



my sin.

the

Sixteenth

need

my addiction.

CALIA READ

the
Sixteenth
need

CONTENTS

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

[Chapter Eighteen](#)

[Chapter Nineteen](#)

[Chapter Twenty](#)

[Chapter Twenty-One](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Two](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Three](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Four](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Five](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Six](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Seven](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Eight](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Nine](#)

[Chapter Thirty](#)

[Chapter Thirty-One](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

About the Author

Copyright © 2023 Calia Read

Cover Design by [Emily Wittig](#)

Formatting by [Jersey Girl Design](#)

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. This book contains material protected under International and Federal Copyright Laws and Treaties. Any unauthorized reprint or use of this material is prohibited. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by an information and retrieval system without express written permission from the Author/Publisher.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

To Beans, Hooch, and EE.

*Thank you for being the greatest inspiration a sister could ask
for.*



CHAPTER ONE

SABLE

NOW: EARLY JUNE

“I HAVE FOUND THAT IF YOU LOVE LIFE, LIFE WILL LOVE YOU back.” Oh, Arthur Rubinstein, I don’t know if I believe you.

Every morning when I roll over in bed, I see those words. They stare back at me from their place on the wall in my bedroom. For years, I’ve tried to love my life, but that love has never been returned. Time and time again, I try to appreciate the things I’ve been given, but the results are always the same.

Maybe I’m doing it wrong, though.

Maybe I care too much about the stares everyone in this town gives me and my sisters.

Maybe I need to stop counting down the days until I get the hell out of this podunk town and just take a deep breath.

Or maybe I’m focusing too much on the reality of my surroundings. If I stop caring about everyone around me, will I see things the way they’re supposed to be?

Right now, I have no answer for that. At the end of the summer, though, I hope to have one.

“I think I’m having a heat stroke.” That’s Alba, one of my sisters.

I glance over at her. She’s sitting next to me on the edge of the cracked sidewalk, gathering her hair up at the top of her head with one hand, while waving her free hand inches away from her neck.

“Last I looked at the thermostat, it said 105,” she says with her eyes closed.

Even though we’ve only been outside for a few minutes, my soda is already warm. Droplets of sweat are trailing down my neck. I put a hand in front of me and watch the heat distort it. Blinking rapidly, my hand starts to disappear, melting into the heat. I almost wish it’s that easy. A simple blink and I disappear from this life.

But I can't.

"You're not having a heat stroke, you nitwit." I look over my shoulder at the long row of brick buildings where a thermometer hangs. "And that thing has been broken for years," I reply.

Truth be told, almost everything in this town is broken. The building behind us only has one small section occupied. A barber shop pole hangs above the door. The red and blue lines slowly twirl around, almost like they're struggling through the heat too. The rest of the buildings are vacant, with their front windows boarded up, or for sale signs that have been there for so long the words have faded away.

This is Antsett, Illinois. Population: 1,129.

It's just a dressed-up version of a village. I'm sure way back in the 1800s this town used to be bustling. People coming and going. Families growing. Filled with nothing but life. But now it's virtually a ghost town. Very slowly, it's dying, and if I don't leave soon, it'll grab a hold of me and I'll die right along with it.

Exhaust fumes linger in the air from the few cars that have passed by. The speed limit is thirty-five, but hardly anyone goes that slow and the ones that do quickly speed up the second they're on the outskirts of town. It's like they can't get out of this town fast enough.

I don't blame them one bit.

I face the road, but the view isn't much better. On the other side of the road is a car wash, with the W hanging sideways. The only time it's ever used is when the fire department needs to wash their trucks.

Broken glass bottles and small rocks litter the sides of the main road. The storm drains are rusted out. Weeds grow in the cracks on the sidewalk. Potholes haven't been filled on the roads. There's a gas station, small diner, bank and library. On the outskirts of town sits a sketchy used car dealership.

And...that's about it. Not much to do or see.

“Either way, it’s too hot. Let’s find a place with air conditioning,” Maren states confidently.

