my life. I don't know how she survived having me and caring for me when I was a baby. It's a miracle I didn't die back then, but maybe she loved me at first. I don't know.

Playing with the hair at the nape of her neck, she gives me a tired smile. "You look good."

"Thanks," I murmur, then point to a uniform slung over the back of the dining room chair. "Still working for that cleaning company. That's good."

"Yeah, I hate it." She lets out a rusty laugh, her fingers trembling as she reaches for a packet of cigarettes on the coffee table.

I clench my jaw, preparing myself to reek of smoke for the next few days. But nicotine is better than meth, so I'll take it.

"You still meeting with your sponsor every week?" It's one of the first questions I always ask. She hates it. Every time. But I keep asking it. Every time.

Her eyes narrow on my face with a glare that tells me to shut it, but then she nods and lights her cigarette. It takes her two goes with the lighter, and her fingers are shaking when she finally takes a deep drag.

She blows a puff of smoke into the air and eyes me up. “How long you staying?”

“Like I told you on the phone, four days.” I cross my arms and give her a pointed look.

“Kay. Well, I’m working tomorrow, so... you know. But we can hang on Saturday.”

“Cool.” A door creaks down the hallway, and I tense.

Oh crap. Here comes the douchebag boyfriend. Dammit!

I ready myself but blink in surprise when I spot a woman walking into the room.

“Hey.” She smiles at me, raising her hand, then looking to my mother. “You good?”

“Yeah, this is my boy.” Mum points at me. “I was telling you about him.”

“Oh, yeah. Dante, right?”

“That’s me.” I nod, shoving my hands in my pockets and doing a quick assessment. She’s wearing shorty-shorts in spite of the fact that it’s winter, but at least her clothes are clean, her hair looks washed, and her skin isn’t sallow. All good signs, I suppose. “Who are you?”

“I’m Clara, your mum’s new roommate. I moved in about a month ago.” She walks into the kitchen, opening the fridge and calling back to us. “You guys want anything?”

“I’m good.” I look to my mother, and she says the same.

And then we stand there in awkward silence again. Because my mother lives in a one-bedroom apartment, and this Clara chick just walked out of the bedroom. Roommate, my ass.

My mind scrambles to readjust to this new revelation.

Clara saunters back into the room, sipping from a beer can before sharing a look with my mother.

“It’s okay,” I finally murmur, looking between them before settling my eyes on Mum. “Why didn’t you tell me you had a girlfriend?”

She shrugs. “Didn’t know if you’d understand.”

I’m kind of insulted that she thinks so little of me, but I don’t say it. I just try to smile and find the words to tell her I’m happy for her. As long as Clara keeps her on the straight and narrow, we’re all good.

That beer can is concerning. Mum’s sponsor wants her off all drugs and alcohol, yet Clara’s standing there sipping a beer? Talk about shoving it in my mother’s face.

My stomach sinks as I start to wonder how new this relationship is. Clara said she moved in a month ago, but how long were they dating before Mum invited her? Knowing my mother, not long. She falls hard and fast. Always has.

With an addictive personality like hers, it doesn’t take much for her to throw herself into something new without a moment of thought.

Mum looks to her girlfriend, blowing another stream of smoke out the side of her mouth before giving her a weak smile.

Clara grins, wrapping her arm around Mum’s shoulders and pulling her close. She kisses her forehead before pressing her cheek against the top of Mum’s head. No one says anything, and I finally take a seat on the dirty couch, staring at the floor and figuring this is going to be one very long, long weekend.

THE BIGGEST MISTAKE OF THE
WEEKEND



SELAH

OH MY GOSH, it's been the longest weekend in the history of man.

And I still have two days to go.

I haven't found the courage to tell my parents about Dante yet. Maybe that's why this weekend is stretching out so slowly. The weight of my secret is getting heavier by the hour, but I can't seem to find the right time to open up.

Liar! You're just a big chicken.

I huff, trying to argue my point and think of when I could have said anything.

Oh, I don't know... maybe every time you've been talking about the upcoming ball. Which is always.

Wincing, I focus back on the table of decorations. I'm helping Mum make crepe paper flowers for some charity thing she's attending next week. They're doing a craft stall, and she wants to have samples of what the ladies can make.

Classical music is playing in the background, and Mum is humming along, dropping little comments like "This would be a lovely song to dance to" and "Oh, your father and I perfected the foxtrot to this one."

Her sparkling smile is kind of sweet and gushy.

Now. You could say it now.

I swallow and instead go back to the pointless task of rehashing my weekend and arguing with myself about why I haven't said anything yet.

Friday and Saturday were taken up with hugs and family reunions. Like always, Mum arranged for the entire extended family to come over for dinner so I could catch up with all of my cousins. Thankfully, Clinton was still in Hamilton, so I didn't have to deal with him. I was forced to talk a lot about school and how everything's going.

Dad loves details about what I'm studying, so I spent a few hours updating him on each of my subjects and what I've been learning. I basked in his smile, grateful that I could make his eyes water with pride. But that glistening smile had a touch of sadness to it as well. He started thinking about Shiloh when I was halfway through explaining my library duties and how I think Miss Tomes has fallen in love with the Scottish caretaker.

"She's kind of quiet about it, but when we were teasing her the other day, she blushed up a storm. I still don't really get it, because Mr. McTavish is kind of gruff and scary, and she's so sweet but..." My voice trailed off. Dad was looking out the window, his mind far away as he no doubt lamented the fact that his oldest daughter wasn't here telling her own stories about college or performing arts school, which is where they'd dreamed she'd end up. Studying dance or something dramatic.

Instead she's living in a halfway house three hours from here. The last I heard, she was battling through another detox, but I don't know if it stuck. She's not very good at keeping in touch. My parents call her once a week, like clockwork. And I'm expected to initiate contact once a month. I'm pretty good at keeping up with that, but it's always so awkward. Words used to flow so easily between us, but now our conversations are disjointed and filled with painful pauses.

"So..." Mum runs her hand down the back of my hair, gathering up the ends and twirling them around her finger. "You seem quiet this morning, sweetheart. Everything okay?"

“Yeah.” I nod. “All good.”

“I guess you’re kind of exhausted after two days of talking. I know you like to hide away in your books, but I love spending time with you when you’re home. I want to know every detail of your life in Cambridge so I can picture what you’re doing.” She sniffs and forces out a little laugh that does a terrible job of hiding her pain.

I think she hates that she sent me away to boarding school. Shiloh went to the local high school in Napier, but after what happened to her, my parents wanted me somewhere far away.

“Of course.” I smile, trying to kill a little of her sadness. “It’s great to see you too. And I’m really happy at school. Things are going well.”

Tell her now. This is what you call an opening!

I swallow, my fingers burning to reach for my phone so I can text Dante again. We’ve been keeping each other company when we can. I’m kind of worried about him. His mum has a girlfriend, and Dante can’t figure out if he likes her or not. He’s cleaning up the apartment and trying to be the good son while also assessing how much influence this Clara woman is having on his mother.

On Friday morning, he was hopeful it was good. His mother is clean and seems happy.

But when he walked in the door with a bag of groceries on Friday night and found them half naked on the couch with music blasting and empty beer cans littered across the floor, he had his doubts.

Poor guy. You never want to walk in on your parents getting busy with each other. Walking in on his mother sexing it up with her girlfriend must have been so awkward for him.

He bolted out the door and spent the night wandering the streets, telling me he didn’t know how he’d ever sleep on the couch again after seeing that. I texted him when I could, worrying that he was out after dark. But he made it back to the apartment without any trouble and then spent a little one-on-one time with his mother on Saturday. That turned out to be

kind of painful because she got super shitty with him when he tried to ask if being in a relationship had been okayed by her sponsor.

I wish I could bring him here so he didn't have to deal with all of this.

But then I don't, because my parents would no doubt torture him in a whole different way.

What I really want is to disappear into the middle of nowhere with him. We could spend the days reading and dancing and watching movies and making out.

My cheeks flush just thinking about it.

"What's that smile mean?" Mum's head cocks to the side, her eyes studying me in a way I haven't seen before.

I try to make my face blank and shake my head. "Nothing."

But her expression drops, worry cresting over her face. "Selah, what are you not telling me?"

Oh man, she looks scared. I drop my flower and reach for her wrist, giving it a gentle squeeze. "Mum, I'm okay."

"Then why are you lying to me?"

"I'm not."

"Don't keep secrets. You know the rules. We want to know everything. And if you're trying to hide something from us..." Her eyebrows dip together. "You know where it could lead."

"Mum, stop freaking out. I'm not in any trouble."

"That smile on your face. The one I just saw..." She narrows her eyes at me. "I've seen it before. On Shiloh. When she first met Warren."

My shoulders slump, and I look down at the table, focusing on the bright red paper and tracking the way it bends into a circle.

"No boyfriends until after high school." Mum's voice is trembling. "You know why."

I nod and clamp my lips together. So, this isn't going very well.

Scrambling to make it better, I clear my throat and shift in my seat, trying to find a lie within my truth... or just an easier way to get the truth out there. They don't need to know that Dante's my boyfriend, but they probably need to know he's my dance partner. Maybe if I start with that and talk about how he saved me in this awkward situation, they'll like him and I can lay on the boyfriend stuff later... like *way* later.

"Actually..." I clear my throat, an idea coming to me in the nick of time. "I was smiling because I was thinking about dancing." That's partly true.

"Oh really?" Mum's head jolts back in surprise. "So, practices have been going well?"

"Yes." I nod. "Really well, actually. Um... in fact..." I pick up the paper flower, needing to do something with my hands and not look at my mother's face. "I was going to ask you who is accepting audition clips for the creative round this year."

"The creative round?" Mum moves into my space, lifting my chin so I'm forced to look at her. "You want to enter the creative round?"

"Well... maybe?"

"Oh, Selah. Sweetheart. That round is for..." She licks her lips and forces a smile. "Well, only the most competent dancers get in."

"I know." My shoulder hitches. "But it's also for dancers who want to try a little something different. We might not make it, but we *never* will if we don't send in an audition clip, you know?"

"Well, I suppose. I just don't want you to be disappointed."

"I won't. I know the chances are slim."

"I'm surprised." Mum shakes her head. "I didn't think Clinton would be into something like that. He likes to dance the more traditional waltzes. Such a rule follower, that boy. It's

wonderful.” She laughs. “How did you get him to agree? Or was it his idea?” She shakes her head. “Sorry. I’m just trying to wrap my brain around this.”

I swallow, my jawbone developing instant rust as I try to open it and say the words I *have* to say.

Just do it!

Say it!

“Actually, Mum... Clinton’s not my partner anymore.”

She goes still, blinks at the yellow paper in her hands, then gapes at me. “What?”

“Yeah, he... wants to compete with his girlfriend this year, so...”

“When?” Her voice pitches. “When did this happen?”

I dip my chin and mumble, “About two weeks ago.”

“And you didn’t tell me? Selah!”

I flinch when she snaps my name, keeping my gaze downcast as she starts pacing the room. “How dare he do this to you! He made a commitment, and he simply bails because he has a girlfriend now? That’s unacceptable.” Mum snatches the phone off the table. “I’m calling his mother, and then I’m calling him and I—”

“Mum, no!” I grab her arm before she can even unlock her screen. “I’ve figured it out. I have a new dance partner. It’s all gonna be fine.”

She goes still again, and I hold my breath.

This is it.

The moment of truth.

Letting out a ragged breath, I softly explain. “His name’s Dante. We go to school together. He’s a dancer, and I’m teaching him to—”

“*You’re* teaching him. Which means he’s not really a dancer.”

“Well, he is. He just needed to learn how to waltz.”

“Oh!” Mum tips her head back, squeezing the bridge of her nose like this is the worst news she’s ever heard. “The competition is at the end of next month. How are you supposed to teach him in that amount of time? You have a waltz and a cha-cha to compete in, and now you’re saying you want to do the creative round as well. Selah, it’s too much. You can’t bring a novice into this.”

“He’s not a novice,” I argue back. “He’s an amazing dancer! He’s a Misfit!”

And that one word right there.

Yeah, I’ll be able to chalk that up to my biggest mistake of the weekend.

A TEAR-FILLED PHONE CALL



DANTE

I'M TRYING to read the last chapter of *Catching Fire*, and it's taking me forever because Mum and Clara are cackling away in the dining room. They're oblivious to the fact that the lounge is my bedroom. My sleeping bag rustles as I try to get comfortable on the lumpy cushions and turn my back to them.

Ugh. Even sitting on this couch is grossing me out.

Trying to block out the images of what I walked in on Friday night has been a challenge. If I had anywhere else to sleep, I'd take it.

I swear I nearly bailed and ran for the bus stop. If I'd had my stuff with me, I would have bolted back to Haven Academy.

But I've stayed.

Because I'm an idiot.

I shake my head. No. I stay because I'm her son.

"We should go, baby." Clara is hankering for a night at the casino, and it's making my insides knot.

Does she know nothing about money management?

They're living in this dive, barely making ends meet, and she wants to go waste her money on blackjack.

I wish I could say something, but Mum seems hell-bent on defending her new relationship. If I get into a fight with Clara, Mum might kick me out and not speak to me again. How will I keep an eye on her if she shuts me out completely?

I'm constantly walking this fine line, trying to play nice while also getting my point across. Mum's had it rough, and I just want to protect her from the traps she seems to love running into all the time.

So far, I've managed to play nice and keep my thoughts on lockdown, although I did have to stand up for myself when Mum started scoffing over the fact that my girlfriend comes from money.

"A prissy bitch? Why'd you go falling for someone like that?"

We ended up getting into a big argument about it, and that's why she hasn't really spoken to me this morning. She's trying to act like I'm not here, but her eyes keep darting into the living room like she's checking on me... or checking to see if I'm sitting here judging her.

Clenching my jaw, I'm attempting to read the next paragraph when the phone starts to vibrate in my hand. I answer the call the second I see Selah's name.

"Hey," I croak, my morning voice kicking in. "How's it—" My words are sliced in half the second I hear her sniffing. "Are you okay?"

"No," she whimpers.

I bolt upright, kicking off my sleeping bag and drawing my mum's attention. I look for a little privacy but figure I won't get an inch in this tiny apartment.

"One second." I lay my phone down and throw on a sweater, shoving my feet into a pair of shoes and walking out the door. "I'm here. What's the matter?"

"I just told Mum about Clinton dropping me and then you offering to help me and..." She sniffs. "It didn't go very well."

My chest constricts, and I hate the fact that I can't reach her, hold her while she cries and tells me the details. Running down the stairs, I shoulder the door open and start walking down the street, searching for a quiet place to sit so I can give her my full attention.

"What'd she say?" I pause at the crosswalk, checking for traffic and then darting across the street.

"Well, she's super pissed at Clinton, and I was trying to tell her that it was all good because you stepped in, but now she's freaking out because you don't have any dance experience."

I scoff and shake my head. "I do have dance experience."

"I know that, but she's wanting you to have experience in ballroom dancing. Apparently that's the only worthy kind." Her voice takes on a bitter edge. "I tried to tell her she was wrong and that you're picking things up so fast and making me better, but..." Her sigh is soft.

"But what?"

"She knows you're a Misfit."

My rapid pace slows to a crawl. I hunch my shoulders against the wind and mumble, "I'm guessing that didn't go over so well."

Selah tuts. "She's just being a snob. Freaking out because of what happened with Maverick and assuming all Misfits are trouble."

"You told her what happened with Maverick, though, right?"

"Of course I did, but she's put you all in this box. You're trouble. No matter what I say, she won't change her mind."

"So... what does that mean?"

"I don't know."

"Can I not be your partner anymore?"

"That's not her choice to make. I've already told her I'm dancing with you, no matter what."

My lips twitch. “How’d she take it?”

“Not well, but it’s not like she can kick her own daughter out of the competition.” Selah sniffs and lets out a heavy sigh. “They’re just overprotective because of Shiloh, and... they’re being dumb.”

I let out a soft snicker, parking my butt on a bench seat inside a bus shelter. It’s protecting me from the wind, although the nearby trash can is smelling pretty ripe.

Pressing the phone to my ear, it’s hard not to think about the fact that Selah is so far removed from this kind of thing. She’s probably curled up on her plush bed with a million pillows and a warm duvet. No lumpy couch and sleeping bag for her.

“I couldn’t tell them you’re my boyfriend. I wanted to, but she was already in a frenzy.”

“I get it,” I murmur, pinching my nose and trying not to let it hurt me.

“I want them to know. I wish they could understand, but they don’t want me dating anyone before I’m eighteen.”

“And the fact that I’m a Misfit won’t be helping either.” Scuffing my beat-up sneaker on the dirty concrete, I rest my elbows on my knees and sigh. “I’m a street rat. You’re a princess. Not exactly a perfect match, right?”

She sniffs again, but then her voice takes on a sweet edge. “We’re Aladdin and Jasmine.”

“What?” I snicker.

“You know, Aladdin, the diamond in the rough. That’s you. I’m no princess, but I don’t mind the analogy if it means I’ll end up with you. They get married in the Disney movie, you know.”

A smile tugs at my lips, and I lean back, closing my eyes and transporting myself to her side. I trail my fingers through her long, silky hair, then lean in for one of those all-consuming kisses.

“I wish our life could be a Disney movie. Or maybe a book with one of those really happy endings.”

“It could be,” I whisper. “We can make it so.”

“But life doesn’t work that way.” She sounds sad, and I can feel it. “This thing with you and me will always be complicated because my parents suck.”

I snicker. “They love you. They want you to be safe.”

“You *are* safe. And I wish I knew how to make them see that.”

“I’ll do my best to prove it. I’ll be the best freaking dance partner you’ve ever had.”

“You already are.”

Her kind words warm me all the way through to my core. “You’re the best, you know that?”

“No. I’ve never been the best, and I probably never will be, but I’m liking the person I am with you, so can you somehow make the next two days go in fast-forward, please? I really need to see you.”

“I’ll be there waiting for you the second you get back. We’re gonna make this work, okay? Let’s shock the hell out of your parents and be the best dancers on that floor.”

She lets out a watery laugh, and I cling to the sound, letting it carry me back to Mum’s apartment.

“Who was that?” Mum asks the second I close the door. She’s obviously gotten over her *don’t talk to Dante* stance.

“My girlfriend.” I don’t like saying her name in this place. It belongs in fresh-smelling air with butterflies and daisies.

Mum takes a drag from her cigarette. I watch her from across the room, my insides trembling as I study the woman who raised me. I don’t want to be like her. Haven Academy has been my chance to start over, and maybe Selah is my chance to be a diamond in the rough.

Because I will do anything not to end up in some shitty apartment with a job I hate and a partner who doesn’t want the

best for me.

LOW BLOWS AND SILENT TEARS



SELAH

THE RIDE back to school is a welcome relief.

My driver doesn't say a word as I sit in the back staring out the window and reliving every awful conversation I had with my parents over the last couple days.

They don't want me getting mixed up with the Misfits.

We argued until I was screaming at them to stop being so judgmental. We fought about the fact that the Misfits are nothing but trouble.

"We all know what happened with that Maverick boy and his flying fists."

"Maverick was innocent!"

"I'm not talking about the incident with the girl. I'm talking about all the other fights he's been mixed up in, and now you're telling me this Dante boy is his best friend?"

"They're good people!"

Somehow that argument returned to Maverick, and in spite of the fact that they agreed that telling the truth about Ronan had been the right thing to do, they were still mad with me for putting myself in that position. I shouldn't have been at Henry McDonald's house party in the first place. Just like I shouldn't be hanging out with a boy I hardly know. I shouldn't be dancing with someone who isn't experienced.

We ended up talking in circles until everyone was exhausted.

But somehow, through it all, I managed to stand my ground and insist that Dante will be my partner at their precious ballroom dancing competition. I need someone to waltz with, and I used every reason I could think of to convince my mother it's a good idea.

Mum tried to talk me out of it, but I wouldn't budge. I did backtrack on the creative round. Drawing all that attention to ourselves is probably a stupid idea. But I'm still going to waltz and cha-cha with him, because dammit, he's a good partner!

"He better not embarrass the family." That was the last thing my father said to me. I haven't spoken to him since then.

We hugged each other goodbye, but I kept my mouth shut. I'm so mad at them both for making assumptions about a person they don't even know.

Their paranoia over me repeating Shiloh's mistakes is insulting.

The phone on my seat jangles, and I stare at the screen, rolling my eyes and shaking my head when I spot the name.

I should ignore it, but being the good girl I am, I slide my thumb across my screen and respond.

"Hello."

"Hey, sis." Shiloh's voice is raspy, but she doesn't sound high, although it's hard to deduce what she is after only two words.

"Did Mum ask you to call me?"

She lets out a hard, husky laugh. "What do you think?"

I scoff and shake my head.

"I'm meant to tell you that you need to learn from my mistakes. I'm a rotten girl, and they don't want you to get poisoned the way I did."

"Shiloh, don't," I whisper.

She snorts, and I can picture her shaking her head. Hair that used to be so long and lustrous is probably a scraggly mess around her shoulders. I wonder if she's still going through her emo phase with the black lipstick and nail polish. The eyeliner that's always applied way too thickly, so it ends up smudging under her eyes and giving her that ghostly appearance I still can't adjust to.

"Tell me about him." Her voice sounds hollow and disinterested.

Why is she doing this?

Why did Mum call her to talk to me?

I close my eyes and start rubbing my forehead. My sister is unpredictable, and I have to be careful what I say around her. If she gets into one of her moods, she could relay anything back to my parents, and I can't have her tainting Dante any more than my parents already have.

Biting my bottom lip, I keep my eyes trained out the window and finally mutter, "He's nothing like Warren."

It's a low blow. I shouldn't have said it, but it shuts my sister up. She goes quiet, softly sniffing before eventually muttering a string of insults and hanging up on me.

Tears burn as I stare at my phone and fight the tears.

I still remember so clearly when she started falling for Warren. She'd float into my room and gush about him. I'd sit there completely rapt, hoping one day I'd be lucky enough to fall in love too.

She was obsessed with him, and I thought I understood it until I saw how he was slowly chipping away at her, his weed-like influence wriggling into her soul and changing everything about her, piece by piece.

But Dante won't do that to me.

He knows the pain of living with an addict. He's good and kind and helpful and smart.

He's no Warren, so I don't have anything to worry about.

How do I make my family understand that?

Covering my mouth, I will my stomach to stop trembling. I'm on my way back to Dante right now. I'll be wrapping my arms around him soon, and everything will be okay.

Except it won't.

Because in just over a month, I'll be traveling back to Napier with a Misfit for a dance partner and two parents who are fuming over that fact.

I've never defied them like this before, and they're no doubt counting the days until they get a call from the police informing them that their youngest daughter was picked up off the street covered in puke or dragged off in cuffs after snatching someone's wallet.

But I'm not like Shiloh!

And Dante won't lead me down some destructive path.

He's *helping* me!

Slashing the tears off my face, I lift my chin, determined to prove my parents wrong. I'll see if Dante's up for some extra dance practices or something. I may never place at this competition, but the least we can do is hold our heads high and show my parents that it doesn't matter where you come from—anyone can shine.

They're worried about us embarrassing them?

Well, we're not gonna do that. I will dance the best waltz I ever have, and they can go eat humble pie.

REUNITED**DANTE**

MY KNEE WON'T STOP BOBBING as I sit in the common room, failing to read.

“Would you quit it?” Maverick slaps my leg. “You’re driving me crazy. Just sit still.”

“You don’t like it, go sit somewhere else,” I mutter.

He growls, launching out of his chair and smacking me on the arm.

I flick him back, shoving him away from me. Usually this would start some kind of playful scuffle between us, but I am so not in the mood right now.

And Maverick knows it.

Staring down at me with a sigh, he finally murmurs, “I get it, man. You know I do. More than anyone else here, *I* get it.”

I look up at him with a glum smile. He’s right. He doesn’t even know which thought I’m wrestling with at the moment, but he understands what it’s like to have parents who don’t really care about you and a girlfriend from the other side of the tracks.

“It’ll be all right.” He lifts his chin at me.

“Thanks, man.” We slap hands and are all good again, but my leg still won’t stop bobbing.

I check my watch, wondering how far away Selah is.

Any minute now.

“Why don’t you go wait for her outside or something? You can run into each other’s arms and—”

“Shut up.” I scowl at Arlo, who is now laughing at me.

Maverick starts snickering, too, and I flip them both the bird, ready to stand up and stalk out of the room when my girl appears in the doorway.

I bolt from my seat, reaching her in three easy strides. Before she can say a word, I pull her into my arms and just hold her.

Her fingers dig into my back while she presses her lips against my neck.

That’s when the wolf whistles start up. She stiffens against me, and I pull away with a little sigh.

“Come on.” Taking her hand, I guide her out of the common room and all the way outside.

We don’t say anything as we weave around the boardinghouse block and find a quiet space against the brick wall facing the sports fields.

Leaning her back against the bricks, I cradle her face and stare into those big green eyes. “Are you okay?”

She nods, her lips pulling into a trembling smile just before she fists my hoodie and tugs me in for a heated kiss.

I sink into the sensation, sliding my tongue against hers and getting thoroughly lost in the moment. Her arms wrap around my neck, and I pull her against me, kissing her jaw and trailing my lips down her neck.

We stand there holding each other, breathing in sync and just being together. After a long, horrible weekend, this is like our heat pack on aching shoulders.

I’m not sure how I’ll let her go, but I don’t have to think about that just yet.

Gliding my hands up her back, I pull away and gaze into her pretty face again. “I missed you.”

“I missed you.” She traces the lines of my face. “I hated that I couldn’t be there for you. It sounded like a tough time with your mum.”

“It did suck, but at least I wasn’t arguing with her the whole time. I’m sorry you had to go through that.”

“I’m sorry my parents are being so stupid. They’re just... paranoid.” She blinks and sniffs, shaking her head with a desperate little frown.

“Are they going to let me onto the dance floor?”

“They better. Because I’m not dancing with anybody else.” The fire in her eyes is like nothing I’ve ever seen before. It’s sexy and inspiring.

Leaning into her with a grin, I press our lips together. She threads her fingers into my hair, deepening the kiss. I’m pretty sure this is what heaven tastes like.

Until it’s interrupted by a snide remark from one of Satan’s minions.

“Better watch out, Selah. He might be carrying some kind of disease.”

I rip my mouth away from hers and glance over my shoulder.

One of the Stainton twins is sauntering toward us, and I only hesitate for a moment before figuring out which one it is.

“Piss off, Gabe.”

He ignores me, smirking at my girlfriend like I’m not even there. “But I guess your mouth has a will of its own, right? That tongue of yours doesn’t care what it’s doing.”

His gaze tries to slice right through her, so I shift my body, blocking off his line of sight.

He stares at me for a second before letting out a derisive scoff. “Let me know when you’re ready to taste a real man, sweetheart. I don’t usually kiss tattletale skanks, but maybe I

can make an exception for you. Train that body of yours to do what it's told."

I growl again, lurching toward him and hating the fact that I'm that much shorter than he is. Still, I can inflict a little damage if I need to.

Curling my fists, I glare up at Gabe, who's got the audacity to start laughing in my face.

Oh, he is going down.

"Don't." Selah grabs the back of my hoodie, pulling me away before I can throw the first punch. I'm not much of a fighter—words are usually my power weapon—but Gabe is such a prick, I'll make an exception for him. I want to see that guy black and freaking blue.

"He's not worth it." Selah tugs a little harder, snatching my arm and forcing me to turn my back on Gabe. "We can't afford any trouble." It takes a moment for her words to sink in. "Please, just walk with me."

Sliding her hand down my arm, she threads our fingers together and keeps pulling me away from the building.

We end up on the other side of the school.

Resting under a grove of trees near the admin block is a wooden bench seat that was donated by some alumni. We're not technically supposed to be here outside of school hours, but it's a private place, and that's all we need right now.

I plunk down, still breathing like a bull, and Selah sits beside me, pulling my arm over her shoulders so she can snuggle against my chest.

I'm still riled, but as her long fingers glide across my body, smoothing over the fabric of my hoodie, I'm able to regulate my heart rate and breathe easy again.

Pressing my lips against her head, I inhale her sweet scent and start to find some calm.

EQUAL PARTS EXCITEMENT AND
TERROR



SELAH

WE SIT in silence for a while, my head resting on Dante's shoulder. Eventually he shifts, moving so I can nestle even closer against his side. Playing with the ends of my hair, he weaves a long lock around his finger before spinning his hand and letting it fall free again.

We still haven't said anything since Gabe insulted us both. The lick of fear that works through me every time he's around always makes me freeze, but Dante was there. He put a barrier between us, nearly threw a punch for me. As much as I don't want the trouble, I can't deny the thrill of being with someone who will fight for me.

I brush my thumb over his knuckles.

"Thanks for not hitting him," I murmur.

"Oh man, I wanted to. But you're right. We can't afford the trouble."

I sit back, resting my hand on his cheek and guiding him to look at me. "I hope that didn't offend you. I..."

"It's okay." He covers my hand with his. "I know what I look like from the outside. For parents who have already lost one daughter to a bad boy, I'm just trouble waiting to happen."

“But you’re not,” I assure him. “You’re so different, and I want my parents to see that, but they just jump to all these stupid conclusions, and they don’t even know you. I could have used every breath in my lungs listing all the wonderful things about you and they wouldn’t have heard one word.”

“So... I guess we’ll just have to show them, then.”

“How, when they don’t even want me spending time with you?”

“They can’t keep us apart when we’re here.”

“They can probably try.” My lips form a wonky frown. I can feel the shape my face is making.

Dante rubs his thumb along my jawline. “I don’t care what Sully or any teachers try to say to me, I will not leave you alone. You’re stuck with me.”

I grin, resting my head against his. “No complaints here.”

“Do you honestly think Sully and Monica would try to keep us apart?”

“No.” I shake my head, relieved. I doubt my parents will make a call insisting on it either. They may have puffed their chests and gotten all angry over the weekend, but I doubt they’d make a demand like that.

They will probably call the school to make sure my grades aren’t slipping. I’ll have to stay on top of my schoolwork.

And when it comes to the dancing... “We’ll just have to make sure our performances are as perfect as we can make them. You picked up the waltzing pretty fast, and we’ve already started the cha-cha.”

“And then there’s the creative round,” he murmurs.

I tip away from him, shaking my head with a wince. “I don’t think we should push it.”

“Are you kidding me?” He swivels to face me properly. “That’s exactly what we should be doing. We need to push it and be brilliant. We need to show everyone that all of their assumptions about us are wrong. We need to put together

something dazzling and original. Something that will stun everybody and that will show them that you're brave enough to shine in front of a room full of people. And me? I'll show them I'm your diamond in the rough."

I love the way his eyes are sparkling right now. "Yeah, you are." I kiss him, then lean back to double-check. "Are you sure we can pull this off? That's a lot of work to fit in. We're gonna have to choreograph an entire dance."

"We can do it. You've been dancing for years. And I've picked things up really fast. Let's just watch a bunch of dance movies and draw inspiration from that. Plus, we could get the others to help us, or maybe even Jack or Miss Fillion."

The idea terrifies me, but he's so enthusiastic right now, and maybe he's right. Maybe we *can* do this. Maybe the creative round is exactly what we need to really make a statement.

It'll be just like the final scene in *Strictly Ballroom*.

My heart kicks out of rhythm, and I catch my breath as equal amounts of trepidation and excitement pour through me.

THE THINGS THAT MAKE YOU BETTER



DANTE

I WHISTLE under my breath as I jog down the hallway. I'm running late for class, but oh man, worth it!

Selah and I have been squeezing in dance practices whenever we can. We've got a ton of work to get through, especially now that we're trying to choreograph an extra dance as well. But it's coming together, and I'm loving every second of it.

I've got something to prove, and it's motivating me more than anything else right now.

I can be the guy Selah needs me to be.

I can't wait to surprise her parents and show them that I'm more than a rumor or an assumption. It's driving me to work hard, push hard, and create the kind of dance that will win us a placing.

Selah's kind of nervous about some of my ideas, especially the music. She keeps going for classical options, but I'm pushing for contemporary. I've managed to talk her around to most of my choices, but I can tell she's hesitant. She's scared to push the boundaries and upset her parents even more, but we're trying to make a statement here. There's no point going through with all of this if we're just going to deliver some half-ass performance. We have to stand out. To dazzle.

Yes, it goes against everything Selah likes to do. She hates all eyes on her, but she's beautiful and talented, and she has nothing to worry about. I just have to do everything I can to make her see that.

Running into Mr. Dechlin's physics class, I make a beeline for the back table.

"Got yourself a late pass, Mr. Arden?"

"No, sir." I take a seat and pull the laptop from my bag.

"That'll be a detention, then."

I squeeze my eyes shut and mutter a curse under my breath. "Please, sir, I've got dance rehearsal after school today. That's why I was late now. The competition coming up is a really important one, and we're on the clock."

"Then get your teacher to sign you a late slip next time."

He scribbles on the blue detention card and slaps it onto my table. I can't get a teacher to sign a slip for me because she wasn't there during the lunch break, which technically means Selah and I shouldn't have been there either.

Clenching my jaw, I shoot him a fiery glare and try again. "I will make it up to you another time, sir, but I can't miss today. Please, just let me do this detention in a few weeks, after this is over."

"It's one detention today or you'll be doing a second one tomorrow as well."

I growl in my throat, snatching the card and scrunching it in my hand.

His steely-eyed glare tries to strip the skin off my bones. "You better be there, son, or you will not like the consequences of your bad decisions."

"I'm late like one time."

"You were late on Tuesday as well. That was my warning. This is my follow-through."

"I'm like five minutes late!"

“Mr. Arden. Do you *want* a second detention?”

My nostrils flare, energy pulsing through me in black waves as the rest of the class seems to hold its breath. “No, sir,” I finally manage through gritted teeth.

“Then stop arguing with me.”

He stays by my table, daring me to challenge him. And I so want to. I’ve got some choice words just busting to get out of my mouth, but by some miracle, I manage to keep my lips pressed together.

After the world’s longest minute, Mr. *Dicklin* nods and turns his back.

Troy’s looking at me, and I turn to frown at him. “What?”

“Sorry, man.” He gives me a sympathetic smile, and I turn away from it.

What the hell does he know? He could be twenty minutes late and Mr. *Dechlin* probably wouldn’t even notice.

The injustice of it makes my skin crawl, plus the fact that I’ll be letting *Selah* down. This is gonna make me an hour late to dance rehearsal now. Such a waste of my time!

I thump the desk, scoring myself a few curious looks before shuffling in my seat and focusing on my physics lesson, which is damn impossible to soak in.

I text *Selah* as soon as I’m in the hallway again.

Me: Got detention. I’ll be late. Sorry.

Selah: Don’t worry. I’ll just keep working on the sequence we came up with at lunchtime. See you when you get there.

The fact that she doesn’t seem too surprised about me getting a detention is a little disappointing. She doesn’t even ask what it’s for. I guess she’s used to seeing the Misfits go there on a regular basis. So we’re not star students. That

doesn't make us bad people, and teachers are always way harder on us than they are on anybody else.

A dark cloud hovers over me for the rest of the afternoon, and I scowl my way through detention. We have to copy out the school charter by hand. All this highbrow crap about what the school stands for and their goals for student achievement. It's so freaking boring, and all I can think about is how I could be dancing with Selah right now.

The second I slap my scribble on top of the teacher's desk, I bolt out the door. Running past Ronan and his douchebag friends is unavoidable, and I respond to their catcalls with a raised middle finger.

"Your girlfriend's a rat!" Gabe shouts.

My shoulders ping tight, and I'm so tempted to turn around and let them have it, but I'm late enough as it is.

Just keep running, man. Selah's waiting.

I jump down the flights of stairs and arrive in the dance studio so out of breath, I have to take a second before I can speak.

Selah watches me with a cute smile on her face. Her school uniform is untucked, her knee-high socks bunched at her ankles, and her hair is coming loose from its braid.

I point at her and grin. "I kind of like you disheveled."

She laughs. "I couldn't be bothered changing. You okay?"

"Yeah, just got here as fast as I could."

"Detention wasn't too painful?" She crosses her slender arms, her narrow nose wrinkling.

"Oh, it was painful, but it helped knowing I was coming down here to dance with you."

And there's that sunshine smile again. Damn, I love that look on her.

Closing the space between us, I cup her cheeks and plant a kiss on her lips.

She jolts with surprise, then sinks into it, the sweet sound easing out of her mouth enough to make me deepen the kiss. She goes with it, then starts to pull away.

“As much as I want to stand here kissing you, we’ve got work to do.”

“We do.” I kiss her once more, then step back, shedding my blazer and untucking my shirt. “Okay, where do you want to start?”

“I added a little something to the sequence we were working on at lunch. Do you want to go over that, and then I’ll show you what I thought we could put in? I’m still nervous about the song choice, but I know this move is one of my mum’s favorites, so maybe if she sees it to untraditional music, she might get a kick out of it. I don’t know.” She makes a face, and I laugh at her cute expression.

“She will.” My eyes light. It’s so awesome to see Selah coming out of her shell on this. She thinks she’s so useless when it comes to dancing, but she’s gone ahead and worked on something without me. She’s way more capable than she gives herself credit for.

“You and me…” I swivel right, then lift my arm so she can spin. “We make a good team.”

She grins, twirling back to my side for a little dip, then swinging her leg over my hip. “Thank you. I like us too. And seven, eight, then left turn.”

I follow her instructions, then pull her to a stop. “That’s good. How about in this next part we try for a lift.”

She bites her lip, her forehead wrinkling. “What kind of lift? Please don’t say *Dirty Dancing*.”

I grin and shake my head. “I’m thinking we should throw in a few swing moves, like we were doing with Mav and Londyn the other day. A little of this.” I act out my part. “And a little of that.”

She laughs when I start to overexaggerate the moves. “Okay. Let’s try it, although we need to make sure we stay even on the beat. Swing might not fit with this style of music.”

“We’ll just adapt it to make it fit.” I shrug. “We want to wow the audience, right? Might as well go all in.”

She winces but starts nodding when I smile at her.

I click my fingers to count her in, and we run through the sequence again, adding in the new moves.

We fumble it at first, but by time number four, we’ve got it sussed.

“Yes, I like that! Let’s try it with music.” She skips over to her phone and is about to press Play when the door bursts open.

I spin to find Maverick and Londyn walking toward us.

“Private practice, you guys. Go away.”

Londyn ignores me, focusing on Selah instead. “Did you hear what happened to Miss Tomes and Henry McDonald?”

Selah’s face pales. “What?”

“Apparently he’s been messing up the back corner of the library, and she caught him red-handed and—”

“Lost her shit.” Maverick laughs. “She yelled at the guy, then marched him to the principal’s office.”

I punch my fist in the air and whoop. “No way. When did this happen?”

“This afternoon. Isn’t that the best news you’ve ever heard?”

“Mav.” Londyn gives him a reprimanding look. “You can’t celebrate someone’s demise. Even if it is Henry McDonald.”

“Oh, come on, you can’t tell me you’re not completely stoked by this.” He throws his arm around her neck and pulls her close, nuzzling the top of her head.

She concedes with a little grin, but she quickly bites it back.

“Is Miss Tomes okay?” Selah’s still looking worried, and I shift to stand by her side.

“Of course. She was steamed.” Londyn raises her eyebrows.

“I just know she’s had a rough week. Breaking up with Mr. McTavish and everything. She was kind of upset the other day. And Henry always riles her so badly.”

“Not today.” Maverick’s smirk is frame-worthy. “I mean, she was riled, but he didn’t push her around the way those guys sometimes do, you know what I mean? Man, I wish I’d been there to see it.”

“Me too.” Londyn giggles.

I run my hand down Selah’s back, silently checking on her. She flashes me a quick smile.

“So, how’s it going in here?” Londyn pulls away from her boyfriend and eyes us up. “The waltz coming along okay?”

“Yep.” I nod. “We’ve pretty much got that down.”

“It still needs some smoothing out,” Selah corrects me.

“The main thing we’re working on is this creative dance.”

Selah’s breath catches, and she nudges me in the stomach at the same time Londyn asks, “What’s that?”

I shoot my girlfriend a quizzical look. “Do you not want people to know?”

She winces.

Tipping my head with an apologetic smile, I take her hands. “They’re gonna find out. We need someone to record the audition piece for us.”

She swallows like that hadn’t even occurred to her.

“Once it’s ready, we should perform it for the Misfits. I’ll get Cedric to record it for us. He’s good at that stuff, and—”

“You want me to dance in front of your friends?” Her skin goes even more pale than it normally is. “The Misfits?”

“Well, yeah.”

She’s shaking her head like I’ve just asked her to perform the Chicken Dance naked in front of the entire school.

“They’re like the best dancers I’ve ever seen, and you want me to perform in front of them?!”

“You’re amazing.” I touch her cheek. “You don’t have anything to be afraid of.”

“Yeah, right.” She backs out of reach, nearly crashing into the window behind her.

“I figure performing for them will be like a test run for the big event. They can give us feedback, tell us how to make it better.”

“But I just...” She starts rubbing her forehead. “I didn’t think this through.”

“Selah.” Londyn catches her attention. “You’ll be great. I’m so excited to see what you’ve put together. No one’s gonna judge you.”

“Yes they will. People always do, and everyone is already thinking how weird it is that Dante even likes me.”

“I don’t think it’s weird.” Londyn shrugs. “You’re a catch.”

Selah frowns like she doesn’t believe her, so I reach for her hand again and start nodding emphatically. “You are.”

“But...”

“We want your parents eating humble pie, not *I-told-you-so* meringues, right?”

“What?” Maverick mutters behind me, sharing a confused look with his girlfriend.

“And if that’s what we want, then we need all the help we can get. Performing for the Misfits will be a good thing, I swear. They can make us better. I promise.”

Selah starts biting her lip.

“It’ll be fine,” I reassure her, pulling her into a hug. “Just keep your eyes on me and pretend the rest of the world isn’t there.”

Kissing her ear, I give her another squeeze, then pull away so I can check on her face.