“I suggest the library. Out of all the places in Antsett, it’s the only one guaranteed to have air conditioning.”

Alba looks over Maren’s head at me and smiles. “I agree.” She hops up from the sidewalk and dusts off the back of her thighs.

“I second that,” Lennon, the youngest out of the four of us, pipes up.

We all stand, but before we walk across the road, I gather our half-empty soda cans and chip bags. Just then, a couple walks by and Alba’s smile widens.

“Hi, Mr. Plaza,” Alba says with false cheerfulness.

Her finesse-free attitude makes most people unsure of her. She plays with the residents of Antsett like they’re string puppets created for her amusement. The four of us are aware of what everyone in town says about us, but Alba is the only one who refuses to back down against anyone.

The older man opens his mouth, but his wife squeezes his arm and drags him away. Even a few doors down, I can still hear her words: “Don’t talk to them,” she hisses. “Those girls are nothing but trouble.”

Those girls.

Those girls.

Those girls.

That title has been aimed in our direction more times than I can count. It’s always finished with a look filled with disgust. Even now Mr. Plaza’s wife is giving us that very look, as if we’re descendants of Hester Prynne.

Which just goes to show you that the smaller the town, the quicker the gossip spreads.

I can’t stand sitting here for another second, enduring this lady’s stare. “Let’s get going,” I mumble.

We walk across the road, taking our sweet time. Alba dramatically skips, like she's on the set of a movie and not in this crap-hole town. Maren is giving Lennon a piggyback ride. The three of them shriek with reckless abandon, the noise carrying behind them and wrapping around me like a warm embrace. I dodge the massive pothole in the middle of the road and hurry after my sisters.

When I make it to the other side, I look over my shoulder one last time, and when I do, I see the old men sitting outside the gas station, staring at me and my sisters with suspicion. I avert my gaze. It seems to me that the road between us is like one long black line, showing that we'll never be welcome in this town.

Eighty-four days, I tell myself. *Eighty-four days* and I'll be out of here. *Eighty-four days* and I'll no longer be known as Annie Cole's—the town drug addict—daughter.

Eighty-four days and I'm free.



CHAPTER TWO

SABLE

NOW

THE MINUTE ME AND MY SISTERS STEP THROUGH THE DOOR, cold air slams into us. Collectively, we sigh. But Alba takes it up another notch and makes a beeline for the fan whirling in the corner.

“Airrr...” she draws out dramatically. She holds the front of her shirt away from her body and leans in close to the fan. In a loud voice she says, “I swear, I’m sweating worse than a whore in church.”

At that, the librarian behind the front desk gives the four of us the stink eye. To make the situation worse, there’s another librarian in the kids’ section reading to a group of children, which means multiple sets of eyes look our way.

We should probably leave. That’s certainly what our disapproving audience wants, but the truth is none of us want to go. We know what will be waiting for us at home: stifling heat. The smell. The shame. And the fear of what we could find...

I give everyone a small smile. “Ignore her,” I say. “She’s just kidding.”

It’s so quiet, I swear I hear a cricket chirp. A woman sitting in the reading group wraps a protective arm around her daughter, as if we’re snakes just waiting to poison her innocent little girl.

“This is a library,” the old woman behind the front desk says slowly, as though we’re infants. “Please keep your voices down.”

“Will do,” Alba whispers back just as slowly.

Quickly, I walk away, my sisters trailing behind me.

“Well,” Maren murmurs in my ear, “that wasn’t awkward at all.”

The second we're in the far back corner of the library, I turn on Alba. "A whore in church, really?"

She blinks and gives me an innocent look. "What? It's hot outside."

"We don't need to add another reason for people to hate us here," I whisper.

"I hate to break it to you, Sable, but no matter what we do, they're all going to hate us," she replies. "Give them a chance and they'll say we're breathing the air wrong."

"She has a point," Lennon says.