She gives me a reluctant grin and finally starts nodding.

THE BACK CORNER



SELAH

NERVES KEEP ATTACKING ME, reminding me that dancing in front of the Misfits is the worst idea ever thought of. Logically, Dante's right. We have to perform in front of people eventually, so why not start with the Misfits? But what if I screw it up in front of everyone? Ugh. I then have to attend school with these people.

At least with the actual competition I can drive hours away and not have to face many people until the next year. This will be so different.

"But we're prepared," Dante told me last night. "We've worked so hard, and we look great together. The dance is awesome."

"We've only just finished the choreography. We need more practice." My arguments were in vain.

The performance is all set up for this afternoon.

Dante has arranged Cedric to record, and even Miss Fillion is sticking around after school to watch as well.

We ran through it one last time before school, and Dante nearly made me late for class, kissing me long and slow and telling me that we were going to be great. The way his eyes sparkled with that heated look he sometimes gives me made my limbs feel like jelly. He's so freaking hot.

I wish I could meet up with him after school to make out instead of having to perform a dance.

I don't want to do it! I'll screw up and embarrass us both.

Maybe it's better if we don't do this.

With a little tut, I check the front of class to make sure the teacher is distracted before pulling out my phone. Amera's eyes dart my way, and I dip my head, cradling the phone on my lap and getting ready to send a "chickening out" text to my boyfriend.

Sure, he'll be annoyed with me, but then he'll understand. He's not here to persuade me with his sweet smile and soft touches. If I bail over text, it'll be easier, and then we can postpone this whole thing.

Delay the inevitable. Nice move.

I cringe and unlock my screen.

"Selah." The teacher's sharp voice makes my head pop up.

My eyes bulge, cold prickles traveling down my body as she approaches my desk.

"What have you got there?"

"I... I..." Looking to Amera for help, I give her my best pleading look, but there's nothing she can do for me.

The teacher lays her hand on my desk, giving me a disapproving frown. "Selah, show me what's in your lap. Right now."

With a little sigh, I reveal my phone, and her frown only deepens.

"I know I don't have to tell you that phones are banned during class time. Now turn it off and put it away, or I'm taking it for the rest of the day and you can collect it after school."

I nod, putting it on silent.

"No, turn it *off*."

Biting my lip, I turn it off and slip it into my bag.

“This is so unlike you.” The teacher shakes her head. “Don’t let me see it out again.” She points at me, moving back to the front of the class while I have to endure every set of eyes looking at me.

I curl my shoulders, shrinking in on myself and pulling my braid over my shoulder. It doesn’t hide my face, but it still feels like some small barrier between me and all the staring.

“What is your problem today?” Amera whispers once the teacher has moved out of earshot. “You’ve been even more twitchy than normal.”

“I just...” I huff. “I have to do this dance thing with Dante after school, and I’m nervous.”

It was never my plan for anyone to know about any of this, but news travels fast in the boardinghouse. Whispered conversations get overheard and misconstrued, and in the end, I told my roommates the truth.

“You’re gonna be fine.” She nudges me. “With all the practice you’ve been doing, you seriously have nothing to worry about.”

I appreciate her smile and encouragement, but she hasn’t seen me dance—thank goodness—so she can’t really tell me not to worry.

Trying to focus back on my work, I pull the laptop toward me and notice an email notification pop up. My eyes dart to the teacher, and even though I’ve been told off once today, I risk the rules and check it.

It’s a message from Dante. My lips rise into an automatic smile.

To: seldix@havenacademy.school.nz

From: danard@havenacademy.school.nz

Hey my dancing queen,

I know you're nervous about today. Don't worry. It's gonna be fine.

Meet me in the library after school, and we can walk down there together.

Why don't you meet me in the back corner, and I'll get you in the mood to dance with me ;)

xx

Your dancing king

“The back corner,” Amera whispers. “Oooooo.”

My cheeks flush as I quickly try to cover my screen. “Don't read my emails,” I softly bark at her.

“I couldn't help it. Your cheeks are so red right now.” She starts snickering behind her hand, then wiggles her eyebrows at me. “I wonder how he's planning on getting you in the mood to dance. You gonna have a bite of Dante candy after school?”

The thought sends a thrill of pleasures spiking through me.

Getting kissed senseless by my boyfriend? That will definitely distract me from the brewing anxiety.

“You know that back corner is reserved for super hot and heavy, right? I made it to third base there once.”

“What?” I bulge my eyes at her.

“Oh yeah.” Her smirk is all pride as she lifts her chin, checks on the teacher then leans down to whisper. “It was with a senior from last year. Hugo McCauley. Do you remember him?”

“Yeah.” He was a super-hot musician who had a rep with the ladies. “Oh my gosh. I can't believe you went to third base. That's so risky! The library is a public place.”

“No one ever goes in the back corner. The fact that Henry got busted by Miss Tomes is a total fluke.” She shrugs. “I

guess the fact that someone *could* catch you is the thrilling part, though. Dante's obviously got some heavy make-out plans. How far have you guys taken things already?"

I blush and dip my chin, darting my eyes around the class before softly whispering. "Just making out, nothing under the clothing."

"Well, my guess is that he's planning on distracting you big-time. Trying to kill your nerves before the performance or give you an adrenaline kick to really get your heart pumping. I'm sure a little second base will do the trick." Her eyebrows start wiggling again, and my entire body flushes with anticipation.

My insides are trilling so hard I think I might puke.

The anticipation of getting to my boyfriend is overwhelming, and it makes it impossible to concentrate during last period.

Finally the bell rings, and I rush to homeroom to finish up for the day. It's a ten-minute check-in that takes way too long. As soon as the teacher dismisses us, I bolt out the door. Amera's laughter trails me as she chases me to my locker, where I fumble my books and drop two on the floor.

She crouches to help me pick them up. "Would you calm down? Not only is the library going to be amazing, but the dance performance is gonna be great too. I wish I could see it."

"Misfits only." I say what I did the last time she asked to look in.

"I know. I know." She backs away, her hands raised in surrender while those eyebrows of hers start doing their thing again.

"Stop it." I point at her.

She giggles and mouths, "Have fun in the library." Licking the tip of her finger, she runs it between her breasts and shimmies away while my heart starts to spasm.

Skipping off to the library, I arrive just as Miss Tomes is leaving.

“Oh, hey, Selah. I was just about to lock up.”

Panic sizzles through me. Dante mustn't be here yet.

“I just need to get a book.” I scramble for a quick lie, then try to make it sound even more plausible. “I have an assignment due on Monday, and there was a quote I wanted to include. I can't remember exactly which book it was in, but I was looking at it yesterday.”

Was I in the library yesterday?

Panic courses through me so hard and fast I feel like I'm about to wet my pants.

Seriously. Calm down!

Yes, you were in the library.

“That's right.” Miss Tomes smiles, then glances at her watch. “I trust you. Why don't you go for it, and we'll leave the locking up for John. I have something going on this afternoon, so...” Her cheeks tinge pink, and I grin.

“Is this your first date with Mr. McTavish since you guys got back together?”

She nods, her smile electric. “Actually, we're gonna have a family dinner with his daughter. Apparently Friday night is movie night on the weekends she's with him, so...” She tries to shrug it off, but I can tell how excited she is.

“Have fun, Miss Tomes.”

“I will.” She winks at me. “Make sure you're all done by four thirty, okay? I don't want John to have to wait around for you.”

“Okay.” I nod and slip through the door, excitement rounding over me again. I wander to the back corner, gripping my bag strap and trying to breathe.

Second base.

Will we seriously get to second base?

I grip the edge of my skirt, fighting a grin as I wonder what that might feel like. No guy has ever touched my breasts or butt before. Dante's hands will be smooth and sweet, and he'll feel amazing.

I reach the back bookshelf, the one that has been newly repaired since Henry mutilated it. The books still need to be restored and returned, but Miss Tomes has plans to make it a more appealing place so it'll send more traffic through. Thankfully, that hasn't come into play yet, so I can meet Dante back here.

I wonder why he chose the library. I mean, we both love it in here. We love books, but the boardinghouse roof seems more our style. But I guess getting up there in the middle of the afternoon is a little risky. This is way better. He's a smart man.

My man.

I drop my bag on the floor and start to smile again.

He'll be here any second now.

Checking my watch, I figure we've got a good twenty minutes to get busy before we have to head for the dance studio. Dante's not the kind of person who likes being late, and as soon as I hear the library doors open, I spin with a relieved smile.

He's here.

My stomach jitters as I listen to him walk through the library and down toward this private corner.

PACING IN THE CORRIDOR



DANTE

I RUN a hand through my hair and pace the corridor at the top of the stairs.

Where is Selah?

I thought she'd come right over to the performing arts block after homeroom, but she's taking her sweet time. I mean, yeah, the performance doesn't officially start for another twenty minutes, but I was hoping I could give her a hug or something.

She'll be nervous. Maybe I can kiss away that tension and help her relax before we have to put on a show.

Cedric appears, heading for the dance studio with a camera case in his hand.

"I'm just going to set up for you guys." He lifts the case and looks kind of proud. I think he's stoked we're asking him to do this. Cedric is one of those guys who loves to help. It makes him feel needed, I guess.

I slap his shoulder as he walks past me. "Thanks, man. We'll be down in a few."

"Cool." He gives me a thumbs-up and trots down the stairs while I get out my phone and text Selah again.

She doesn't reply, so I decide to just ring her instead.

It goes straight to voice mail.

“Come on,” I mutter. “Where are you?”

“Hey, Dante.” Londyn skips up to me with a smile. “You good?”

“Yeah. Just waiting for Selah. She’s not answering her phone.”

“Oh, that’s probably because it’s turned off.”

“What? Why would she do that?”

“I heard she nearly got it confiscated by the teacher because she was using it in class, and she had to turn it off. She’s probably just forgotten to turn it back on.”

“How’d you hear about it?”

“One of the guys in my homeroom told me. He was laughing about it because Selah *never* gets in trouble. He joked that you’re bringing out a little bad girl in her.” I frown, and Londyn’s face flashes with a guilty smile before she laughs again. “It was only a joke.” Squeezing my shoulder, she gives me a sincere smile. “We all know you bring out the best in her. Well, I do, anyway.”

Her cute wink makes it hard to stay mad with her, so I lift my chin toward the stairs and mumble, “I’ll meet you down there.”

“Are you sure she’s not there already?” Londyn points down the stairs, and I figure maybe I should go check.

I thought I’d gotten here before her, but maybe she got out of homeroom early and I’m standing up here stressing while she’s down there wondering where I am.

“Idiot,” I mutter under my breath, jogging down the stairs and beating Londyn into the room.

But all we find is Miss Fillion perched on the edge of her desk, patiently waiting, and Cedric setting up his camera.

“Hey, guys.” She waves at us. “You ready for this?” She beams at me. “I’m excited to see what you guys are gonna do. Selah dancing. I nearly fell over when Maverick mentioned it

to me. What you're doing for her is just brilliant, Dante. I'm really proud of you."

"Uh... thanks." I scratch the back of my head and force a smile, turning back to the door when it opens.

But it's just Maverick and Arlo with Alexia and Trixi trailing behind.

"You guys seen Selah?" I ask.

"She not here yet?" Arlo's face bunches with a frown. "I thought she was one of those on-time freaks like you."

"She is... mostly," I murmur, brushing off the insult as I try calling her again. "Dammit."

"Chill, man." Maverick slaps me on the arm. "She'll be here. She's probably just nervous or something."

"Yeah, maybe she's doing some deep breathing in the bathroom." Trixi nods, her purple hair bouncing around her shoulders. "I told her about it this morning. Lock yourself in a stall and just take in a few deep breaths."

"In the bathroom?" Alexia spins with an incredulous look. "Are you kidding me? Deep breaths in the stinkiest place in the school?"

"Hey, it's private. That's why I suggested it."

"She's probably passed out from the smell and is lying on some dirty bathroom floor." Alexia rolls her eyes while I scowl at her. "What?" She laughs. "The cleaner will find her. Don't stress."

I groan, tipping my head back and starting to pace again.

I don't know why I'm this antsy. It's just weird that she's running so late. And maybe I'm a little nervous about performing in front of my friends, too, and I know the second I see her, I'll start to feel better. We're doing this for her. For us.

"Would you stop pacing? Dude." Maverick snickers at me. "She'll be here."

"Maybe she's chickened out." The words come out of nowhere, but maybe that's what I've truly been fearing.

She can't handle this.

Which means maybe she can't handle me.

Because I'm the bad influence, right?

I'm the guy who's not good enough for her.

Londyn just said it.

She—

“Amera and her are in homeroom together. Maybe she knows.” Londyn shares a quick look with her boyfriend. Her forehead wrinkles, and he moves into her space, holding the back of her neck while she texts her friend.

I mean, I think they're still friends.

Things have been kind of disjointed since Londyn chose us over them, and Amera's been stuck in the middle, trying to play Switzerland.

Londyn swallows, holding her phone and shooting a pained frown up at Maverick. He kisses the side of her head and then reads over her shoulder.

Now he's frowning too.

“What?” I snap.

“She said Selah's at the library...” Maverick looks at me. “With you.”

“What? Why would she think I was there?”

Londyn's thumbs are flying over her screen again as she confirms the details with Amera.

The second the response comes in, her mouth dips at the corners.

“What'd she say?” Arlo steps up to my side.

“She said that Selah got an email from Dante asking him to meet her in the library.” Her cheeks go red, and she darts her eyes to Miss Fillion before whispering, “In the back corner.”

We all know what that means.

My stomach jolts with surprise, then starts to plummet. “I never sent that email.”

The color drains from Londyn’s face as she looks up at me and whispers, “Then who did?”

FALSE ACCUSATIONS



SELAH

I HOLD MY BREATH, gripping the sides of my skirt and letting my lips lift into a wide smile.

That instantly drops away the second Ronan appears in the aisle.

My heart stops beating.

My muscles freeze as he slowly walks toward me.

“Hey, snitch.” His eyes glitter, but not in the good way.

He’s got malice on his mind, and it all starts clicking into place as I back myself into the shelves and try to figure out what to do.

Run! You need to run!

But Dante’s coming. He’ll be here any second.

“I see you got my email.” Ronan jumps forward, boxing me in with his arms.

My stomach bunches. He sent that email?

He must have hacked Dante’s account somehow.

And now I’m here and...

And Dante’s not coming.

My throat swells, making the already thick air in my lungs even harder to manage. My heart’s started working again, but

it's now going a hundred miles an hour, and it's making my head spin.

“Get back,” I squeak. My voice is barely working. “I mean it.”

He snickers, running his knuckle down my cheek. I flinch away from his touch and try to duck beneath his arm, but he grabs my shoulder and throws me back into the shelving.

I wince as the wood cuts into my back.

“Why'd you do it?” he seethes.

“Because it was the right thing,” I whisper.

“So that's it? You're just gonna go around the school now, telling on people until you get us all expelled?”

“What?” My face bunches with confusion. “I had to tell them about you. You were trying to pin it on Maverick.”

“I'm not talking about me,” he snarls. “I'm talking about Henry.”

My face bunches in confusion. “I didn't tell anyone about Henry.”

“You saw him down here. You knew he was up to something, and you told on him, you little brat.”

He shoves my shoulders and I gasp, crossing my arms over my stomach and trying to make myself small.

But he won't let me. Grabbing my braid, he yanks my hair back so I'm forced to look him right in eyes.

They're burning with rage.

“I didn't say anything to anyone about Henry.” My voice is so tiny.

He doesn't believe me.

“You just love stirring shit, don't you? Quiet little Selah. A snake in the grass, right? What the fuck is wrong with you?”

My breath hitches.

“Why the hell are you trying to take down your own people?” He starts thundering. “You’re sticking up for them? Street trash! What the hell did Henry ever do to them, huh?”

I flinch. His spittle hits my cheek, and I lean away from him, but he grabs my face, forcing my head back. His fingers are cutting into my cheeks. Tears burn my eyes, making it hard to see him.

“They’re not trash.” My words are distorted by the way he’s holding me, and I want to wail, push him off me, scream for help. “And I didn’t do anything to Henry. I swear.”

My frozen muscles are aching to move and get away from this guy.

“You can’t keep doing this to us.” He smacks my head back against the shelf, and a band of pain wraps around my temples. “You’re betraying us, and we won’t tolerate it. So, this is your final warning. You stop snitching and getting us in trouble, or we are going to make your life a living hell. You don’t think I can’t destroy everything you care about? Your stupid little Misfits. Your *boyfriend*. Yeah, he’s gonna burn. I can get him kicked out of this place, and I will. Believe me, I will.” His voice is toxic gas in my face, and I clench my jaw, my insides writhing.

He’s threatening Dante.

He’s threatening the one person in this school who actually gets me.

And it makes something in me snap.

With a little grunt, I raise my knee. I don’t score a clean shot between the legs, but the movement is enough to surprise him. He loosens his grip on me. With a savage scream, I shove him, then ball my hand into a fist and strike out the way Alexia showed me.

I probably don’t get enough force through my hips, but my aim’s pretty good, and I get him right in the face.

My knuckles protest instantly, and I start shaking my hand, jumping away from him and taking off down the aisle.

But I don't get far before Gabe's blocking my path.

"You feisty little bitch," he snickers, grabbing my blazer and pulling me back when I try to duck past him.

Ronan comes staggering around the corner, cradling his face and cursing at me.

I yelp and try to squeeze past Gabe again, but he's not having it. Moving to the left, he stands in my way until Ronan catches up to me. Fisting my shirt, he shoves me into the shelves. A sharp pain runs down my arm, and the books rattle, the end ones falling on their sides.

"Hey! Ronan! Let her go!" a voice thunders from the end of the aisle, and I glance up with a gasp, surprised to find Troy storming toward us. "What the hell are you guys doing?"

"She needs to learn."

"Like this?" Troy grabs his brother's arm, shoving him back before reaching Ronan and forcing him to let me go. "Stop it, man."

"You stop!" Gabe shoves his brother so hard he nearly lands on me. I topple to the side with a yelp, but Troy catches me before I hit the floor. I stare up at him, wondering where this is all coming from. Troy's usually the one following his brother around, but Gabe is obviously crossing one of Troy's moral lines right now.

"She has to pay for what she did." Gabe points at me while Ronan stands there growling.

"You know how this works, Troy. You're either with us or you're not."

Troy looks between them and then over at me. Shaking his head with a pained frown, he looks to the floor and mutters, "This is bullshit."

"She got Ronan suspended!" Gabe shouts. "She got Henry in trouble."

"Henry got Henry in trouble!" Troy yells back, then points at Ronan. "And if you'd stop putting your hands on girls when they don't want you to, you wouldn't risk suspension. I kept

my mouth shut through all of that because I was trying to be loyal. But this?" He points to me, looks at my face, and winces. "This is bullshit."

"Then leave!" Ronan thunders, snatching my blazer and trying to drag me back into the corner.

"No!" I shout, wrestling against him. "Let me go!" I scream.

Wrenching away from him, I struggle out of my jacket, launching out with my fist and fighting my way free. Ronan jumps out of my reach, and I twist around Gabe, who makes a grab at me. But he can't reach me in time because Troy blocks his way.

"Come back here, you bitch!"

I glance over my shoulder, racing full speed down the aisle and crashing into a body. Strong arms come around me, and I let out another scream.

PUNCHING HURTS



DANTE

“SELAH, it’s me. It’s me! It’s okay.”

I try to hold her steady, and it’s not until her wild green gaze reaches me that she stops fighting.

“It’s me,” I whisper, smoothing the hair off her face.

She starts to shake, crumpling against me and breaking down with sobs.

Maverick rushes past me, Arlo on his tail.

“Oi, you two! Stop!” Mr. McTavish comes barreling in behind them.

He was on his way out of the school, holding Miss Tomes’s hand and smiling down at her when we ran past. We must have looked frantic or something because they both stopped walking and called after us.

“Everything okay?”

“Selah might be in trouble!” one of us shouted. “We think she’s in the library.”

“She is,” Miss Tomes called back. “I saw her go in there.”

I didn’t stop to hear the rest, I just picked up my pace, needing to get to my girl and figure out who tricked her into going there in the first place.

Some shit hacked my email.

I don't know how they did it, but I am—

Selah whimpers, curling against me. I rest my cheek against hers while Mr. McTavish starts thundering.

“When the hell are you gonna learn?” he growls, his Scottish accent thickening. “Ronan, on your feet!”

“I didn't touch her,” he starts saying.

The way Selah stiffens against my chest tells me that's a lie.

“What did he do?” I'm trying to keep my voice calm and easy—I don't want to scare her—but it's an effort. She can no doubt feel my tension as much as hear it.

She presses her forehead into the crook of my neck and clings a little tighter.

“She punched me!” Ronan's voice is pitching. “She's a psycho.”

“That's enough. Shut it, you!” Mr. McTavish growls. “And you two, don't move an inch.”

“Selah.” I run my hand down her back. “Talk to me. What did he do? Are you hurt?”

“My knuckles hurt,” she whispers against my skin.

I gently guide her away from me, taking her hand so I can examine her knuckles. They're red and maybe a little swollen.