I turn back around, refusing to answer, and slowly move down the aisle. I know Alba's right, but sometimes it drives me crazy how everyone in this town judges us.

"Can you just keep your mouth shut while we're here?" I whisper-plead.

Alba rolls her eyes, crosses her arms and leans against one of the bookshelves.

If she says anything after that I don't know because I tune her out and examine the spine of every book in front of me before I find one that grabs my attention. I pull it out of the neat row and read the synopsis on the back cover.

My sisters talk and quietly laugh with each other, but I'm lost in the world of books. If there's any place I truly feel comfortable, it's here.

There's nothing better than being surrounded by books. It's heaven on Earth. Every time I come here, I want to gather all the books I can, find a quiet spot, slip into the pages and experience the lives of the characters.

As I'm lost in my thoughts, Lennon whispers into my ear, "She's following us."

I lift my head, and sure enough, there's the librarian. She has a book cart next to her, looking conspicuous as she puts books away. The whole time, furtively looking in our direction.

“This lady is like a disease; she never goes away,” Maren says from the corner of her mouth.

Maren and Alba snicker loudly, making the librarian press her index finger to her lips and obnoxiously shush us.

Alba stops laughing and shoots the librarian a glare as she crosses her arms. “All right. I’m cooled off now. Let’s go.”

“Give me a few minutes,” I say.

Even though the book in front of me looks good, I still scan the shelves.

“Are you looking for a certain book?” Alba persists.

“Nope.”

“Oh, God,” Maren groans, “we could be in here for years.”

Just to get them to shut up, I randomly grab a book, but it’s rooted in place. I bend down, peer into the shelf and meet a pair of dark brown eyes from the other aisle. A deep voice that I instantly recognize says, “Take it.”

I drop the book and smile widely. “Matty!”

He walks to our aisle and smiles.

Besides my sisters, I have one friend in this small town, and that’s Matty. Like us, he grew up on the wrong side of the tracks. Judged by everyone for his parents’ mistakes and he too can’t wait to get out of this place.

We were destined to be friends.

That friendship wasn’t instantaneous though. When we first moved here, almost eleven years ago, Matthew was the kid no one would be friends with. He had a moving target on his back. I remember in second grade, just days into the new school year, watching with wide eyes as the kids teased him mercilessly. Back then, I was too afraid to step in. Too afraid that the bullies would turn their attention to me.

Later, I’d learn that that would happen either way.

Like Alba, Matty doesn’t know when to sit down and shut up, which makes putting them together disastrous. He has

wild, fierce eyes, and it doesn't matter how many times he's someone's punching bag, he never backs down.

In third grade, Alba got into a fight with Samson McShane and Drew Bledsoe. It was all because of me. It was after school, and most of the kids were gone, but I refused to go home. So Alba played on the jungle gym and I lingered around the swings. Back then, Drew was a hateful little twerp who preyed on kids weaker than him. He usually aimed his sights on boys his age, but it was a slow day for him and I happened to be in his crosshairs. He made fun of my clothes, of my skinny arms and glasses. I remember looking at Sam, one of the tallest kids in school, pleading for him to shut his friend up, but he just stood there.

Right as Alba made her way over, I lost my temper and told Drew to shut up. In retaliation, Drew picked up some rocks and started throwing them at me, and he told Sam to do the same thing.

All I could do was stand there, and as the first rock hit my shoulder, I reacted and covered my face.

All of a sudden, Matty came out of nowhere and jumped onto Drew's back, pummeling him with his fists, causing the rocks to stop flying. Alba and I both stared, frozen in place, shocked at the sight in front of us. Then, with Sam's help, Drew shrugged off Matty, which then put all of Drew's attention on him.

"We have to go!" Alba urged as we ran toward the large oak tree where we left our book bags.

I kept looking over my shoulder as Drew hit Matty on the cheek, and by the time I got the straps over my shoulder and gave Matty another glimpse, he had managed to escape Drew's hold and was moving straight toward us with Drew and Sam hot on his heels.

"What are you doing? RUN!" Matty screamed.

So I ran.

The three of us ran so hard, my lungs were burning. We didn't stop until we were inside the trailer park, Drew and

Sam's figures becoming a hazy blur. By the time we reached my family's trailer, I was shaken, but I felt so alive because I knew that I had four allies in this lonely town.

“Earth to Sable.” Matty snaps his fingers in front of my face and the present comes back into focus.

When I look at this version of him, the older Matty, I can still see what was visible as a young kid, but it's been restrained. Pushed down so low that it's almost impossible to see. He's simply trying to survive this town and waiting until it's his time to get out.

His hands are tucked into his pockets. And his ratty, signature baseball cap is on, covering his light brown hair, with a few strands curling around the brim of the hat. His shirts are always one size too big, so they hang off his lanky body, making him appear far skinnier than he actual is.

“How long have you been here?” I ask.

“Long enough to hear Alba's whore comment. Good one by the way.”

Alba mimics a curtsy. “Thank you, thank you.”

“You might be pissed, Sable, but it was worth seeing the horror on the parents' faces.”

“I don't want to get kicked out of here. This is the one place in Antsett I actually like.”

Matty shrugs. “Consider yourself lucky. That's one more place than I enjoy in this shithole town.”

Alba leans against the bookshelf and crosses her arms. “What are you doing tonight?”

“Going to a party. You guys are going, right?”

Every high school, no matter how big or small, always has an end of the school year party. Anyone and everyone show up. More than likely the cops show up too and embarrassing photos of the night are posted on Facebook.

I think it's a prerequisite for the summer.

“We're going,” Alba says confidently.

“*We* are not going anywhere,” I correct her. “*You* are going to the party.”

“You do realize it’s summer time, right?” Alba challenges.

“Yes, I know it’s summer.”

“Then act like it. Go and have some fun.”

Maren nods right along with Alba. Lennon just stands back and watches everything. She’s always so quiet. People might say she’s too shy, but once she opens up, her true personality comes out. Either way, I’m fiercely protective of her.

All of us are.

“Matty, make her say yes,” Maren chimes in.

Matty looks at me and smirks because we both know him telling me to go won’t change a thing. “Sable, say yes.”

“No.”

Matty shrugs and looks at Maren. “I tried.”

“Someday you’re going to look back on your high school years and regret how you spent them,” Alba lectures.

I give her a pat on the shoulder and smile. “I’m sorry to break it to you, but that day isn’t today.”

Alba opens her mouth, a hot retort on the tip of her tongue, when Maren mutters under her breath, “Oh, God. She’s back.”

I look over her shoulder and see the librarian staring at us. No matter where we go in the library, or how quiet we are, she’ll keep following us until we leave. My grip on the books tightens. “Let me check these out and then we can leave.”

One by one, we file out of the aisle. Before we walk away, Matty grabs a hold of my arm, so I turn around.

“Just think about going, okay?” He pauses and lifts a brow. “He won’t be there. I promise.”

Everyone has a he or she in their life that is attached to painful and/or sad memories, the sound of their name alone brings nothing but heartache, so you pretend they’re a stranger just to cope. Nothing more, nothing less.

Matty stands there, waiting for a reply, as if what he said will make me rethink my decision. If anything, it just makes me think about *him* more. And I already do that enough times during the day.

“I gotta go,” I mutter and hurry down the aisle.

My heart pounds in my chest as I realize that he might not be there tonight, but he will be in town soon, which means I can't avoid him forever. Shit.



CHAPTER THREE

SABLE

NOW

“COME WITH US.”

I turn the page. “No.”

“Please?”

“No.”

“Please?” Alba repeats.

“No.”

“Just do it.”

“No.”

Alba drops dramatically onto my bed. “You’re staying home. On a Friday. Out of your own free will.”

I blink. “How is this different from most of my Friday nights?”

Alba rolls her eyes. “Sable, I know eighty-year-olds who live it up more than you do.”