“Nice.” Alexia snickers behind me. “I'm proud of you, girl. You got 'em good.”

Selah's lips twitch but soon pull into a pout. “Punching hurts.”

“No pain, no gain.” Alexia shrugs.

I frown at the feisty little Misfit. “Would you shut up?”

“What?” Alexia snaps back, looking at me like I'm the douche.

Taking Selah's face, I notice her flinch a little as I smooth my thumb along her jawline. That's when I notice the red marks on her cheeks as well.

“Did he slap you?” My entire body starts to vibrate.

Londyn gasps and steps up to her side. Her eyes are shimmering, too, and I bet she’s now reliving her run-in with Ronan.

“He didn’t hit me.” Selah shakes her head. “He just grabbed my face and shouted at me. He said I got Henry in trouble, but I didn’t.” Her voice breaks apart, tears stealing the rest of her words.

“I’m so sorry.” Londyn starts to sniff, too, forcing me out of the equation and pulling Selah in for a hug. I stand back, watching them, feeling kind of helpless as they cry against each other.

I look for Mav and spot him near the aisle. He’s staring at his girlfriend, his expression switching from a pained frown to a look that could kill.

He glares down the aisle to where Mr. McTavish is arguing with Ronan, who won’t keep his mouth shut.

That’s right, man. Keep talking. Bury yourself for me.

“He was just trying to talk to her, and she freaked out and started swinging. I saw it.” Gabe looks from Mr. McTavish to his twin brother. “Right, Troy? You were here.”

Troy flinches, staring at his brother, then looking down the aisle toward Selah.

She steps back from Londyn and turns to face him. Her tear-streaked face is breaking my heart, and I don’t know what she’s silently trying to communicate with Troy right now, but I don’t want him looking at her anymore. That creep can keep his eyes to himself.

I step to her side, firing him a ‘back off’ glare while wrapping my arm around her waist.

Troy clenches his jaw and looks to the ground.

Selah’s expression crumples, fresh tears trickling from her eyes.

Squeezing the back of his neck, Troy steals another look toward us, his eyes skirting over the Misfits before landing back on Mr. McTavish. “She was defending herself,” he murmurs quietly.

Gabe’s lips part. He looks like Troy just punched him in the stomach.

These two are close, and I’ve got a feeling one brother just betrayed the other, and it’s possibly the first time that has ever happened.

“Stop lying,” Gabe mutters, his nostrils flaring as he glares at his mirror image.

When they’re both dressed in uniform, it’s really hard to tell them apart. I usually know just by placement. Gabe’s leading the charge, and Troy’s trailing behind.

I’ve never seen them in this position before, facing off against each other.

Selah sniffs, and I pull her close, kissing the side of her head while we wait for Mr. McTavish to decide what to do. It’s a little awkward. He’s not a teacher, so I have no idea how much authority he has. He’s kind of scary, which works in his favor, but...

Where did Miss Tomes go?

And where’s Miss Fillion?

My question is answered moments later as they bustle through the door with the deputy principal on their heels.

“Okay, what is going on in here?” Mr. Van Weiss storms between us, letting out a tired sigh when he spots Ronan, Gabe, and Troy standing there. He then looks to me, his forehead wrinkling before his eyes dart to Selah’s blotchy face and then land on Maverick. “Tell me you had nothing to do with this.”

Maverick raises his hands as two white flags. “No, sir.”

“Of course he didn’t.” Miss Fillion tuts. “April, check the video. That’ll tell us what we need to know.”

“Already on my way.” Miss Tomes pulls out her keys, heading for the office, while, much to my pleasure, Ronan and Gabe share mystified, worried frowns.

I have no idea when a camera was installed in the library, but I’ve got a feeling it might be aimed at the back corner, which is how Henry got pinged and how Ronan is about to go down for real this time.

TOO MANY TEARS WILL GIVE YOU A
HEADACHE



SELAH

I DON'T WANT to watch the video.

I already know what happened to me, and I'm not that keen on reliving it.

My body is desperate to walk out of here. I need a hole to crawl into. A safe place to hide. I want my spot on the roof. I just want to be alone so I can lick my wounds.

But Miss Fillion forces me to stay. She has her arm around me, pinning me to the spot while Miss Tomes and Mr. Van Weiss watch the footage.

Both of their faces mottle with anger, and the deputy principal looks ready to knock heads together when he turns and points his finger at Ronan.

"You crossed a line, and this time we've got all the evidence we need. Your mum might be chairperson of the board, but she can't save you from this one."

Ronan lifts his chin, trying to stand tall, but the look in his eyes is wavering. He knows he's done for.

"And don't think I won't take this to the police as well," Mr. Van Weiss snaps. "I've had enough of your foolish behavior!"

I glance at Maverick and Dante. They share a fleeting smile before dipping their heads to hide their triumph.

“And as for you two...” Mr. Van Weiss points at the twins. “The camera didn’t catch that action, so I will be relying on Selah’s recount of events.”

Ronan scoffs and shakes his head. “So the rich bitch wins again.”

I shrink against Miss Fillion’s side. Her arm around me tightens.

“Hey!” Mr. Van Weiss barks. “You’re in enough trouble as it is. Don’t make it worse for yourself.” Darting a look at me, he points to the library doors. “Selah, you’re coming with me. I want a full account of what happened. You three.” He points between the culprits. “You can wait outside my office. No one is leaving here until we’ve sorted out this mess.”

He heads out of the library, calling over his shoulder. “Let’s go, people!”

I jump to and scurry after him. Dante goes to follow me, but Miss Fillion holds him back.

“She needs support!” he starts to argue, but I’m too far away to hear the teacher’s calm reply.

“It’s okay. I’ll go.” That’s Londyn. Her footsteps hurry to catch up with me as Dante’s arguments disappear behind the library doors.

Londyn and I follow Mr. Van Weiss to his office, taking a seat as soon as he tells us to.

“Are you okay with this?” he asks.

I glance at Londyn, who gives me an encouraging smile before taking my hand.

With a stoic nod, I look to the principal and whisper, “Yes.”

My swallow is thick and noisy as I wait for Mr. Van Weiss to get seated.

We're now sitting in the comfy chairs in the corner of his office. Flicking back his suit jacket, he smooths a hand down his tie and looks at me with a gentle smile.

"I'm sorry you have to go through this again, but it's really important I get the facts straight. I saw what happened in the video, but then you ran down the next aisle, and the story gets lost from there. Can you please tell me what happened?"

I lick my lips, my stomach trembling as I squeeze Londyn's hand and recount the events from the moment Gabe stopped me. I try to remember the exact wording of the argument he had with Troy, but it gets a little fuzzy, and I end up stumbling over my words.

"It's okay," Mr. Van Weiss soothes, scribbling down notes as I go. "Take your time."

I nod and take a breath. "Troy was trying to help me. That's the main thing you need to know. He said he'd stayed quiet when the whole Ronan and Londyn thing went down, but he couldn't do it again. I think he's been eaten up by guilt, and maybe he's trying to make amends."

"Well, that's good to hear."

"It's probably caused big friction between him and his brother, though."

"Hey." Mr. Van Weiss waits until I'm looking at him before offering up a gentle smile. "That is not your problem."

I nod, dipping my chin and fighting the urge to cry again.

My head is pounding after all these tears. And getting my head knocked against a bookshelf isn't helping either.

There's a quiet tap at the door, and we glance across to see Monica slipping into the room. "I just heard what happened." She rushes over to me, smoothing her hand across my shoulders and causing tears to well in my eyes again.

Seeing my sweet house mother cracks the feeble shell I had around myself, and I dip my head and start sobbing the way I did when Dante was holding me.

I hate this.

I hate crying.

I don't want to be in this office anymore.

"It's okay, sweetie." Monica kisses my head and cradles me against her shoulder. "Are we nearly done here, Eric?"

"Yes, I think I've got what I need. I'll deal with the boys. Why don't you take Selah back to the boardinghouse and get her checked for any bruises? Sounds like she got pushed around a bit."

"Do we need to go to the hospital?" She pulls away, looking at me with that motherly concern she wears so well.

I shake my head. "I need some pills for a headache, but I can still see straight and everything. I'm fine. Really."

Monica studies my face, looking into my eyes for a long minute before nodding and helping me to my feet.

"Thank you, Selah." Mr. Van Weiss stands with me. "The principal may have some more questions for you on Monday, and I was serious when I mentioned taking this to the police. Do you think you could handle talking to them as well?"

My mouth goes dry, my entire body stiffening.

I know I should say yes. I mean, I will say yes, I just don't know how to right this second. The idea of being interviewed by the police is kind of overwhelming.

"It's okay." Mr. Van Weiss gives me a gentle smile. "You don't have to deal with that right now. Have yourself a quiet weekend. Rest up, and don't you worry about those boys. I'll make sure they don't come within an inch of you."

"Thank you, sir," I whisper and walk to the door, flanked by Monica and Londyn.

By the time we get back to the boardinghouse, I'm exhausted, but everyone is there waiting to check on me. They all crowd around me at once, and it's too much.

Pushing Dante's hand off my arm, I wriggle my way out of the crowd and make a beeline for my bedroom, wishing I could lock myself inside and block out the world.

HATING ON THE WORLD



DANTE

MUCH TO MY ANNOYANCE, Selah skips dinner. Monica tries to get her to come out, but she refuses, so I sit in the dining hall with my friends, picking at my food and hating on the world for a bit.

I'm not mad at Selah.

I'm pissed off with Ronan and Gabe.

And maybe a little at myself. I promised to protect her, and I wasn't there when she needed me most.

That wasn't your fault. Your email got hacked!

I'll have to follow that up on Monday. Sully has assured me that the IT guy will look into it for me and make sure my account is secure.

It has to have been Ronan or Gabe. Those freaking Asshats!

Troy's off the hook. According to Londyn, Selah said he tried to help her. I should probably thank him, but I can't find the words right now. I just want to see my girlfriend, but she's set on shutting me out.

Okay, so maybe I am a little annoyed with her too.

Why is she doing this?

I want to be there for her, but I can't when she won't let me.

Shoving the fried rice around my plate, I pick at a piece of chicken, forcing myself to nibble it.

Arlo shoots me a sympathetic smile from across the table. Maverick's not here. He got permission to go home with Londyn. I think he's worried that Selah's incident will trigger bad memories for his girlfriend. He wants to be there for her. I get that. I want to be there for my girl too!

My insides vibrate, frustration coursing through me as I push my plate away and lean back in my chair.

Alexia opens her mouth to say something, but I shut her up with a swift look. She pulls a face at me but then stills when she spots something over my shoulder.

"There she is," she whispers, lifting her chin.

I whip around in time to see Selah pause in the doorway, then shake her head and quickly retreat.

"Clear my plate for me." I push it toward Arlo and bolt from my seat, ignoring Sully's confused frown as I dart past him and out of the dining hall. I can't see Selah, but I notice the door leading outside is slowly closing, so I head that direction, trying to catch up to her.

Selah might not want me to follow her, and if she tells me to go away, I will.

I just want to check on her. Make sure she's all right.

"I'm fine," she mutters just before I reach her.

At first I think she's trying to get rid of me before I've even said anything, but then I hear the response through her phone.

"I can't believe this happened to you." It's a woman. She sounds upset. Afraid.

It's probably her mother.

"They made a wrong assumption and went after me. My guard was down, and I didn't see it coming." Selah's long hair

billows in the cold winter breeze.

I wish I could step forward and wrap my arms around her, keep her warm.

But I stay put, quietly waiting on the path leading away from the boarding house.

“Oh, Selah, sweetheart.” The woman’s voice wobbles. “Your father is going to make sure those boys get exactly what they deserve. I can’t believe you got mixed up with Ronan again.”

“Yeah, he’s a first-class jerk.” Selah sighs.

I shuffle behind her. I don’t think she’s heard me yet, and I don’t want to startle her. I should probably walk away, but I know her mum stresses her out sometimes. I kind of want to be here after the call is done so I can offer any kind of comfort she might need.

So I stay put, standing still and trying not to draw attention to myself.

“Why would they think it was you?” the woman asks.

“Probably because I told the truth about Ronan.” Selah sniffs.

“You shouldn’t have taken such a big risk.”

“I had to tell the truth, Mum. An innocent person was taking the fall, and it would have been wrong if I hadn’t spoken up.”

“I know. I know. I just...” Her mother tuts. “That boy should have been expelled *then*. After the way he treated that girl and then tried to pin it on someone else. Now he’s going after you. He better be sent on his way this time or your father and I will be making a big fuss.”

“He might be.”

“They all should be.”

“Not Troy. He tried to help.”

Her mother huffs again. “You shouldn’t be spending time with these people, Selah.”

“I... I’m not. I never hang out with the Stainton brothers, and I’ve always avoided Ronan.”

“I’m not talking about them. I mean those misfit kids. Ronan probably would have left you alone if you weren’t associating with the people he hates the most. He definitely wouldn’t have falsely accused you if you’d just stuck to your corner. But you had to go and get yourself a dance partner.”

I flinch, hating her mother’s tone.

“You... you would have made me get a new dance partner.”

“No, I would have *made* Clinton keep his word. You shouldn’t be in this situation, and I warned you that associating with that dance crew would lead to trouble.”

I hold my breath, waiting for Selah to tell her it wasn’t our fault. We had nothing to do with what happened this afternoon.

But she doesn’t say anything.

“I don’t want you dancing with that Dante boy. This needs to end. Now. I know this puts you in a tricky position, but I will speak to Clinton personally.”

“He wants to dance with his girlfriend,” Selah murmurs.

“Well, then... maybe this year you just... come along and watch.”

No. I shake my head. She’s too good to stand on the sidelines.

“I know dancing isn’t really your passion.” Mrs. Dixon’s voice is strained. “You’ve never loved it the way your father and I do. The way your sister did. But we wanted it to be a family thing. Now I’m not so sure. After what you’ve been through, maybe this year we make an exception. I, of course, want you to be safe, so... why don’t you just come along and be part of the audience? And then, over the summer break, we’ll find you a new partner, and things can go back to the way they were.”

I continue to shake my head. Waiting. *Waiting* for Selah to deny her mother.

But she doesn't say anything.

She just stands there, staring at her phone and not saying a damn word.

SAD REJECTION



SELAH

MUM'S GIVING ME AN OUT. This is what I've been waiting for. What I've wished for all these years. A chance to be an invisible bystander.

I'd still have to go, but I wouldn't have to perform or be judged or...

Part of me wants to thank my mother, blow kisses at the phone.

Yet there's this sense of sadness I don't understand either.

"Okay, sweetheart?"

I nod, then realize I'm not on a video call and have to croak, "Yeah."

"All right. Well, you take care of yourself. I want you to have a quiet, restful weekend and I'll see you back home for the holidays soon. Only two weeks to go."

I swallow and nod again. "See you, Mum."

"Bye, sweetheart. Call us if you need us."

I hang up, letting out a heavy sigh before turning back to sneak into the boarding house.

That's when I see him.

Dante. He's standing right behind me, far enough away to give me some space, close enough to hear everything I just said... or didn't say.

The outside light casts a yellow beam across him, leaving the right side of his face in shadow. It's not enough to hide his feelings from me, though.

He stares at me, the look on his face kind of wounded.

"I..." Lifting the phone in my hand, all I can really do is shrug.

"So, that's it? You're just... quitting? All the work we've put in. You're... that's it? Just like that?" His voice is wounded too and I don't know what to say.

Opening my mouth, I try to reply, but nothing comes out.

All I can do is shrug again.

"And what about us? You don't care about proving a point anymore? You're just gonna ditch the charity kid, cos he's too much trouble, right?"

I stare at him, my lips twitching uselessly.

With a little huff, he shakes his head and walks away.

I can't call out to him. I want him to go. Like I have the energy for this kind of conversation right now.

Closing my eyes, I let the cool air wrap around my body. Swaying on my feet, I stay frozen in the cold winter night, too spent to even shed a tear.

I may have just lost the best thing that ever happened to me. I don't even know what to do with that tragic idea.

So I just stand there.

Useless.

Alone.

Acting like the weirdo everyone thinks I am.

Saturday morning comes after a night of basically no sleep. Amera and Celeste are smart enough to leave me alone. When

I finally drag my butt out of bed, I shuffle out to the dining hall only to realize I missed breakfast.

I don't care.

I'm not hungry anyway.

Monica notices me standing there and checks on me, but I murmur that I'm fine and wander into the common room.

Big mistake.

Dante is sitting there with his friends. They're huddled in a circle and when Alexia spots me, she narrows her eyes in a glare that has me shrinking back against the wall. Trixi nudges her to stop, flashing me a tight, disappointed smile before checking on Dante.

His head is down, but it moves just a little to spot me.

I cross my arms and dart out the door, spending a restless day in my room. I have a shower at one point, making it so long that I get yelled out of the stall by Monica, who doesn't realize it's me in there.

She quickly changes her tone when I poke my head around the curtain. "Sorry, I thought you were Tash. She always takes way too long in the showers."

"I'm getting out."

The police stop by for a visit in the late afternoon. Monica sits with me while I give my statement. The female officer who leads the interview is really nice and keeps the session brief. I'm grateful for her consideration but am still left with a pounding headache.

I take some pain killers and head back to bed, but then Monica forces me into the dining hall at dinner time where I sit by myself, trying and failing to read.

I guess things are getting back to normal, just the way Mum wants them.

She's right, I suppose, it's safer this way.

But it doesn't dull the ache in my chest. It doesn't bring me any kind of comfort.

Glancing over my book, I spot the Misfits. They're talking amongst themselves. Arlo laughs along with Tobias and Trixi. Dante's hunched over his plate, and I would do anything to have him look over his shoulder and try to find me.

But he won't.

Because I rejected him.

I still can't think of the right words to say.

Is this really it?

I'm just throwing it all away so I don't have to dance?

No, not just that.

Opening myself up is terrifying and it led to me running for a hookup in the library. The old Selah never would have fallen for that. I was just so caught up in my love for Dante that I threw caution to the wind.

Wait. My love for Dante?

I love him?

I bite my lip, burying my nose back in my book and telling myself I'm crazy. I have a crush on Dante, that's it.

Oh, okay. So that's why you're hurting so bad right now. Because he's just a crush.

I sniff, blinking and trying to make the words on the page less fuzzy. But then a wave of laughter reaches me from the Misfits' corner and all I can think about is how much I want to be sitting over there right now.

I want Dante's hand on my knee under the table.

I want him smiling at me. Checking on me.

With a little huff, I slap my book closed and grab my plate. Scraping a large chunk of uneaten food into the scraps bucket, I stack my dirty dishes and stalk out of the room.

At midnight, after hours of lying on my bed and going out of my mind, I creep out the window and climb up to the roof.

That cold air feels so good on my skin. I've been shut up for basically an entire day and I need those icy wind tendrils to

wake me up and—

I stutter to a stop.

Dante's here.

He's standing there in the glow of a nearly full moon and watching me make my final steps onto the roof.

I place my boot on the rough concrete and linger by the ladder.

"Hey." He raises his hand at me.

Lifting my fingers, I wiggle them back at him.

"Don't worry, I'm not trying to steal your spot or anything. I just couldn't stop thinking about our first dance up here and I..." He shrugs, looking pained as he points up at the sky. "It's nearly a full moon again."

"Yeah." I nod, struggling to speak past the lump in my throat.

My whole body starts to ache. The distance between us is too far. All wrong.

I want to close that gap, feel his arms around me again.

But he won't want that anymore.

I rejected him.

Shifting away from the ladder, I give him space to leave me, then start to wonder if I should offer to be the one to go.

But this is my roof and he doesn't want to steal my spot. He just said that.

My forehead bunches as the awkward silence continues to stretch between us.

"Look, Selah, I know you don't really want me around at the moment." He works his jaw to the side, acting as if those words are like poison in his mouth. "I'm sorry I can't be what you need." He clears his throat, shoving his hands into his hoodie pockets and shaking his head. "But if you change your mind, I'll dance with you anytime." He looks up, his lips

tipping into a sad smile. “I’ll kiss you in the moonlight... anytime.”

My breath catches and the ache in my chest starts to shift. It blooms and stretches, like my heart wants to reach out of my chest and pull him close.

Before I can think for one more second, I walk toward him.

He stays put, watching me come, probably wondering what the heck I’m doing.

But I don’t make him wait for long.

As soon as I’m close enough, I grab his face in my hands and kiss him. It’s not some delicate, sweet touching of the lips. I dive deep, pouring in my pain and desperation, my hunger and thirst.

I don’t want to just kiss him in the moonlight.

I want to drown in his every touch in this moonlight.

MY PRINCESS JASMINE



DANTE

I CAN'T GET my hands out of my pockets fast enough. The second Selah's tongue slips into my mouth, I want to fuse our bodies together.

Wrapping my arms around her waist, I pull her against me, running my hand up her back and bringing us as close as possible.

Relief pumps through me in overpowering waves as she kisses me senseless, then starts trailing her lips up to my ear.

I rest my chin on her shoulder and start to sway, closing my eyes and just being in this moment with her. She wants me. Sure, she hasn't outright said it, but that kiss...

Yeah, she wants me.