“That’s the difference between you and me. You think living it up with your friends and going out is fun.” I gesture to the hardback in my hands. “This is what I consider living it up.”

“What you just said proves that you need to get out more. Experience life outside of a book and a job.”

“My job pays our bills. And outside of a book? What are you talking about? I live more lives reading than you ever will.”

My words fall on deaf ears. Alba quickly sits up, reminding me of a Jack in the Box that suddenly pops up. “Let me paint you a picture, okay?” Dramatically, she slashes her hand through the air, like it’s a canvas. “You spend your high school days working and hibernating at home. And then college arrives. Ah, college — a time to discover yourself and to enjoy life. But what do you do? You repeat what you did in

high school: work and hibernate. The years go by and BAM!” She claps her hands so loudly, I jump in my chair. “You realize you’ve wasted your whole life away.”

“That’s a sobering picture,” I deadpan.

“I know, right? It’s tragic.”

Alba stays put, showing no signs of leaving.

“Well, I’d love to go, but I can’t; I don’t want Lennon to spend the night alone in this craphole.”

“Well then do I have good news for you. Lennon’s coming with us.”

At that, I sit up. “What?”

Alba nods enthusiastically. “I invited her and she’s coming.”

“She’s only fourteen!” I sputter.

“And Maren’s only sixteen. I’m seventeen and you’re eighteen. Now that we have everyone’s ages out in the open, can we please get going to the party?”

Alba stares at me expectantly. I quickly try to think of another excuse to give, but I can’t think of any. I blame this damn weather. It’s freakishly hot and I think it’s fried some of my brain cells.

It’s bad enough to deal with the high temps during the day, but they’re extending into the night. Add in next-to-no breeze and it’s unbearable. We have a box fan in the corner of the bedroom, but it’s on its last leg, the blades slowly circling about, just spreading hot air around. Right behind me, the only window in the room is open. Patches of black duct tape pepper the broken screen. It’s a half-hearted attempt at keeping the bugs out. Somehow, though, they find their way in.

It’s only a small consolation that the entire trailer feels this unbearably hot. In the living room, there’s a window unit, but it hasn’t worked in years.

Do I really want to lie here, sweating the night away? Hell no.

Marking my place with a bookmark, I drop my book onto my bed and stand up. “I’ll go.” Alba gives me a shit-eating grin and goes in for a hug.

I dodge her outstretched arms at the very last minute. “Just so you know, it wasn’t your moving speech that made me change my mind. It was the thought of sweating to death in this trailer by myself or sweating to death with my sisters.”

Alba shrugs. “Fair enough.”

Digging through my purse, I finally find my keys and toss them to her. She catches them with one hand. “Give me five minutes. I’ll be out soon.”

When the door slams behind her, I look around. For one person, this room is tiny. But with four people, it feels like an incubator and it’s felt like that since we were kids. On the opposite side of the room is a bunk bed that Maren and Lennon share; it swallows up half the space and makes opening the closet almost impossible. Maren has the top. Hundreds of notecards and post-its litter the wall around her. Over time those notecards spread across the walls until they covered almost every square inch. No matter where I look, I’m surrounded by words, which, depending on my mood, can be the most wonderful thing, or the worst, because words can build you up with a mere sentence or break you down with only one word.

My rinky-dink twin bed is on the other side of the room. It has a trundle bed that Alba sleeps on. She bitches about it every morning and night. But it’s been our routine for years. I think it’d be weird not to hear her complain.

When we were in grade school, the close proximity started to get to Alba, Maren and me. So we hung a queen-size sheet in the middle of the room, closing Lennon and Maren on one side and Alba and me on the other. We even went as far as to run a line of black duct tape down the middle. The sheet is gone, but the tape’s still there.

The white, vinyl walls have become discolored with time. There are even water stains in a few places. The floor is covered in orange shag carpet that was all the rage in the

sixties but is now hideous. We placed rugs throughout the room, but the ugly orange always peeks through.