A smile stretches my lips as I start to hum, taking her hand and dancing her around the rooftop.

I was listening to "By Your Side" when I was trying to distract myself this afternoon, and it comes to mind now. My voice doesn't really do it justice, but Selah doesn't seem to mind. She smiles at me when I raise my hand to spin her in a circle, then laughs when I dip her, kissing her nose before pulling her straight again.

With a little lift, I keep the dance going, spinning us around before bringing her back against my body and swaying

in the soft light.

She snuggles her face into my neck and murmurs, “I could do this forever.”

“Dance with me?” I ask.

“Yeah. I love dancing with you.”

Easing away from her, I try to catch her eye, waiting until her head’s lifted off my shoulder before saying, “Then let’s not quit.”

She stops moving, her hand gripping mine as we stay frozen in a waltz pose.

“I know you don’t love it. I mean, the whole eyes-on-you thing and the competition, but if you back out now, then how will your parents ever accept me? How will we show them how great you are?” I let go of her hand so I can gently cup her cheek. “You said you love dancing with me. So do that. Go to this competition and dance with me.”

Her swallow is thick, and my heart starts to thunder.

I can’t force her to do this.

She doesn’t really have to prove anything to her parents.

It’s not my place to demand something from her, no matter how desperately I want her to say yes.

Her mouth starts to move. Her lips part, and I hold my breath, waiting for her answer.

Nothing comes.

Just a quiet smile.

I brush my thumb over her bottom lip. “Is that a yes?”

And then she starts to nod.

“That’s a yes?”

“Yeah.”

“Yes!” I let out a whoop, forgetting that we’re supposed to be in stealth mode up here.

“Shhh!” She slaps her hand over my mouth, softly laughing when I lift her off her feet and swing her around. Can’t have her missing out on my happy dance, right?

On the second turn, she spreads her arms wide, lifting her face to the moonlight and letting out a quiet cheer of her own.

That’s my girl.

My Selah.

My Princess Jasmine.

MY MAN AND THIS MUSIC



SELAH

SO OUR DANCE on the rooftop gave Dante yet another idea for our creative piece, and my body is humming with nerves as I prepare to perform it for our peers.

We spent all of Sunday in the dance studio finalizing steps and adding in the last sequence, which I have to admit I *love*.

Dante is my diamond in the rough, and this dance is a statement that not everyone will understand, but we do. And that's what counts.

"You good?" Dante comes up behind me, perching his chin on my shoulder and murmuring against my cheek.

I nod.

"You're nervous."

I nod again.

"You're gonna be great. We worked our asses off yesterday, and the dance was looking awesome."

I nod for a third time, and he starts to laugh, slowly spinning me to face him.

Lightly pinching my chin, he rests his forehead against mine. "Ignore everyone else. The music, the steps, me—we're the only things in your world right now."

I close my eyes and smile, inhaling deeply just before Dante steps away from me. Taking my hand, he turns to his friends and Miss Fillion.

“Thanks for coming this afternoon. We really appreciate the support. Selah and I have been working really hard to get this creative piece looking great. If you have any feedback for us, we’re totally open to it, but hopefully you’ll love what you see and we can send in our audition clip tonight.”

Arlo lets out a cheer, which sets off a round of applause and whistles.

Dante grins, giving me a little wink before looking to Cedric.

“Good to go, man.” He gives him a thumbs-up.

Dante nods at Maverick, who’s our DJ for this one. He helped us mix up the songs on Garage Band early Sunday morning so they flow from one to the other. I’m still having palpitations over our music choices, but it’s an epic mash-up that I hope the Misfits will at least love.

“Let’s do this.” Dante swivels to face me, his gentle gaze sending a pulse of warm energy right through my body.

I can do this.

The Latino beat kicks in, and we move instinctively, the dance we’ve been pouring our hearts into flowing through my body as I forget everyone else and focus on my man and this music.

WE'RE FAMILY



DANTE

WE FINISH the dance with a flourish, and I stand in my final pose out of breath but elated. That went well.

An instant cheer goes up around the dance studio with Miss Fillion yelling the loudest.

“That was incredible!” She’s gaping at Selah, then grinning at me, then smiling and laughing and resting her hands on her hips. “Did you two seriously do all of that on your own?”

Selah bites her lips and blushes while I wrap my arm around her waist. “We got inspiration from movies as well, but yeah, we put it together.”

“And you told me you knew nothing about choreography.” She rolls her eyes, then starts to laugh. “That was amazing!”

“Thanks, Miss.” I smile at her and nod, feeling her compliment all the way down to my toes. But I can’t take all the credit. “Selah’s been dancing for a long time. She’s taught me all the ballroom dancing stuff.”

“Well, it’s obvious you’ve been dancing for a while.” Miss Fillion flicks a blonde curl off her cheek and grins at my girl.

Selah looks like she’s struggling to comprehend what’s going on right now.

“Other people see it too.” I squeeze her hand. “You’re brilliant. You just don’t know it.”

“People don’t think I’m brilliant,” she quickly counters.

“I do.” I smile at her and enjoy the color scorching her cheeks. I love the way her green eyes light with a smile that seems to be only for me.

“I’ll put the footage in our Dropbox, Dante,” Cedric calls to me.

“Can I see it?” I run over to his computer and pull Selah with me.

Soon the entire dance crew is crowding around Cedric’s laptop, critiquing the dance and telling us what they liked.

“I would change that bit up just a little. Like on the lift, maybe turn there, and her foot can touch the ground faster so you can spin into that next move.” Maverick points over my shoulder.

“That’s a good idea,” Selah murmurs. “Do we need to rerecord it, then?”

“I don’t think so.” Miss Fillion assures us. “This audition should be enough to get you into the creative round.”

“Do you really think so? They only take six to eight couples.” Selah bites her lip.

Londyn gives her a light nudge. “And you’ll be one of them.” She bounces on her toes, letting out an excited noise that’s half cheer, half squeal. “I can’t wait.”

Selah blinks. “What do you mean, you can’t wait?”

“I’m going.”

“What?”

“Yeah, me too.” Maverick throws his arm around Londyn’s shoulders.

“I will absolutely be there,” Trixi pipes up, and soon everyone is jabbering away.

“But...” Selah’s surprise is kind of endearing. “Why?”

“Ugh. To support you, you little weirdo.” Alexia rolls her eyes, then finishes with a wink and a smirk. “Of course we’re all coming.”

“I’ll arrange to hire a school van, and we can drive down together.” Miss Fillion pulls out her phone and starts taking notes. “It’ll be a huge day but so worth it. I’ll see if I can rope Jack in as well. He loves this kind of thing.”

“But it takes nearly four hours to drive to Napier.”

“I know.” Miss Fillion grins. “If we leave around six, we’ll get there right on time, and who cares if we don’t get back till the early hours of the morning? You can sleep all day on Sunday.”

“Is that okay?” I shake Selah’s hand, getting her attention and trying to wipe that shocked look off her face.

“Um...” She blinks. “Yeah. Yeah, of course.”

“You don’t look sure.” Londyn frowns. “Do you not want us to come?”

“No. It’s not that. It’s just...” She looks around the group. “My parents were going to charter a private plane for me to...” Her expression crumples with a wince, and she shakes her head. “The truth is, I’d much rather travel down with all of you.”

“Then why do you look like you’re trying to ingest sour grapes right now?” Alexia crosses her arms and glares at my girlfriend.

“Sorry, I just... I’ve never...” She swallows and casts a quick look my way before murmuring, “People don’t usually want to hang out with me, so I’m... I wasn’t expecting anyone to come down. It’s such a long way and so much effort and—”

Alexia cuts her off with a groan. “Seriously. Stop talking. We’re coming. End of story. Nothing is ever too much trouble when it comes to this group. We’re family.”

I smile at Alexia, who warns off any gooey sentiments with a little growl.

Fighting my grin, I dip my head and squeeze Selah's hand again. "Welcome to the crew," I murmur, kissing her cheek and getting a loud, very embarrassing reaction from everyone around me.

"Okay, okay, you lot!" Miss Fillion quickly calms us down, then points to Cedric. "Can you please help Dante and Selah edit this so it's ready to send? And you two..." She points between me and Selah. "You're not allowed to go to bed tonight until that thing has been entered into the competition. Got it?"

"Yes, Miss." I salute her, fighting this giddy sensation as I think ahead to the end of the month, when I will hopefully be performing this number with the girlfriend I never thought I'd have.

MUSIC MAKES HIM COME ALIVE



SELAH

THE COMPETITION IS in less than a week.

We only just got our audition tape in before the deadline, and it's been painful waiting to hear the results.

I didn't breathe a word about it to my parents during the school holiday break. Thankfully, they aren't the ones to select who gets into the creative round. The only people who are allowed to see the audition clips are the three judges. I don't know who came up with that rule, but I am so freaking grateful for it.

If Mum knew what we were planning, she'd totally freak out. They still think I'm just coming down to watch the competition. It's my choice to surprise them this way. I couldn't handle the drama and arguments, especially while I was home for the winter break. I did manage to get out of the charter flight. Thank God. The look on the Misfits' faces when I mentioned it was enough to make me cringe and cut off my explanation midsentence.

Mum can't understand why the heck I would want to drive down, but when I explained that Londyn and a few teachers from the school are really interested in seeing the event, she got all puffed up by the compliment and said it was okay.

She's going to get the shock of her life when I rock up with the Misfits.

Part of me is kind of looking forward to seeing it.

Another part is terrified that this is going to blow up in my face and be a huge disaster.

“Humble pie, not *I-told-you-so* meringues,” I murmur under my breath as I skip down to the dance studio.

My steps are light and playful these days. I’m used to shuffling everywhere, but since returning from my school break and being welcomed back by Dante’s open arms, I’ve felt lighter than I ever have before.

I have friends.

Weird, right?

I never thought I ever could, but the Misfits keep inviting me to sit with them at mealtimes. And I have been. It’s taking me an age to finish my current book because I’ve been too busy hanging out.

Maverick and Tobias taught me how to play poker the other night, and Trixi French-braided my hair before school yesterday morning.

Even Amera and Celeste have noticed a change.

“Stop humming all the time. It’s freaking me out,” Celeste muttered on her way to the bathroom last night.

“Sorry. I can’t get these songs out of my head,” I called to her back, but she ignored me.

Amera stared from her perch on the bed, then started to shake her head with a grin. “Love suits you, Miss Dixon.”

“It’s not just Dante.” Although he is a huge part of it. “It’s everything. The dancing, the Misfits, the...” My voice trailed off as Amera’s expression fell.

Crouching in front of her, I looked up at her slightly sad expression and reached for her hand. “Come with us next weekend. Hang out. I know you want to.”

Her brow creased with uncertainty, and she eventually shook her head, but I’m going to keep trying. She hasn’t said much about what happened to me in the library, but she looked

pretty annoyed about it when she found out... and she kind of smirked when she heard the news about Ronan's expulsion.

Yep. That's right, he's been asked to leave the school. Whether he comes back next year is yet to be seen, but for now, he's had to enroll at the local high school in Cambridge. He's also been charged with assault, but because he has no criminal record and is a minor, he's been issued a formal warning from the police and been set up with an alternative action plan. I googled what that meant, and he basically has to attend some counseling sessions and maybe do a few hours of community service. That's it.

A frustrating result for both Londyn and me, but at least he's not walking the hallways of Haven Academy anymore. Monica assures me that if he screws up again, the consequences will be far more serious, and he'd be an idiot not to wake up and change his ways.

Dante was fuming and started ranting that he hopes Ronan does slip up again so he can go down for real, but then Sully quietly reminded him that in order for Ronan to slip up, some other poor victim would have to pay a price.

We all fell silent after that.

It's seriously been the biggest scandal. I can only imagine the outrage Ronan's mother must have felt. It won't surprise me at all if she resigns from the board after this.

Because Gabe didn't have any prior bad conduct recorded against him—sneaky bastard—he got away with a week of detention and a phone call home.

I still hate that I have to see him around the boardinghouse and at school, but the Misfits are like my personal protective army.

And Troy has kind of joined the ranks.

I mean, not joined, but... I don't know. Something about him seems different these days. I don't see him loitering behind Gabe's shoulder as often, and he's been sitting on the edge of the common room, watching TV with us rather than lurking with his brother in the hallways.

Poor guy looks a little lost, to be honest.

“Selah! Wait up!” I turn at the bottom of the stairs and wait for Trixi and Tobias to reach me.

“Have you heard back yet?” Tobias flanks my right side while Trixi takes my left.

It’s still taking me time to adjust to having people around me. I’ve been alone for so long, letting fear of getting led astray force me into a corner. But now I’m part of a tight group, and... I kind of like it.

I smile between them, then shake my head. “Not yet.”

“Ah, this is killing me!” Trixi throws her head back dramatically. “You have to find out soon, right?”

“Yeah, it should be any day now.”

“Good, because your costume for the creative round is the best one of them all,” Tobias tells me. Yes, he and Trixi insisted on designing what I’d wear for the performances. They took all my measurements before I left for the school holidays, and I gave them some cash to buy the material. They then spent the two-week break sewing up a storm. They both had to leave for a week to visit their families but were able to come back early so they could work on finalizing the costumes together.

I have my final fitting in a few days, and they haven’t let me see anything yet. It’s killing me, because I’m worried they’ve gone way too extravagant and I’m going to end up looking like a Barbie doll in a ball gown, or maybe the outfit for the cha-cha will be scandalously skimpy.

“You guys, we might not get in,” I try to warn them, my lips dipping. “The fact that we haven’t heard back by now is not a good sign.”

“We’ve started making it anyway. You gave us money for the material, and we spent it. You can always wear it some other time, right, Tobias?” Trixi rabbits on to her best friend, ignoring what I just said.

“You’re going to look amazing.” Tobias sings the last word, and I try to smile, hiding my concerns.

This coming weekend is either going to be my biggest triumph or my highest fall.

My mother will die if I humiliate her at this thing.

You won’t. Trust these guys. Trust Dante.

I suck in a breath, pausing outside the dance studio.

“You going in?” Tobias opens the door for me.

“Yeah.” I nod and get dragged into the room by Trixi.

Dante is waiting by the mirrors, chatting with Maverick. The second he spots me, his face lights with a grin, and I know it’s cheesy, but I run into his arms. He lifts me up, swings me around once, then kisses me soundly on the mouth.

We haven’t seen each other since lunch break, which was a whole two hours ago and feels like an age.

“Ugh. Get a room!” Alexia groans.

“Or don’t!” Miss Fillion warns as she heads for the door. “I want this studio locked up and lights off by five o’clock, please, guys.”

We shout out our agreement.

“And let me know if you get into the creative round!” she calls over her shoulder. “Monica and Sully both have my number.”

I grin, falling a little harder for the dance teacher. She’s grown on me hugely over the last few weeks. I mean, I didn’t not like her before. I just didn’t know her. And now that I’m spending more time with the Misfits, I’m seeing why they adore her so much.

“I’m here! I’m here!” Londyn runs into the room. “Sorry I’m late.”

Jumping into Maverick’s arms, she gives him a kiss, the kind of kiss that I would never give anyone in public. I turn away and give Dante a blushing smile. He grins and shakes his

head, pecking my lips before walking over to the sound system.

For reasons I can't even explain, most of the Misfits crew have decided they want to learn our creative dance as well. Maybe it's a way to support us, I'm not sure, but having to teach them the steps has made Dante and me that much sharper.

We've all coupled up and have been practicing any chance we can get. The dance has become second nature, and I'm sure if I get to perform with Dante at the competition, I'll be able to do the steps without thinking.

We run through the song a few times before they all insist Dante and I practice our cha-cha. On the day, we'll probably be dancing to a classical cha-cha piece like "Oye Cómo Va," but for practice, we've been picking modern songs. Today we shake our hips to "Dance" by DNCE, and I love every beat of it.

It's hard not to laugh as I move my body alongside Dante's.

He's into it, and I love the look on his face right now, like this music makes him come alive.

Like *I* make him come alive.

Oh man, I really hope we shine in Napier. I need my parents to see this. To see him and how amazing he is.

Please don't let their preconceived ideas blind them to what's really here.

They no doubt think Dante would be the lucky one to score a rich girl like me, but they've got it all wrong.

I'm the lucky one.

There's no way I'd be doing something like this without him. I mean, sure, I'm forced to perform every year, but never in the creative round, and never have I actually been heading into a weekend like this without being filled with total dread.

I'm not sure I'm ready to admit it to anyone, but I'm actually kind of excited to dance with my boyfriend. Even if it

does cause trouble with my parents.

My gut twists, and I lose my foot, stumbling over the next few beats.

“It’s okay. Keep going.” Dante smiles at me, and I focus on his face until my phone starts ringing.

I glance at my watch and see it’s Mum calling.

As much as I want to ignore it, I ask Dante to cut the music while I take the call.

Everyone gathers on the other side of the room to give me a little privacy and I put on a bright voice.

“Hey, Mum.”

“Hi, sweetheart, just really quickly... the programs have arrived, and I’m so frustrated because there’s been a printing error, and I wanted to give you fair warning so that you don’t worry when you see your name on there. I told the program director you were withdrawing weeks ago, but your name is on here three times, including the creative round.”

I gasp. “We got in? I never got an email about it.”

My delighted shock is sliced in two by a stony silence that takes me a minute to catch up with.

Oh crap.

“Excuse me?” Mum’s voice is low.

Oh mega crap.

“You auditioned? For the creative round? With whom?”

I squeeze my eyes shut, making a fist and pressing it against my forehead.

So much for the element of surprise.

I’ve gone and done it now.

IT'S HARD TO WIN WHEN YOU'RE A
MISFIT



DANTE

I WAS TRYING to give Selah some privacy, but the second I heard her say, “We got in?” my head whipped in her direction.

And then I saw her shoulders bunch and her hand make a fist.

I’m moving before I can think better of it, quietly rushing over to her and resting my hand on her shoulder.

“You okay?” I mouth.

Her expression crumples, and she tips the phone so I can hear her mother’s voice.

“How could you not tell me about this? You would have had to send in your audition clip before the holidays even started, and you didn’t say a word? Why, Selah? Why!”

I wish I could wrench the phone out of her hand and tell her mother exactly why, but I can’t go doing that.

All I can do is look at Selah and silently plead for her to be strong, to not stay silent this time.

“I didn’t think you’d understand,” she murmurs.

“I love that you want to dance. What wouldn’t I understand?”

“Well, I’m...” She sucks in a breath, then blurts, “My partner is Dante, and I know you have a problem with him, for no good reason that I can see.”

“No good reason? He’s trouble.”

“He’s not.”

“If it weren’t for him, you wouldn’t have been attacked in the library.”

“That is so not true!” Her voice pitches, her green eyes sparking as she catches my gaze. “He had nothing to do with that.”

“All of those Misfits are—”

“They’re my friends now.” She barks the words, then looks like she wants to shrink in on herself.

I glance over my shoulder and can see them all listening in. Selah’s eyes dart to the mirror, and she catches their curious gazes. Dipping her chin, she works her jaw to the side and swallows.

“Selah...” Her mother’s voice starts to wobble. “Please don’t make me remind you what happened to your sister.”

“That’s not going to happen to me. I’m not hanging out with people who are trying to drag me down. Mum, they’re making me better. And we’re going to show you at the competition this weekend.”

“Oh really?” Mrs. Dixon tuts. “You? The girl who can barely get through a waltz is going to compete in the creative round?”

My insides flash with annoyance, and it must come across in my face because Selah gives me a defeated frown before muttering, “I got in, didn’t I?”

I smile at her, hoping she’ll see how proud I am that she’s putting up a bit of a fight.

“Well, what are you dancing to? What music did you select? What style are you going for?”

“I can’t tell you that. I want it to be a surprise.”

Her mother sighs. “I don’t want you embarrassing us. This is a very important event for me. You know that!”

“I’m not going to embarrass you, and do you honestly think we would have gotten in if we’d done something completely crazy?”

“Selah, I—”

“I’m going to make you proud. Trust me. I’m not my sister. But I am sick of trying to be the perfect daughter. You shouldn’t be telling me off for putting myself out there.” Now Selah’s voice is starting to shake. “You should be congratulating me and my boyfriend for making it into the creative round.”

“Boyfriend?” Her mother’s voice pitches.

Selah eyes bulge, her face flashing with panic.

I wince and try to give her an encouraging smile. This is not the way we’d planned to reveal our relationship. We thought we might hint at it after the dance, but this is not going well.

Selah licks her trembling lips and swallows before managing to rasp, “Yes. Boyfriend.”

“You know the rules,” her mother snaps.

Selah’s expression crumples, but then she huffs. “We haven’t slept together, we haven’t drunk alcohol together, we haven’t done drugs together, and my grades aren’t slipping! Your rules are—”

“Young lady! You are—”

“I’ll see you this weekend,” Selah quickly clips before hanging up.

As soon as she’s pressed that little red button on her phone, she lets out a strangled gasp and flicks back to that panicked look again.

“You did good,” I try to reassure her.

“I’ve never spoken to her that way before. I hung up on her!”

“It’s okay.” I grin, kissing her forehead and drawing her into a hug.

She clings to my shoulders, whispering against my cheek, “She’s gonna kill me.”

“No she’s not.”

“She’ll be so mad.”

“Maybe.”

“What if she doesn’t let us dance?”

I pull back from my girlfriend, lightly cupping her cheeks and waiting until those green eyes are staring into mine. “Then we’ll be *Strictly Ballroom* and dance anyway.”

Her eyes start to glisten, her wide mouth trembling into a smile. “I love you.” She mouths the words, and my heart takes off like a horse at the freaking races.

Did I really read that on her lips?

I’m not exactly sure how to respond. People don’t tend to love me. I’m not the guy girls fall for. But here she is, doing just that.

Pulling her into a tight embrace, I kiss her neck and silently promise that I will be the guy she’s worthy of. I will be the boyfriend who shows up and proves to her parents that their daughter is not making a mistake by choosing me.

Nerves haven’t left me alone since Selah’s phone call with her mother. She’s had multiple texts since then, all of them trying to dissuade her from doing this, but Selah has had a response to every one of them. Actually, we’ve helped her out a little. She didn’t want to pull us into this drama, but we’ve all happily dived in and had some good laughs trying to come up with responses to her mother’s long list of questions and concerns.

In the last one, her mother asked about costumes and how Selah could possibly be ready in time.

It was pretty freaking satisfying for her to text back that it's under control. And it was pretty freaking funny to read through the stream of worried messages that followed. Seriously, I can't believe how little faith they have in their daughter. It's like they're bracing themselves for Selah to humiliate them at this event. I really don't get it.

"Costumes." Selah gave me a nervous, yet excited, grin before rushing off to her next class.

I had to have my final fitting last night, and Selah's having hers during free period today. Tobias and Trixi are their own personal brand of *Project Runway* and have fitted us out pretty well. I've got two changes—a formal suit for the waltz, which Sully arranged for me. I hate bow ties. It took all of forty seconds for me to figure that one out. But I'm not sure it's any worse than the other outfit I have to wear—fitted black pants with this sequin vest that I think looks ridiculous, but apparently that's what you wear for the cha-cha. Trixi was trying to insist I have a third outfit as well, but Monica brought her back to Earth with a few practical reminders, and the only thing I'm changing up for the creative round is that I get to ditch the vest and just wear the red shirt underneath it. Thank God for that. My movements are much freer in the shirt, and even though it's silky and I look like a total douche, I just have to focus on the fact that I'm doing this for Selah.

And okay, maybe a little for myself.

I will give pretty much anything to shine this weekend and be the diamond in the rough Selah believes I am.

"Okay, tests have been marked." Mr. Dechlin is walking the room, slapping papers down on desks.

I glance at Troy, who gives me an edgy frown before taking his test paper and slumping forward.

His elbows hit the desk, and I take a quick peek at his score.

39%. Ouch.

“Shit,” he mutters, flicking through the pages.

He missed an entire section. No wonder he scored so badly.

“Did you not see it?” I ask.

“I ran out of time by then, and...” He sighs. “That’s not true. I saw it and came up totally blank. I hate physics. Why am I even taking this subject?”

I snicker and shake my head.

Mr. Dechlin finishes walking the room, and it’s not until his hands are empty that I sit up a little straighter.

“Did you forget one?” I raise my hand.

I thought I’d done quite well on the test and am kind of bummed out he hasn’t marked it yet.

“Don’t call out,” he snaps.

I roll my eyes. “Mr. Dechlin, come on. Where’s my test?”

“I’ll have a word with you later.”

“What was wrong with it?”

He points at me, his expression turning a little thunderous. “Stop calling out!”

My muscles tense, rage bubbling through me as a string of choice words crowds out my mouth. But then I think about Selah and this weekend and how going off at Mr. Dechlin could get me kicked out of class or even worse... grounded for the weekend. This dickhead would relish that.

But I won’t give him the satisfaction.

Clamping my teeth together, I assert every ounce of self-control I have and don’t say a freaking word.

“Come back and see me after school today, Mr. Arden.”

I nod once, keeping my eyes on the board behind Mr. Dechlin’s shoulder and trying not to lose it.

What the hell have I done wrong now?

I can’t freaking win with this guy.

LOOKING HOT



SELAH

I STARE INTO THE MIRROR, frowning as I adjust the bodice of the dress.

“Would you stop?” Trixi slaps my hand away.

“Ow,” I complain.

“Just let me finish fitting the back and stop worrying. You look stunning.”

“It’s very low at the front here.”

“It’s supposed to be.” Trixi tuts.

“And it’s very short.”

“Your legs are gorgeous.” Tobias stands back to study me. “Seriously, they go on forever. Most girls would kill for your skinny bod, so just own it, girl.”

“He speaks the truth.” Trixi looks over my shoulder, catching my eye in the reflection.

I give her a twitchy smile and wish I had even half her spunk.

She’s always so confident and out there with her clothing choices. Purple hair, dramatic eye shadow, every untraditional shade of lip color you can think of. Last weekend, she had turquoise lips. I didn’t even know they made that color of lipstick.

“Okay, good. Now, change out of that and let me see you in the red dress you’ll be wearing for the final dance.” Trixi glances at her bestie. “Out, you. Give this girl some privacy.”

“I’m going, I’m going.”

He wanders out of the room, and I get changed, hyperaware of Trixi fussing around behind me.

I’ve always been very shy around other people, and living in a boardinghouse has been kind of torturous in that regard. But I need Trixi’s help with zips on my outfits, so I have no choice.

Miss Bandini is letting us use the costume room next to the performing arts theater. Apparently Trixi and Tobias are helping with outfits for the production next term, and this gives them special access.

It’s pretty well set up.

The back walls are lined with costumes from the past while the long table beneath the windows has three sewing machines along with copious sheets of paper with various sketches for costume ideas. Rolls of fabric are piled in the back corner, and I can just imagine the frenzy this place must be in prior to every production.

“Okay, now step into it carefully.”

I do as I’m told, loving the feel of the fabric as it travels up my body.

This is my favorite dress of the lot. It’s not over the top like the feathery monstrosity I have to wear for the waltz. It’s subtle, simple, the red fabric swishing around my legs when I move. The bodice is fitted and not too tight. The only real dazzle is on my shoulders, and even that’s not too out there.

I love it.

Smoothing my hand over the bodice, I study my reflection and actually like what I see.

“Her hair should be up.” Amera’s standing in the doorway.

I jolt. “What are you doing here?”

“I saw this one loitering outside and got curious.” She points her thumb at Tobias.

“Can I come back in yet?” he whines.

“Yes.” I laugh, beckoning them both into the room.

Amera crosses her arms, studying me with a critical eye. I adjust my shoulder strap and start to feel like ants are crawling over my skin.

She shakes her head, her brown eyes traveling from my toes to the top of my head. Finally she lets out a soft snicker and murmurs, “I never, ever thought I’d say this to you, but damn, woman, you look hot!”

I let out a choking laugh. “I really don’t. But I do love this pretty dress.”

Amera rolls her eyes and nudges Tobias. “Would you tell her, please?”

“You do.” He nods. “Seriously. If I was your boyfriend, I’d be drooling. Actually, I’m not even your boyfriend and I’m—”

“Don’t finish that sentence!” I hold up my finger.

He smirks and wiggles his eyebrows at me.

My entire body decides to blush, and I cringe at my scarlet skin while Trixi starts to laugh. “Would you guys stop? She’s already in a red dress. At this rate, she’ll end up being one big red tomato!”

“I’m taking a pic.” Amera starts snapping away from every angle.

“Don’t post it on social.” I cringe, willing my skin to calm down and look normal again.

“I won’t.” Amera throws me a pointed look. “Now just take a few deep breaths.”

I do as I’m told.

“That’s it.” My skin starts to turn white again, and then Amera murmurs, “Smile.”

I give her an automatic grin, and she snaps a few more pics, then starts nodding at her phone.

“I mean it, Amera. No social.”

“I won’t!” She raises her eyebrows at me but then dips her head and starts typing something.

“What are you doing?” I hear the dreaded swish of an outgoing message and spin to face her. “What did you just do!”

“Thought your boyfriend might like to have a reaction of his own.” She winks, and although I should be protesting, I kind of can’t say anything, because Amera thinks I look hot. And coming from one of the prettiest girls at this school, it’s a huge compliment.

So maybe I should stop protesting and just revel in this feeling right now.

HANDLING MR. DICK-LIN



DANTE

MY GUT HAS TWISTED itself into such a tight knot, and my belly is aching by the time I reach Mr. Dechlin's room after school.

I don't know what he's going to say or do or accuse me of, but I can't lose it. No matter what comes out of his mouth, I have to check what's coming out of mine.

Man, I hope I can do it.

With a huff, I raise my hand to knock on his door but am stopped by a buzz on my phone. Pulling it out of my bag, I check the screen and narrow my eyes in query.

Why is Amera texting me?

How'd she even get my number?

Unlocking my phone, I open the message in full.

021-0098-7642: It's Amera here. Thought you might want to see this. Got yourself a hottie, Mr. A.

Flicking my thumb, I push the screen up and have my breath stolen by an image of Selah. She's in a red dress that fits her body at the top, then flows down her long legs. She looks freaking amazing.

“Whoa,” I whisper. “That’s my girl.”

The thought tickles me, and I can’t help a soft grin.

She’s mine.

She chose me.

Lightly kissing the screen, I tuck the phone into my back pocket and knock on the classroom door, waiting for Mr. Dechlin to respond before walking in.

“Mr. Arden.” He frowns at me when I approach his desk.

I keep the image of Selah at the front of my mind, stopping by his desk and not saying a damn word.

“I want to talk to you about your test.”

“Okay,” I murmur, looking at the score when he hands it to me.

100% is written in the top corner.

The bright red numbers make me blink, and then my lips start to curl at the corners. I knew I’d done well.

“Did you cheat?” Mr. Dechlin threads his fingers together and gives me a pointed look.

Anger spits and fires, bubbling up my throat, but I somehow manage to croak, “No, sir. I studied, I prepared, and to be honest, the stuff we studied last term wasn’t too hard. I understood it.”

He scoffs and shakes his head. “Oh, so you just ‘get’ thermodynamics?” He snaps his fingers. “It’s that easy for you?”

I hitch my shoulder and look down at his desk. He’s so frickin’ condescending.

But Selah.

Selah. Selah. Selah.

“Yes, sir,” I rasp. “Physics clicks for me. I don’t know why, but I get it, and I like it.”

“You do, huh?”

“Yes, sir.” I swallow, risking a look at his face.

He leans back in his seat, obviously skeptical. “Students never score 100 percent on my tests.”

“Why?” I frown. “Doesn’t every question have a correct answer?”

His gives me a withering look, and I remind my tongue to stop moving.

Shut up, man. Just get through this and get out of here!

He continues to eye me like he’s waiting for me to put my foot in it or suddenly fold and admit I *did* cheat.

But I can’t.

Because I seriously didn’t do anything wrong.

My lips twitch as I try to figure out what to say to make him believe me. In the end, I shrug again and murmur, “Well, I’m glad I could be the first to get them all right.”

With a frown, he takes the test back off me and runs a hand through his thinning hair. “I don’t understand you.”

“I’m sorry?”

“You schlump into my class coated in attitude and radiating these repellent, angsty vibes and yet you shine. You’re the smartest kid in my class, and I don’t understand you.” He huffs. “You walk around like the world is against you.”

“You are against me,” I bite back but softly.

“Why do you think that?”

“Because you’re always singling me out. You’re hard on me.”

“You don’t think I’m like that with every student in my class? All I ask for is respect.”

“Yeah, well, it’d be nice for you show me some too.”

“Excuse me?” He rises from his seat, his voice ringing sharp and clear.

“I’m sorry, sir.” I wince. “I’m not trying to insult you. Maybe I don’t get you either.” I flick my hand at him. “You obviously love physics, and you have a really clear idea of what you’re doing, but you... well, sometimes it’s like you hate teaching, or teenagers, or something.”

I hold my breath and wince again.

Shut the hell up, man!

Clamping my lips together, I focus on the floor until I hear a soft snort and then a snicker.

“I’ve been doing this a long time now. I guess my patience grows a little thinner each year. And maybe it kills me when I see so much talent sitting in the back row of my classroom and mouthing off at me every time I try to bring him into line.”

Don’t respond. Don’t bite back!

“But maybe I don’t need to worry so much.” He taps the test paper. “So, I guess I should be saying congratulations.” He flashes me a very quick smile. “You don’t have anything to worry about come exam time.”

“Uh... thank you. Sir.” I blink, still trying to catch up with what he just said.

Was that a compliment?

“I know you kids have the cards stacked against you. I know you think the world hates you. But most of the world doesn’t even care... and then the rest of us, we’re just trying to give you a helping hand. I don’t want your time here to be wasted. Maybe that’s why I’m so hard on you.” He sighs and plunks back down in his chair. “When you enter the workforce, you’re not going to get any handouts or favors. There’s no free ride when you’re an adult, and it’s tough out there.”

I nod. “I can be tough, sir.”

“Oh, I know it.” His eyes start to twinkle. “But if it’s okay with you, I might keep trying to teach you how to hold your tongue and watch your temper. If you can handle me, you’ll be able to handle any dickhead employer.”

My mouth drops open as he gives me a little wink and shuffles in his seat.

“Now don’t go telling anyone I said that.” With a small chin lift toward his door, he gives me a gruff goodbye. “Go do your homework.”

I blink, still kind of reeling. I can’t decide if him acting like a dick so he can train me to handle future dicks is a good idea or not, but something about it settles inside me, and I end up snickering as I head toward the door.

“Well done on that test, Dante. I look forward to seeing what you can achieve this term as well.”

I glance over my shoulder and flash him a smile. “Thank you, sir.”

A BIG SURPRISE ON THE EARLY
MORNING BUS



SELAH

THE SUN ISN'T UP YET, and the morning air is cold enough to make me shiver. I creep out of my room and down to the bathroom, trying not to wake anyone, but Monica's already up.

"Oh good, I was just coming down to be your human alarm clock." She winks at me, loving that phrase.

She says it all the time and takes great delight in waking us up in a variety of ways. The worst so far has been the trumpet she borrowed from her uncle. Amera swore up the biggest storm and threw her pillow at the door.

But this morning, Monica's going subtle, because not everyone in the boardinghouse is heading to Napier.

I wash my face, wondering if I've got time to jump through a quick shower. I'm so nervous, I need to pee for like the fifth time in five hours. Yes, I haven't gotten much sleep, and I don't know how I'm going to handle today when I'm running on empty.

But you try sleeping when you have a pending disaster—or triumph—in your very near future.

"Why are we doing this again?" Alexia stumbles into the bathroom, grumbling under her breath while Trixi skips up to me and wraps her arms around my waist.

“It’s finally here!” she squeals.

“Shh. Trix!” Alexia tells her off while I grin at my reflection.

Trix’s head pops out from behind my arm, and she smiles at the mirror too. “This is gonna be so much fun! Your dresses are already waiting for you on the bus.”

“The bus?” I swivel to face her.

“Yeah, didn’t you hear? So many people want to come that Sully had to switch from the van to the school bus.”

My mouth goes dry, and she flits off to a bathroom stall while I plunk back against the sink, getting my pajama bottoms wet.

Alexia snorts and shakes her head at me. “You look like you’re about to pass out.”

I open my mouth, wishing I had some sassy retort, but all I can think is that she looks like a scarecrow with her wild curls going nuts around her head.

But if I say that, she might punch me, so I just give her a twitchy smile and dart out of the bathroom to get dressed.

My bedroom light is on when I return to my room, and Amera is pulling a shirt over her head.

“What are you doing up?” I ask.

“I’m coming with,” she mumbles.

“You’re what? I thought you didn’t want to.”

“Why wouldn’t I want to?” She frowns at me. “You invited me, didn’t you?”

“Well, yeah, but you never gave me a definitive answer, so I just assumed...”

“She’s getting dressed right now. Isn’t that answer enough!” Celeste sits up with a yell. “Now would you two please hurry it up? Some of us would like to go back to sleep!”

She thumps back down, pulling the covers over her head, and I whisper, “Why are you coming?”

Amera tips her head, looking kind of exasperated. “So I can support you.”

“Really?” My eyes start to water out of nowhere, and I sniff to try and stop the tears from leaking.

“Oh stop. Someone’s got to do your makeup. If Trixi has her way, you’ll be dancing with neon green lips and a big red nose.”

Celeste snorts, the sound muffled by her covers. Flicking them back, she squints at me and mutters, “Be grateful she loves you enough to come. I love you, too, but not that much.”

She gives me a cheesy smile, then disappears under her covers again.

“Thanks, Celeste. I think.”

“Good luck!” comes her muffled reply.

I finish zipping my jeans and throw on the thickest pair of socks I can find. Grabbing my jacket, I wrap it around myself and shiver again.

“You can snuggle with Dante on the bus. I’m sure he’ll happily keep you warm.” Amera wiggles her eyebrows as she drags me out of the room, leaving the light on.

“You cow!” Celeste yells from her bed and Amera runs away laughing.

I scuttle after her while Monica runs interference, calming Celeste down and telling her to be quiet while she flicks off the bedroom light.

She then chases me outside, wrapping me in a huge hug. “I’m so proud of you. Dance your best.”

“I’ll try.” I wince.

With a little laugh, she holds my face and smiles up at me. “If you have fun, you’ll dance your best. And don’t freak out about your parents. They’ll take one look at you on the dance floor and forget all about their petty concerns over Dante. He’s a good boy, and they’d be lucky to have their daughter dating him.”

“Thanks, Monica.” I kiss her cheek and grab the bag Trixi throws at me. “Oof! What’s in here?”

“Supplies!”

“I told you I was bringing the makeup.” Amera follows her to the bus, and the two of them bicker their way up the steps.

Their snappy little argument fades into the background the second I spot Dante walking up the path toward me.

“Hey, beautiful.” He gives me a morning kiss, the tip of his cold nose brushing against my cheek.

“Morning.” My smile is dreamy. I can tell.

But it’s been a really awesome week between us. Ever since I stood up to my mum, we’ve kind of been in sync or something, and it makes everything wonderful.

“Okay, onto the bus, people!” Sully’s clapping his hands and ushering us to the school bus. He’s the only one with the correct license to drive this thing, so he’s taking us down there.

Oh my gosh, so many people are coming.

All of the Misfits plus Amera, Miss Fillion, and her boyfriend, Jack. Miss Tomes is here! And her boyfriend, Mr. McTavish, and a redhead tween who has to be his daughter.

“Where can I sit, Dad?” She jumps on her toes. “Can I go by Londyn, please?”

“Only if she says it’s okay. She may want to sit with her boyfriend.”

“She can sit with us.” Maverick lifts his chin, grinning at Miss Tomes, then introducing himself to...

“Elsie.” The girl grins. “Londyn’s my babysitter.”

“Nice.” He high-fives her. “She’s my girlfriend.”

“I know. She talks about you all the time.”

“Good stuff?”

“*Only* good stuff.” The girl rolls her eyes.

Maverick tips his head, looking thoughtful. “I knew there was a reason I loved her.”

“Oh stop. You love me for so many reasons.” Londyn pokes her head out the bus window, giving him a cheeky grin before beckoning him with her hand. “Now get in here, you two.”

Elsie jumps up the stairs, followed by a snickering Maverick.

I hover, waiting for the bus to fill up before trailing Dante up the stairs.

“I can’t believe how many people are here to support you.”

“Us,” he corrects me, leading me down to the middle of the bus.

We take a seat on the right, and he starts unloading treats from his bag.

“Wow. You stocked up.”

“I didn’t want you going hungry.” He hands me a breakfast bar, and I peck his lips before unwrapping it, then nearly choke on my mouthful when I spot Troy ascending the stairs.

“Nice. You made it.” Sully slaps his hand, looking kind of pleased while the rest of us go quiet.

Troy stands there, staring back at us before his eyes land on me and Dante.

“Hope you don’t mind that I’m tagging along. Never been to something like this before.”

I nod, then share a quick look with Dante.

He shrugs, obviously as weirded out by this as everyone else is.

Troy clears his throat and wanders down the aisle, his tall body making the bus look too small.

The first empty seat is next to Alexia. He pauses, looking down at her with a closed-mouth smile. “Hey.” He lifts his hand in a little wave.

“Whatever.” She shuffles over to make room for him, looking out the window.

Poor guy.

I think this is going to be a really long trip for him.

Arlo pops over the back of our seat, slapping Dante’s shoulder and whispering way too loudly, “I so don’t get why he’s here.”

“Maybe he’s looking for some new friends,” Dante murmurs, eyeing the back of Troy’s head.

Alexia is such a shorty next to him. Her wayward blonde curls are in extreme contrast to his farm-boy haircut. He’s wearing a plaid shirt and screaming ‘country boy’ while Alexia adjusts her nose ring and scowls at him again.

He smiles at her, and she shakes her head, turning back to the window.

Yeah, it’s gonna be a long four hours for the guy.

But maybe he *is* trying to make new friends.

“That’s kind of brave,” I whisper.

“Yeah. Just like you.” Dante’s smile is sweet as he brushes a lock of hair off my cheek, then spreads his arm so I can snuggle up against him.