I exhale loudly and look through the closet. Can I really call it a closet when it hardly holds any clothes? There are sixteen hangers and five of them are empty. I don't know what it's like to have a closet overflowing with clothes, let alone new ones. The clothes in front of me are worn and battered. Pants looped through the hangers are threadbare, with more holes than material. One of my favorite flannel shirts looks close to falling off the hanger. Alba and Maren hate the shirt. Maybe because I've worn it a hundred times, but I found it at Goodwill on sale for fifty percent off, meaning it was too good to pass up.

That's right, even the thrift store can be too expensive for us. My family is just one rung above homelessness.

Before everything went to hell in my family, Mom would always tell my sisters that it wasn't a second-hand store, but a "boutique." Frequently, she would make a game of it, challenging us to scour the racks for shirts and pants that were our size. I loved walking up to the cash register with my meager pile of clothes in my arms. I felt pride at what I viewed to be my rare finds. No one else may want them, but I saw potential in these clothes. When we pulled into the driveway, I was the first out of the car, so anxious to try on my clothes. They felt special, as if they were meant just for me.

That feeling remained with me until seventh grade when a group of girls stopped me in the hall. They looked me up and down, and in unison, smirked. One of them said the shirt I was wearing looked eerily familiar and asked why I was wearing her castoffs.

For years, I felt ashamed. But now I just suck it up. To me, it's like paying bills: you don't want to do it, but you have to.

I grab a gray, scoop neck tank top with a faded image of the American flag and slide my feet into a cheap pair of black flip-flops.

I give our small room one last look and shut the door.

Alba honks the horn loudly. Instead of hurrying out, I walk down the hall and stop in front of the closed door.

I don't want to knock. I don't want anyone to reply. I don't want to open the door. I just want to stay on this side, where everything is dreary but not terrible.

But I have to.

If I don't, my conscience will eat at me for the rest of the night. I'll think of everything that can or will go wrong. All because I didn't check in.

Exhaling loudly, I knock and wait. "Mom?"

Unsurprisingly, she doesn't reply. Mom's in there, though. The TV volume is so loud, I can make out the actress's voice.

It's a surprise that she's home. Normally, at this time of night, she's out. Either working at the bar or with some random man. But she slammed the front door five hours ago, muttering underneath her breath about some 'lousy, good for nothing man.' I think the lousy good for nothing's name is Tim and he was her 'date' for tonight. I don't know if 'date' is the right word, considering they don't have dinner or share pleasant conversation. More like shots, drugs and sex.

I knock once more before I open the door. A heavy fog of smoke escapes, making me cough loudly. I wave my hands in front of me and walk deeper into the room.

All the lights are off. The glow from the television outlines her hunched-over figure on the bed. She has on a soiled nightgown. I'm sure that at one point it was probably pure white, but it's now the color of ivory.

When I stand beside her, she finally lifts her head. Her pale blue eyes are dull, lacking the sparkle they normally have at this time of night.

"We're going out," I say quietly.

Mom grunts and reaches for the bottle of half-empty Svedka. All her best friends sit there, gleaming back at her: Jim Beam, Captain Morgan, Jack Daniels and Johnnie Walker.

These are friends I never intend to have. Ever.

But they are a staple in Mom's life. It doesn't matter how many mornings she spends hovering over a toilet, puking so hard blood comes up. Or the hours huddled in her bed, vowing that she'll never have another drink. In the end, she always goes back to the bottle.

"Did you hear me?" I ask, raising my voice.

She takes a drink and slams the bottle onto the nightstand. Vodka trickles down the bottle and lands on the stained wood. "Yeah, yeah. I heard you the first time."

I take a step back. "I just wanted to let you know."

When she doesn't say anything else, I walk toward the door. But I don't leave. No, I look over my shoulder. "Are you going to be okay?"