Arlo groans and flops back into his seat, muttering something about the love bus and how he needs to get himself a girl.

“Are we good to go?” Sully looks down the bus and is about to take off when a car comes racing up the driveway, its horn beeping.

“Wait for us!” Danny and Kai jump out of the car, running around the front of the bus and hopping on. “Sorry we’re late.” Kai grins at Sully before being greeted with a mix of cheers and catcalls.

“Everybody just calm down.” Danny holds his hands up. “The fun has arrived. We are now good to go.”

Laughter rises in the air followed by more teasing and hassles.

Danny starts high-fiving everyone, and I once again get a taste of what it's like to be part of a loud, raucous... family.

Because that's what this feels like right now.

Family.

CRASH LANDING



DANTE

THE RIDE to Napier goes pretty fast. We stop for breakfast along the way, drawing all eyes at the McDonald's when we barrel in, everyone talking over each other as multiple conversations take place within our group.

We are a big bunch today, and I don't mind the extensions.

Sure, the Troy thing is kind of weird and maybe a little sus? I'll keep an eye on him.

But Danny and Kai are always good value, and I can't believe how many adults have come to support us.

After chowing down on too many pancakes, I take Selah's hand and lead her back to the bus.

"You doing okay?"

"Yeah." Her eyes dance. "I'm having so much fun."

"Good." I quickly kiss her, then watch her smile falter. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing. Just... wish we could stay in this bubble, you know?"

"Yeah. I know." Pulling her against me, I kiss her ear, then follow her up the steps.

We snuggle the rest of the way to Napier, laughing at Arlo's over-the-top stories, then singing along when Maverick

starts blasting a tune he's been vibing on all week.

Even Elsie gets into it. She looks like she's having the time of her life, hanging out with all the big kids. Her dad is keeping a careful eye on her—he's obviously the protective type—but he's got nothing to worry about. I'm confident Miss Tomes will keep reminding him of that.

We're not a bad bunch.

People just like to assume the worst.

The bus starts to slow, and Selah sits up, gazing out the window and looking kind of green.

“Are you gonna be sick?” I rest my hand on her back, ready to jump up and yell for Sully to stop the bus.

But she shakes her head and murmurs, “We're nearly here.”

I look past her shoulder as we turn off down a long driveway. We must be pulling into some kind of estate, and the second we crest the rise and see the mansion behind the fountain—the one that looks like it belongs in an historical movie, yeah, that one—the nerves I thought had faded away jump right back up my throat.

“You guys are dancing here?” Arlo's eyes bulge, and then he starts to laugh. “No freaking way.”

Every Misfit on the bus is gulping and staring out the glass as Sully pulls into the turning circle to let us out.

“Okay, guys,” Miss Fillion calls down the bus. “When you disembark, can you please gather by the fountain? I know you're all responsible teenagers, but I can't lose anyone today, and I just want to go over a few things before we let Dante and Selah get ready.”

No one responds, which is kind of unlike us, but I think we're all too busy feeling way out of our depth.

I trail Selah off the bus. She's as nervous as I am.

“You never danced here before?” I ask.

“No, this is where it happens every year.”

“Oh, okay.” I nod, trying to act like it’s not a big deal.

My spasming heart tells me otherwise. I know I go to Haven Academy and everything, and yes, it’s one of the wealthiest private schools in the country, but this mansion... it makes the competition suddenly feel next level.

“How much are your parents worth?” The question just pops out of my mouth, and I instantly regret it.

Selah gives me an awkward smile, tucking a long lock of hair behind her ear and murmuring, “Too much.”

“Sorry. I probably shouldn’t ask that kind of thing.”

“I don’t mind.” She shrugs, then takes my hand, her fingers sweaty against my palm. “You know I don’t actually live here, right?” She gives me an uncertain smile.

I snicker and glance over my shoulder. “Yeah, of course. But I bet your house is pretty freaking awesome.”

Her smile is shy as she dips her head and lets out a soft “Yeah, it’s pretty big.” Pulling in a shaky breath, she stares past my shoulder at the sprawling estate and murmurs, “Let’s just get this over with, shall we?”

“Wait.” Miss Fillion stops us and quickly goes over expectations. It’s a touch condescending, but we take it in silence, knowing she means well. We love her enough to let her get away with it and are all nodding our agreement, except for Alexia, who is rolling her eyes.

“What do you think we’re going to do in there? Incite a riot? Gimme a break, Miss Filly.”

Troy, who happens to be standing right next to her, starts to laugh, and Alexia looks up with a scowl.

He swallows the sound while Miss Fillion spears Alexia with a pointed look. “Do your best to act like a lady, *please*.”

“No chance.”

“Then at least be a subtle version of yourself today, okay?” Miss Fillion winks, holding Alexia back to have another word

with her while we trail Jack and the other adults into the building.

Alexia likes to throw out a lot of attitude, but she wouldn't do anything to screw up Selah's and my chance today. Above all else, she's loyal to the people she trusts.

And I'm lucky enough to have her trust me.

"So, where's the makeup happening?" Amera sidles up beside Selah, Trixi right behind her.

"I've got your dresses here." She holds up the bags. "Tobias has Dante's stuff. And... Londyn! Hurry up!" Trixi starts yelling over her shoulder while Londyn struggles to carry the extra bags.

Maverick steps up to help her, and we're soon standing by the registration desk, a misfit rabble who look like they belong out back rather than front and center.

The man behind the table gives us an imperious frown before murmuring, "This is a private function."

"No it's not." Selah steps forward. "And we're here to register."

"Selah." The man blinks, then starts sifting through his paperwork. "Your mother didn't tell me you were coming today. In fact, she said you *weren't* competing. I saw your name on the list, but she told me that was a mistake."

Selah's pale eyebrows dip into a sharp V, her lips pinching tight.

I run my hand down her arm, a silent show of support as she swallows and manages to croak, "My mum got it wrong. I will be dancing today. This is my partner, Dante Arden." She tips her head toward me. "And we are competing in the novice open for waltz and cha-cha, plus we were accepted into the creative round."

The man starts tapping the keyboard of his computer, nodding and looking slightly flustered. "Congratulations on making it into the creative round." His eye bulge gives away his surprise.

“Thank you.” She lifts her chin and appears to be owning this moment, but then she flicks me a twitchy smile, and I can tell how much effort this is taking.

I rest my hand on her lower back.

“Here is your number.” The man places a pack on the table, and Selah starts unloading it.

“You’ll need to wear this on your back.” She passes it to Tobias, who has made himself my personal valet for the day.

I try to keep up with the man’s rapid-fire instructions. Selah is nodding like she’s heard this all before while my mind veers off its tracks and ends up in Downtown Not Listening Land. To say I’m struggling with mild overwhelm is probably an outright lie.

I’m starting to freak out. Big-time.

Yeah, I’m the guy who can tough out any situation. But, right now, I’m starting to feel like a squishable ant.

And it doesn’t help when two very elegantly dressed people swan out of the main ballroom and stutter to a stop in front of us.

The willowy woman’s red lips part, and she touches a hand to her necklace while the man beside her takes us all in, his long back stiffening while his expression droops in dismay.

“Mum. Dad,” Selah chokes out and heads toward them.

“I thought you weren’t serious. I thought you wouldn’t come,” her mother mutters.

“I told you I was.”

“But... then I didn’t hear from you for a few days, and I assumed you’d come to your senses.”

“Who are all these people?” Her dad eyes our dance crew, his gaze finishing on me.

I try not to squirm under his glare, but it’s like facing an inquisition.

“These are my friends.” Selah points behind her, sounding way less confident than she probably wants to.

“Hello, Mr. Dixon. Mrs. Dixon.” Miss Fillion steps forward to introduce herself. “I’m in charge of this lot today, and we are so excited to be here to support your daughter. She’s a wonderful dancer, and we—”

“She’s not supposed to be here,” Mrs. Dixon clips. “We agreed that she wouldn’t compete this year because she didn’t have a suitable partner.”

“Oh, but she does.” Miss Fillion looks completely unruffled by the austere woman.

Even so, Jack steps up, resting his hand on her back and smiling at the adults. “Dante is a very talented dancer, and he has been working very hard with Selah. I’m sure you’ll be impressed.”

“I don’t know how I could be,” Mr. Dixon replies, his voice gruff as he flashes Selah a pained frown, like *she’s* the one breaking *his* heart.

Selah’s shoulders sink while I’m transitioning from ant to pile of steaming cow turd.

“Okay, guys. Let’s go and get you ready.” Miss Tomes steps up, smiling at me as if nothing unpleasant has just gone down. “Tobias, why don’t you take Dante to the dressing rooms? Selah, where do the guys get changed?”

She blinks at our school librarian, then meekly points to the left.

I give her an encouraging smile, but I’m not actually sure what my lips are doing. They feel heavy. My entire body does.

Trailing Tobias, I glance over my shoulder to see Trixi and Amera ushering my girlfriend in the opposite direction.

Shit. This is not a good start.

Her parents don’t want us here. Especially me.

I don’t know how I’m supposed to pull this off with that much animosity on the sidelines.

This whole time, I've been running at this thing thinking I've got what it takes to be enough for Selah, to shove it in her parents' faces.

But right now, I don't even know if I've got what it takes to remember the steps I'm supposed to.

AN INFERIOR WALTZ



SELAH

I'M MORTIFIED.

Oh my gosh, the look on Dante's face as he walked away to get changed. I can't believe my parents spoke about him like that. Right in front of him too!

What the hell is their problem?

They're paranoid you're gonna pull a Shiloh on them.

They're worried you'll break their hearts.

Oh yeah?

Well, they're breaking mine right now!

Tears start to burn, my throat swelling up as Amera forces me to sit in a spare makeup chair. "Do not cry." She gives me a stern look. "I can't make your eyes look amazing if you're blubbering. Pull it together, right now."

"But Dante..." I sniff.

"He'll be fine. He's tough, and he's not about to let two hoity-toity, snooty-pants parents ruin this day for him." She stops and blinks at me in the mirror. "Uh... no offense?"

I snort and shake my head. "Don't worry. They are being snooty. I seriously wish I could shake them. They're not usually this horrible, I swear. They just have some baggage about my sister, and—"

“You can tell us the sob story later. Now close your eyes.” Amera’s being bossy, but in some ways, it helps. She’s forcing me not to wallow, and as I sit there being beautified by her and Trixi, I start to calm down.

“Okay, we’re done.” Amera steps back, obviously proud of her skills.

And for good reason.

“Wow,” I whisper.

“Wait until you put the dress on as well. Come on!” Trixi starts unbuttoning my shirt for me, and I flush with embarrassment. But she and Amera are oblivious.

They help me step into the first gown, and I suck in my breath as they zip up the back, then fluff around with the material.

It really is a feather monstrosity, but as I stand there letting them turn me into a work of art, I can’t help loving the way the gown swishes at the bottom. It’ll look so pretty when Dante spins me.

“You look amazeballs!” Trixi kisses my cheek and scores a tut from Amera.

“Don’t smudge her.”

“I didn’t. Chill out. You’re like a makeup Nazi.”

“I just want her to look her best.”

“She looks amazing already!”

I walk away from their bickering, fidgeting with my fingers as I creep around to the edge of the ballroom. The Misfits crew have found a spot in the back corner. They look like a clump of people, completely out of place, and I can’t help loving them for it.

“Selah?”

I turn to see Clinton walking toward me. He looks dapper in his fancy tails and bowtie. Beside him is a petite woman wearing a bright pink dress. She looks stunning, and I automatically start fidgeting with the sparkles on my bodice.

If Trixi were beside me, she'd slap my hand away. "They're delicate," she'd say.

But she's not here right now. Clinton and his girlfriend are.

"Hi," I croak.

"What are you doing here?" Clinton frowns at me, looking at what I'm wearing. "Uncle Daniel told me you weren't dancing today. I figured you wouldn't bother coming."

"Dad got it wrong. My parents were worried my dance partner wouldn't be ready, but he totally is, so..." I clear my throat while Clinton looks over his shoulder, obviously spots the Misfits and then Dante, who is dressed differently from all of them.

He lets out a pitiful snort before turning back to share a cringing look with his girlfriend.

I clear my throat and glare at him. He has the decency to flash me an apologetic smile, but it's still not enough to temper my anger right now.

"Good luck," I snip, raising my chin and swanning past him. I know it was rude not to introduce myself to his girlfriend. The poor girl stood there looking totally awkward, but Clinton just pissed me off, and I don't care to meet her anymore!

Weaving my way through the crowd, I make a beeline for my group.

As soon as Maverick spots me, he bends down to say something to Dante.

And the second my boyfriend spins and finds me, his face lights with an appreciative smile.

It does things to the cavity in my chest, killing the sting of stupid Clinton and my parents.

A tingly sensation spreads throughout my body as I meet him on the edge of the room.

"You look very handsome." I smooth my hand down his suit, not used to seeing him dressed this way.

I actually prefer his street-cool look, but for this... well, my stomach is trilling now too.

“You ready for this?” he asks.

Tweaking his bow tie, I give him an edgy smile, kind of wishing I could find the words to apologize for my parents.

He shakes his head, like he can read my mind, and murmurs, “We’ll prove them wrong on the dance floor.”

I suck in a breath, then struggle to release it. Our round is called only moments later, and a loud cheer goes up from the Haven Academy contingent.

My mother’s expression crumples as she darts her gaze down to that end of the ballroom. She’s worried they’ll embarrass her, ruin this whole event.

Damn her stuffy pride.

Anger simmers, low and deep. I can’t help blaming Shiloh. Sure, my parents were snobby before—that’s all they’ve ever known. When you’re raised in wealth and never exposed to the other side, how are you supposed to know any better?

But Shiloh humiliated my parents in every way she could. Turning up to dinner parties drunk and stoned. Calling out my parents’ guests in vulgar ways. And then her final show at this competition. Mum’s ballroom baby was destroyed by her eldest daughter.

Even I was humiliated as Shiloh stumbled across the floor, obviously high, then took a spin too far and crashed into the trophy table, sending the carefully polished prizes flying. They scattered and banged across the wooden floor, and the music cut off. The only sound to fill the stunned silence was my sister’s hysterical laughter and the rustling of my mother’s dress as she raced across the room in a whimpering panic.

Since then, I’ve been working hard to never put my parents in that position again.

And I won’t today either.

They need to lighten up and trust that not all people outside their circle are bad.

We'll prove it today.

I have to prove it.

Dante leads me onto the dance floor, and we take up position, lifting our chins and looking quite the part. As soon as the waltz kicks in—"The Blue Danube"—we move as we should. I force a smile, because that's what I'm supposed to do, but I can feel how stiff my body is.

It's not like dancing in the studio back at school.

Critical eyes are scrutinizing our every move, and it's making me jumpy.

I slip up, stepping on Dante's foot as we round the corner.

"Sorry," I whisper, my voice catching as heat flares through my body.

Dante catches my eye, his smile sweet and forgiving. "Isn't this one of your favorite songs to waltz to?"

"Y-Yes." I swallow, desperately trying to keep up.

"So enjoy it. Just let the music do the work for you." He leads me into a double reverse spin, and by some miracle, I don't screw it up. "I've got you, Selah." His wink is divine, and I sink into it, finishing the rest of the dance with only a few minor errors.

Even so, I walk to the edge of the room feeling like crap.

Dante was sweet and all, but that doesn't change our low score, and it was all my fault. When Clinton's score goes up on the board, my stomach sinks even further. He and his girlfriend aced it, and he must be so freaking proud. He always blamed me for the fact that we never placed, and he's just gone and proved himself right.

My cheeks feel like they're on fire as I stare at the floor and wish I could dissolve into the wood.

"The waltz is your weakest round," Londyn tries to reassure me. "Wait until you get on the floor with your sexy cha-cha moves. You'll blow them all away."

She wraps her arm around me as we watch the second round of novices waltz past us.

Man, they're good.

I can't help looking for my parents. They're not watching me, and I can't help wondering if they're intentionally keeping their eyes averted.

I hold my stare for a little longer but have no luck, so I give up with a sigh.

"The creative round is where you're gonna win hearts," Maverick tells me.

I share a quick look with Dante. He's looking kind of bummed out as well, and I hate this.

He's the one who's carrying me. Doesn't he get how amazing he is?

"Hey." I reach for his hand, threading my fingers between his. "Maybe they're right. When I'm dancing with you and forgetting everyone else, I feel like I'm on fire. So just help me keep my eyes on you, okay? Help me forget about everybody else."

His lips rise at the corners as he squeezes my hand and nods.

"Okay, enough lovey-dovey looks. Let's get you spruced up for the next dance." Trixi yanks me away from my boyfriend, and I nearly trip over my feet as I'm pulled away to be given a whole new look for the cha-cha.

LET'S DANCE, CHICA



DANTE

WE MAKE it through the cha-cha without too many hiccups. In fact, we even get some applause from people who aren't part of our group.

This is a massive confidence booster, but it still doesn't change the fact that Selah's parents have given us nothing but anxious glances and micro-frowns. They obviously can't be open about how they truly feel. They wouldn't want to *embarrass* themselves by complaining about their daughter to the rest of the crowd. But it's clear from their polite applause and straight-faced acknowledgments that they are so not on board with Selah's decision to dance with me.

I'm not good enough for their daughter, and that seems to be quite a layered feeling.

Not good enough for her on the dance floor.

Not good enough for her in life.

It doesn't matter that we scored quite well in the cha-cha.

I'm not good enough.

As much sense as it makes to back out and just face reality, I can't make myself do it. My hopes are pinned on this creative round. We've worked so hard. I want Selah's parents to be able to see that, to give us some credit for all the work we've put in.

They're not made of stone, right?

I wouldn't be so sure.

Fisting my hands, I pace in the changing room like a caged lion.

“Breathe, man. You've got this.” I glance up to spot Jack strolling in. He stops a few feet away and crosses his arms. His smile is encouraging, and I focus on that. “Lauren showed me the audition clip. It's a strong dance. You could even place.”

“If we can pull it off,” I mutter.

“Which you can.”

I wince and scrape my hands through my hair. “I don't want to let her down.”

“You won't, because you're an amazing dancer. Trust me on this. I used to do this kind of thing all the time. And on national television, no less.”

I swallow, remembering that he did a stint on *Dancing with the Stars Australia*.

“You've had all the training. You studied dance for years. I've done less than six months of it,” I try to argue.

“And the fact that you're this good in such a short time shows what a natural you are.” Resting his hands on my shoulders, he waits until I'm looking up at him. “Stop thinking that you need to prove yourself to these rich people, like you've somehow got to earn a right to be in their presence. That's a load of crap.” He gives me a pointed look. “You think about the life you've had and where you are now. You're not less than these people—you're better than them. You've had to fight since you were a baby, and what I see in front of me is a young man who has overcome more than his fair share. You've dealt with stuff these people will never understand, and look at you.” He fixes my shirt collar and gives me a smile that I swear has to be admiration. “Don't be fighting for a place among this crowd. You just go out there and be you. Because you are more than enough.”

For some reason, his speech is making me want to cry.

I can't even explain it. I guess I'm just not used to people looking at me this way.

"Selah knows it." Jack wiggles his eyebrows at me. "So go dance with your girl. You go have some fun and it won't even matter what your scorecard says."

"I really want to place."

"You focus on the music and your girlfriend, and you will."

My lips start pulling into a smile. I give him a nod of appreciation, lightly slapping his arm before moving past him to get to that dance floor.

Selah's waiting for me on the edge of the room, and she takes my breath away. That red dress looks so freaking good on her. I stop so I can really drink her in.

"You're gonna make me blush." She fans her face. "And I'm nervous enough as it is."

"You look... so beautiful."

She gives me a shy smile, running her hand down my arm and lacing our fingers together. Her green gaze is hungry for a kiss, and I wish I could oblige, but her parents are watching. I can feel their scorching stares from the other side of the room.

I swallow, my gaze automatically dipping to the floor.

They're not better than you!

Trying to recapture Jack's words, I lift my chin just as the announcer calls our names.

"And the next couple invited to the floor are... Selah Dixon and Dante Arden! Let's give them a hand."

A round of applause goes up, huge cheers coming from the Misfits corner. Selah's face quickly drains of color, so I place my hand on her lower back and propel her into the middle of the room.

Every eye is focused on us, and the feeling is kind of overwhelming, especially when the cheering dies down and we're standing there in the middle of the room in utter silence.

Selah's lips tremble as she takes a breath and her eyes dart to where her parents are standing, but I keep my gaze on her.

I'm not here for them anymore.

I'm here for me.

For Selah.

I'm here to dance.

Taking her hand, I step into position, resting my arm lightly around her back. Her fingers curl over my shoulder, her eyes trained on something behind me.

She's stiff, her breathing unsteady.

"Hey," I whisper.

Her gaze flicks to mine, and I don't care if it's the dumbest thing I've ever done, but I lean forward and kiss her.

There's a gasp and a little ripple of whispers that runs around the room, but I don't pull back until she's started to sink into my kiss the way she always does.

Pressing my cheek against hers, I softly remind her, "Forget about everyone else. The music, the steps, me—we're the only thing in your world right now."