At that, she whips her body around and sits up in bed. At the same time, she makes a grab for the Svedka. It's almost as if she physically can't be away from it. Her feet hang off the bed, and she begins to tumble toward me, but she gives up halfway and leans heavily against the dresser. She points a finger at me. "You don't need to ask me that. I'm the mother." She points to herself, making clear liquid spill across her chest, but she doesn't notice. "And you're the kid. Do you got it?"

On the TV, someone laughs, breaking the awkward silence in the room.

"Do you got it?" she yells.

My lips go into a thin line. "I got it."

She walks back to her nightstand and grabs a broken rubber band, spoon and syringe. I know where this is going and I want no part of it.

I grab the door knob and Mom rushes forward, a frantic look in her eyes. She reminds me of a wild animal caught in a cage, looking for a way out.

She looks at me and pauses. For the smallest second, I see shame in her eyes. Then it's gone and she's walking toward me her head bent. "Can you help me tie this around my arm?"

A druggie asking you to help them shoot up is like someone handing you a knife and asking you to slit their wrist. My eyes jump between the syringe and my mom's eyes. She stares at me pleadingly, almost desperately.

“No.”

“Where is Alba? Tell her to get in here.”

There's no way in hell I'm getting any of my sisters. “She's in the car, waiting for me.”

Before she can say another word, I leave the room and hurry down the hall.

Truth is that I'll never understand my mom. I may try, by attempting to go back to all those years ago when Mom was a stable mother. A happy person. So vivid and full of life. Colorful. Alive. I go back to when we lived in Indiana, with our grandma across the street. While Mom worked at the bank, our grandma took care of us. Even then we struggled, but we were in a much better place than now. Both physically and mentally.

I go back to small, happy moments: to mom smiling and laughing. To me, only nine years old, watching her get ready for work and asking if I could try on her lipstick. She smiled and said yes. I go back to when Mom had a day off and took us to the park, where she pushed me on the swing set, and I went so high I felt like I could fly.

I go back to when Grandma died. Things were okay for a few months and then Mom started to slip into depression. It started out slowly. She would be late for work, have a small glass of wine at night. Then late mornings turned into spending the entire day in bed and the small glasses of wine turned into large gulps of Jim Beam.

She lost her job, and right when we were close to having it all taken away, she found a random one, only to lose it shortly after.

I think of when we moved to Antsett. It was around then that Mom turned to the harder stuff: drugs. She became

jobless. Money was gone and we were officially living off of food stamps and permanently behind on rent.

Throughout the years, I've given up hope that someday she'll change and suddenly go back to loving us. I stopped wishing for the answers to her problems so I could help her. What I care about are my sisters and getting out of this town.

The front door slams behind me as I hurry to my car, my sisters waiting not so patiently. The three of them stare at me as I get into the driver's seat of my crappy 1991 Chevy Lumina. The sky blue paint is chipping off and half the time it takes two or three tries for the car to start. But it beats riding a bike.

"What took so long?" Maren asks.

"Nothing," I lie. I slam the door and put my seat belt on. "Just getting ready."

Alba looks me up and down. "I can tell," she says dryly.

Before I put the car into reverse, I give the beat-up trailer that's been my home for years a good look. The cream-colored aluminum siding is weather-beaten and old. When we first moved in, the brown shutters were freshly painted, but now most of the paint has chipped off and they're barely hanging onto the trailer.

There's a small front porch with a plastic lawn chair angled toward the door. Next to it is a garbage can to throw away any aluminum cans. A filled ashtray sits on the rickety banister. The wood is warped, looking like it will fall through any second. The steps have broken away from the trailer years. The lattice trim around the porch has fallen off in certain places.

There's an old oak tree directly in front of the trailer. It's been there since we moved in. Sometimes I think it's there just to shield our shitty trailer from the rest of the world. I swear every time its branches scratch against our windows, it says: "There's no one living here. Look the other way."

"Are we going or not?"

Quickly, I pull out of the drive, more than happy to get the hell away from this craphole.