She leans away from me, gazing at my face with those big green eyes that I love so much. They light with a glimmer of a smile just as the music starts to play.

"Let's dance, chica."

OUR SONG. OUR DANCE.



SELAH

OUR DANCE STARTS WITH “LA BAMBA.”

My face splits into a smile as Dante leads us to twist our bodies one way and then the other, moving across the floor at a fast clip.

The lifts, the turns, the spins... I’m in heaven as I let the song take over and keep my eyes on Dante. All the steps we’ve been practicing over the last month become instinctual.

As the tempo changes and “Higher Ground” blasts out of the speakers, I let out a laugh. This is not the kind of song that’s played at a snobby ballroom dancing competition, but we’re making it work.

A cheer goes up from the back corner, but it starts to spread as people get into it, clapping in time to the music and letting out shouts of approval when we drop into our swing moves, Dante flipping me from one hip to the other before spinning me over his back.

I land on confident feet and launch into a series of spins that has us crossing the room in a flurry of red material and thunderous applause.

Dante catches me on the edge of the room, lifting me and spinning me once more before the music drops away and our anthem starts to play—“A Whole New World” from *Aladdin*.

It's the perfect song for us. It's our song.

He found a really cool version on Spotify performed by Boyce Avenue. It's mellow, and the tempo is perfect for the moves we came up with.

I float around the room, Dante wrapping his arm around my waist and propelling me into a magnificent turn that makes my dress flare like magic.

Smiling into his sparkling eyes, I lose everything else around me as we become the only two people on the planet.

Wrapping my arm around his shoulders, we finish the song with a deep dip.

And only then do I hear the whistles and cheers.

Dante lifts me back to my feet, laughing triumphantly as he hugs me against him, lifting my feet off the floor and reveling in this moment.

No matter what the judges think, dancing with Dante in front of all these people has been the best moment of my life.

A CHANGE OF HEART



DANTE

I FEEL on fire after our performance.

We run toward our crew, sucked into a mammoth group hug as we're praised from all angles. I hold Selah against me, trying to protect her from the crush while laughing and soaking up the moment.

I'm so elated I feel like I could float right up to the ceiling.

People are still applauding, the MC fumbling over his words.

"Well, what a... what a fantastic surprise! What a thrilling dance, ladies and gentlemen. Selah and Dante!"

We get more cheers and applause as we unearth ourselves from the Misfits pile.

Selah gives the room a shy wave as I wrap my arm around her shoulders and kiss the side of her head.

Jack was right.

Dancing for us, for fun, was the best thing I could have done.

I swear I've never felt more alive.

"Selah."

And then my heart stops ticking.

I grip her shoulder, not sure whether I should let her go or pull her closer as her parents approach.

Miss Fillion and Miss Tomes force my friends to step aside so Selah's parents can reach her.

They stutter to a stop a few feet from their daughter.

Mrs. Dixon lets out a breath, touching her necklace as she shakes her head and blinks back tears. "That was..."

"Incredible," Mr. Dixon finishes for her. "Selah, you were so beautiful out there."

"I've never seen you look so happy." Her mother lets out a watery laugh, which Selah mimics to perfection.

You can see the family resemblance as they step into each other's arms.

I stand back, letting the family have their moment and sharing an awkward smile with Maverick.

He shuffles a little closer to me while Arlo flanks my other side.

I'm grateful for their silent support.

I may not have two parents who will ever tell me I'm awesome, but I've got brothers who will do anything for me.

Once Selah's finished her tearful embrace, she steps back, taking my hand and pulling me forward.

"Mum. Dad. I'd like you to meet my boyfriend and dance partner, Dante Arden."

"Hello," I rasp, then clear my throat and try again, sticking out my hand and hoping for a good response.

After a moment's hesitation, Mr. Dixon wraps his fingers around mine and gives my hand a firm shake. "Nice to meet you."

"You, too, sir."

"Thank you for... stepping up." Mrs. Dixon gives me a polite smile, then brushes a lock of hair off Selah's face.

It's a motherly move that gives away how much she cares for her daughter.

Selah smiles, then starts introducing her parents to the rest of the crew.

The creative round comes to a close with Selah's parents standing alongside us.

And now the wait begins.

I keep telling myself that the placing doesn't really matter.

But a small whisper in the back of my brain is begging the judges to see all the hard work we put in, to be inspired by our original performance.

Selah and I didn't want to be like anybody else on the floor.

Because we're not like anyone else.

We're a princess and a street rat.

We're the ones you don't bet money on.

But what I wouldn't give to be the ones who blow all the odds to smithereens.

DANTE AND THIS KISS



SELAH

WAITING for the judges to deliberate is a fresh type of torture.

I'm not usually this invested because Clinton and I never placed in the past.

I spot him on the other side of the room, his head tipped sideways as he listens to his girlfriend. I can't read lips, so I have no idea what she's going on about, but the serious look on his face makes me frown.

He's always so serious.

No fun.

No wonder I hated dancing with him. No wonder he stressed me out so much.

I glance at Dante, who grins and winks at me, squeezing my hand as we wait for news.

Gorgeous.

Fun.

Intelligent.

He's the full package.

I turn to my mother, who's hovering beside me, whispering to my dad.

“Hey, Mum.” I touch her wrist to get her attention.

“Yes, sweetheart?”

“Dante’s the full package.”

“Excuse me?” Her face wrinkles into a comical-looking frown.

I grin and say it a little louder. “My boyfriend is handsome, kind, talented, smart. He’s so smart. Like *top-of-the-class* smart. He loves to read, and he’s a good dancer, as you’ve seen, and I just really need you to understand this. You don’t have to worry about me. I’m happier now than I’ve ever been. And I have friends again, good people who want the best for me. I haven’t had that in years because I’ve been so scared of turning out like Shiloh and disappointing everybody. I withdrew from the entire world to try and protect myself, but it’s made me miserable.” I shake my head and look at my dad. “I really think that before judging any of the people I’m here with today, you should be taking a moment to thank them for having my back. And particularly Dante, because he’s the one who brought me out of my shell and made me feel like it was safe to connect. He’s the hero in this whole equation, and no matter what the judges announce, I’m a total gold medal winner today because I have him in my life.”

Mum and Dad blink at me, like they haven’t heard me string this many words together in one go. Ever.

Probably because they haven’t.

After a second, they turn to look at each other, sharing this gooey kind of smile before looking past my shoulder and nodding at my boyfriend.

I spin to get his reaction, and what I don’t expect to see is a pair of glistening eyes.

Touching my face, he continues to fight his tears while pulling me in for a kiss.

“I love you,” he murmurs against my lips, and my gold medal is sealed for good.

It’s official. Today has been the best day of my life.

“And now for the results, ladies and gentlemen.”

We pull away from each other, turning to the judges’ table with bated breath. Dante holds my hand like it’s a lifeline, and I squeeze his digits, my heart starting to thrum so hard my ears ring.

It makes it really hard to hear what the judges are saying. I notice Clinton and his girlfriend go up—they placed third in the waltzing round. I clap on autopilot, my insides tying themselves into knots as each placing is read out and applauded. By the time they get to the creative round, I can barely hear what’s going on. I’ve worked myself into such a silent frenzy that everything around me has become white noise.

But then there’s this explosion of light and sound right beside me.

People start shouting and jumping, and Mum kisses my cheek and cries, “Congratulations!”

We placed?

Oh my gosh, we placed!

Dante’s smile takes over his entire face as he pulls me across the floor.

What takes me a moment to fully comprehend is the massive trophy that is being handed to Dante and me.

“First?” I look to my boyfriend, and he starts laughing.

“First, baby!” Holding out the trophy, he lets me take the other side, and we lift it into the air together.

I revel at the crescendo of applause that rises throughout the ballroom.

“First.” I whisper it again, letting out a goofy laugh and not even caring how stupid it sounds. “First!”

We lower the trophy, Dante taking it back and grinning down at it before looking up to catch my eye.

“We did it.”

I laugh again, then wrap my arms around his neck and kiss him.

Cheers and applause echo throughout the ballroom, and it once again turns to white noise, because all that matters right in this very moment is Dante, me, and this kiss.

WE FOUND IT



DANTE

MUCH TO OUR SURPRISE, Selah's parents invite us all back to their place for pizza and celebratory drinks.

Selah's house is insane.

Six bedrooms, three living areas, a kitchen that's the size of my mum's apartment, and a downstairs rumpus room that is perfect for partying in.

We play pool, drink sodas, and scarf copious slices of gourmet pizza while the adults sit around upstairs talking about who even cares.

Elsie darts between us, obviously feeling like the queen of the world because she's hanging out with a bunch of teenagers. She's like our little mascot, and when she jumps onto Maverick's shoulders and holds up our trophy to even more cheering, I swear she's the happiest eleven-year-old on the planet.

We don't end up leaving Napier until after nine, which means we won't get back to school until around one in the morning.

Selah falls asleep against my chest partway through the ride. I'm just drifting off when my phone buzzes. I squint at the screen, my heart sinking when I spot the word *Mum*.

Holding my breath, I unlock my phone and my mouth drops open in shock when I read her message.

Mum: Sully messaged me a video of you and some girl dancing. Is that your girlfriend? She's pretty. He said you came first. Wow. Any money come with that prize? I guess it doesn't really matter. You won. That's cool, kid. Next time, tell me about it first so I can wish you good luck.

I read the text three times before replying. It's awkward trying to text with Selah lying against me, not to mention the fact that my fingers are shaking.

Me: Thanks. It was fun. Sorry I didn't tell you.

Mum: Never seen you in a suit before. You looked pretty swanky. Can't believe you're my boy sometimes. You're gonna go places.

It must just be that I'm tired or something, but words like this coming from my mother are monumentally huge, and it makes me feel like crying.

Blinking, I try to swallow the lump in my throat and figure out how I'm supposed to reply. In the end, I keep it simple.

Me: Thanks, Mum. Love you xx

She sends back a kissing emoji, because that's the closest she'll ever get to saying the L-word.

I nod, tucking the phone back in my pocket and closing my eyes with a hint of a smile. I don't manage to sleep, but I spend the trip floating in a soft daze, enjoying the weight of Selah's body against me and silently thanking Sully for

sending Mum that video. I never know how she'll react to the things I do at Haven. She never really asks, and I don't readily dish out information, but she was proud of me today. And I've got to remember to give her a chance to be included. She might not always remember I'm coming, and she might not always care what I'm up to, but she'll *never* care if I shut her out of my life. I guess I need to stop being so afraid of the pending disappointment, because every now and again, she'll surprise me.

Selah is softly snoring when Sully pulls the bus into the school grounds.

I lightly shake her, brushing my lips across her forehead to wake her up.

She groans and curls even more into my arms.

"Time to wake up. We're home."

"Home," she murmurs, sitting up and squinting out the window before turning back and leaning in for a sleepy kiss. I oblige, cupping the back of her head and briefly sweeping my tongue into her mouth. When she pulls away, the smile on her face is delicious. "Home," she whispers again, and I know we've found it.

A DIAMOND IN THE ROUGH



SELAH

“SELAH! SELAH! WAIT UP!”

I pause outside the library, allowing Miss Fillion to run to catch up with me.

Stepping aside so two girls can enter, I give her a curious smile.

“Is everything okay, Miss Fillion?”

“Yeah, of course. It’s great. I’m still flying high after two of my students placed first at an amazing ballroom dancing competition.”

I blush and look to the floor. It’s nice that she thinks of me as one of her students, even though I’m not.

“What are you two doing standing out in this freezing hallway?” Miss Tomes bustles up to us, her beanie askew as she hugs a stack of books to her chest. “Get inside here where it’s warm.”

“Actually.” Miss Fillion grabs my blazer sleeve before I can follow. “I was wondering if I could borrow Selah down in the dance studio for a minute.”

“But I have my librarian duty now.”

“That’s okay, Selah.” Miss Tomes grins at me. “You go ahead. I’ll cover for you today.”

A little mystified, I walk with Miss Fillion back to the dance studio. I hope she's not about to ask me and Dante to perform in front of the whole school or something.

I may have survived—and, okay, enjoyed—dancing with Dante at the competition, but to do it in front of a theater full of peers? And not just any peers, but Haven Academy peers? Uh, no thanks!

“So, Selah, I was so impressed by your dance with Dante and can't stop thinking about how we could incorporate elements of it into our upcoming DanceMania competition. Jack and I spent most of yesterday talking about it, and I wanted to ask if you'd be willing to join our crew.”

I screech to a stop. “What? Me?”

“Well, yeah. I mean, you're obviously good at dancing with a partner, and this will be whole new thing for us to try with the group. I could use your expertise.”

“I'm no expert.” I start shaking my head. “Dante's the—”

“You taught Dante most of what he needed for that ballroom competition. Could you please stop underestimating yourself?” Miss Fillion places her hand on my back and propels me forward. She won't let up until I'm walking into the dance studio.

The Misfits are already there, working on a sequence they've obviously got planned for DanceMania.

“I've brought reinforcements,” Miss Fillion sings.

I give them a little wave, feeling like a dork. But then Dante walks over, grinning at me. “I told her you'd say yes.”

“You?” I point at him. “You're the one who's trying to give me heart failure?”

“Oh stop. You're amazing. This will be a walk in the park after what we did.” He kisses my lips, shutting down any of my protests.

“So.” Miss Fillion claps her hands, getting our attention. “If Selah agrees to join us, that'll give us five boys and five girls, but I'd love to have one more couple so we can split into

threes and twos for stage placement. Do you know anyone else who's a good dancer?"

Everyone looks at each other, and I cautiously raise my hand.

"Um... Amera's pretty good. She did dance when she was a kid but then gave it up when she reached high school. We could maybe ask her."

Londyn swallows, then crosses her arms, shuffling a little closer to Maverick. He places his hand on the back of her neck and whispers something in her ear. She shrugs and then looks up at him, giving in with a little sigh before nodding. "Selah and I can ask her, if you like."

"Perfect." Miss Fillion snaps her fingers. "And now we just need to find another guy who can dance as good as you guys."

"What about Kai?" Arlo pipes up. "He's got skills. Definitely musical. Plays drums, bass, and his parents are badass, man. They could, like, form their own band."

"Can he dance, though?" Miss Fillion wrinkles her nose.

"Yeah. He's got moves." Maverick nods. "He'd be a good fit."

"Great, why don't we just fill up the whole group with Asshats?" Alexia grumbles.

"Hey!" Dante lightly pushes her shoulder. "Watch it."

"Well, come on!" She spins to face him, pretty indignant as she spreads her arms wide. "Part of the beauty of the Misfits is that we understand each other. You start pulling people in from a different crowd and it's going to spoil a good thing."

Londyn tuts and narrows her eyes at Alexia.

"Sorry," the sassy girl mumbles, then rolls her eyes. "No offense."

"It's kind of hard not to take offense," Londyn counters with a frown. "But just before you get your panties in too much of a twist, may I remind you that Kai is here on a

scholarship, so you'll only have to deal with three rich bitches if Amera joins the crew."

"Language, people." Miss Fillion tries to break the tension with a little laugh.

"I don't have to join if you don't want me to," I speak up, desperate not to be a divider. This group is precious to me, and I won't do anything to cause havoc or disharmony.

Alexia waves her hand at me. "You're harmless. I just don't want the group getting overrun, that's all."

Londyn snorts and shakes her head. "You think we judge so hard, but you are the worst snob of us all." She laughs. "You are so anti rich people. We're not all bad, you know?"

Alexia lifts her chin, eyeing Londyn with a sharp frown until she suddenly snickers and shakes her head. "Yeah, yeah, I know."

Looking back at me, she gives me a little smirk. "Welcome to the party, princess. Hope you're up for the ride."

I let out a nervous laugh, then look to Dante for help.

He shakes his head and mouths, "Ignore her. Eyes on me."

I start to grin, relishing the look on his face as he pulls me across the floor, then starts showing me moves so I can catch up.

I've never done hip-hop before, so this will be a huge learning curve for me, but as we slowly run through the steps, I start to pick them up.

I'm realizing dance is as simple as the music and beat flowing through me.

It's about surrendering my body to a wave of sound that lifts my soul higher than anything else can.

That's what Shiloh used to say when we were kids. Music was like riding a wave of energy that made your soul shine. She loved it. Oh man, she loved it so much.

I think about my older sister as I copy Dante's steps. Maybe I should call her, tell her what I'm up to. Maybe I

should ask if she's dancing again. Maybe I could even find the courage to go and visit her sometime. I wouldn't mind sitting in her room and dancing to music together, the way we used to when we were two young girls, oblivious to the realities of life outside our bedroom windows.

After the lunchtime rehearsal is finished, I float out of the room, holding Dante's hand and fighting the giddy fairies dancing in my belly.

"That was fun." I rest my chin on his shoulder as we slowly walk to class.

"Sorry about Alexia. She can be..." He shakes his head with a sigh.

"Yeah, I'm guessing she's been burned kind of bad in the past. She certainly holds a grudge against people like me."

"At least she likes you." He snickers. "To be honest, she holds everyone at arm's length to start with. It takes time to get to know her."

"Do you know what would be funny?" I whisper playfully in his ear.

"What?"

"If she fell for a rich guy."

He snorts and pulls us to a stop. "That would be hilarious. Do you know how much mileage I would get out of that?"

I giggle, draping my arms over his shoulders and gazing into those beautiful brown eyes of his.

"But I guess at the end of the day, it comes down to this..." He slides his arm around my waist, pulling me as close as I can get. "If you're with the right person, money doesn't matter. I don't care if you're rich, poor, homeless, or live in a mansion. As long as you're my girl, I'm a happy guy."

I follow his sweet thought with a sweet kiss.

"Love you, Diamond Dante."

"Love you, Princess Selah."

Thank you so much for reading *Selah Loves Dante*. This was such a treat to work on. Having been a fan of *Strictly Ballroom* for years, this is my homage to that amazing movie.

The combination of dance and romance is an intoxicating one. But we can't all be dancers... and what happens when a Misfit falls for a guy who'd rather be playing rugby?

I'm sure you've already guessed where I'm going with this, but yes... it's time for the sassy blonde—Alexia Willard—to fall for the last person she ever thought she could.

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And if you'd like to read Miss Tomes & Mr. McTavish's love story, then you can check out their fake romance turned real right [HERE](#).



Melody Sweet is my romantic comedy penname, and the Haven Hallways novels will follow the lives of the teachers at Haven Academy. If you enjoy playful, sweet romance, then you might like to try [*Just A Little Fake Romance*](#).

DEAR READER...



If you've never seen *Strictly Ballroom* and you enjoyed this book, I high recommend you check out this movie. Yes, it's a touch crazy, but it is filled with beautiful dancing, entertaining characters and the sweetest love story. I love how awkward and shy the main character is. She reminds me a little of Selah and I love the raw talent of her dance partner, which reminds me of Dante.

Dance and romance really are the perfect pair and what a treat it is to work on this series. I'm super excited about diving into Troy and Alexia's story. I have so many fun scenes in my head already.

I know I say this in almost every book I write, but the transformative power of love—learning to love yourself and others—makes my heart sing. Love can overcome what sometimes feels like the greatest odds and that is what I hope shines through in every story I write. It's probably one of the reasons you love reading romance so much—love breathes life and beauty into the darkness. Love fills our hearts with hope.

As with every book, I'd like to say a special thank you to the people who help me bring my books to life: Rachael - you are the sweetest, kindest and most willing assistant. Thanks for sticking with me for so long. Beth - I love you, and working with you is seriously the bestest! Kristin - every book. Every time. You always say yes. THANK YOU! Megan - wow - talk

about cover love. Working with you this year has been nothing but awesomeness!

To you, my lovely reader, thank you for reading this story. Thank you for allowing me to continue with work I love so very much.

Thank you to my amazing review team who cheer me on and make me feel so good about the books I publish. Your kind words mean the world to me - thank you!

And to my fellow authors who are there every time I need to vent, celebrate, ask for advice or just have a chat about life. Maggie, in particular, you have made 2022 an amazing year.

And to my heavenly father who loves us all just the way we are. Whether we were born in a palace or found on a street corner, we matter to you and I'm so grateful for your love.

xx

Jordan

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The graphic includes images of a book titled 'THE RED ZONE', a book bag, and a calendar for January 2023.

And if you'd like a Misfits hoodie of your own, you can [**check out the Forever Love Publishing shop**](#). We have a bunch of stuff from mugs, notebooks, tote bags and clothing.

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Melissa Pearl is a romance author writing in a variety of genres from teen paranormal romance to small-town romantic suspense. She's passionate about telling adventure-filled love stories with relatable characters who will take you on a journey.

If you're after an escape from reality, then check out her [WEBSITE](#).



Melody Sweet is the master of character journeys as she dives into the nuances of love and how it can break, heal, restore, entertain and enrich our lives. If you enjoy stories that take you on an emotional journey, then check out more of her work [HERE](#).



Sophia Quinn is the pen-name of writing buddies Maggie Dallen and Melissa Pearl Guyan. Between them, they have been writing romance for 10 years and have published over 200 novels. If you like books set in small towns with big feels and romance that will capture your heart, then her books are just for you.

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