THE PARTY IS OUT IN THE COUNTRY, ABOUT FIVE MINUTES outside of Antsett at Ezra Jordan's house. He graduated last year and has been living with his parents while he goes to community college. He still hangs around with kids in my grade. He's a prime example of exactly what I want to avoid. Not the community college part. It's the going nowhere, living-in-the-glory-days part that scares me.

I cling to the belief that when life is at its bleakest, things have to get better. And right now, things are pretty pitiful.

"You have to park here," Maren barks from the back seat.

I press the brakes until we're moving at a slow crawl and squint at the road in front of me. In the far distance, I see the lights of a nearby house. "Isn't his house clear over there?" I turn on my brights and squint at the road in front of me. On both sides, parked in the gravel, are nothing but cars and trucks.

"Yes, but all the spots close to his house are taken," Alba replies.

She has a point. I groan loudly and park behind a Ford pick-up.

The car's barely in park before Alba hops out of the front seat.

"How do you guys know Ezra?" I ask as I get out.

"We don't," Maren replies and slams the door. "But Nick was invited to the party and he was invited by a friend of Ezra's."

"So none of us were actually invited?"

Alba rolls her eyes and wraps her arms around Lennon and me. Lennon looks around in wonder. This is her first party... ever. I remember the excitement of my first party. I was a

sophomore. Alba was a freshman. I had all these preconceived notions that I would drink and dance the night away with Alba. But at the end of the night, all I was doing was holding Alba's hair back as she vomited in a ditch. It was too similar to what happens in our home.

I didn't go to another party after that.

"Don't look so excited, Sabes," Alba remarks. "Your excitement is pouring off of you in waves."

"You know this isn't my idea of fun," I remind her.

"Didn't we just go through this earlier? You need to get out more. Tonight will be good for you!"

We set off down the narrow country road, keeping to the gravel on the side. A few kids from our school linger in front of us. Some of them are laughing, but most of them are glued to their cell phones.

My sisters and I share a crappy pre-paid phone. It's supposed to be that whoever is using the car gets the phone, but that's never the case. Most times Alba and Maren fight over it.

In the distance, cicadas sing as tall grass in the ditch rustles in the wind. The sky is clear with stars twinkling. For miles, there's nothing but fields surrounding us. Clean rows of beans and corn flank the road. I'd be tempted to appreciate the night if it wasn't for the loud music coming from the barn to my right. I swear, it's so loud that the ground is shaking beneath me.

"How many people are here?" I ask as we approach the property.

Alba purses her lips. "My guess is sixty or seventy?"

I whip my head toward her. "Sixty or seventy? That's normal?"

She shrugs. "Eh...not really. "

"I give this party two hours until the cops show up. What do you think?" I ask.

“The cops aren’t going to show up,” Alba pipes in.

“Are you kidding? All the party is missing is a beam of light flashing down on the area. This party will be busted and I’ll be gone before that happens.”

Alba snorts. “Debbie Downer, party of one? Your table’s ready.”

“I rather be a Debbie Downer than a Debbie Desperato,” I shoot back.

Alba just grins because we both know I only get bitchy, when I’m nervous or scared.

Matty may have said *he* wouldn’t be here, but you never know. There’s always a chance.

So what? My conscience challenges. Just play it cool.

But what if I can’t play it cool? I should probably leave right now while I have the chance.

But before I can, Alba links her right arm through mine—as if she knows exactly what I’m thinking—and then loops the other one through Lennon’s.

Maren skips ahead of us, practically vibrating with excitement.

Finally, we approach the large, white farmhouse. All the lights are off. But behind it, a large red barn stands with its door slid open and people pouring out.

Maren slows down long enough for us to catch up to her and the four of us approach the barn. Bright lights spill out onto the gravel from the Christmas lights that are strung across the open beams. Near the cleared-off work space are hundreds of old license plates nailed to the wall. Clear in the back of the barn are two old, grain bin trucks and a large mower. Shovels and rakes lean against the wall, as other gardening supplies hang above the workspace, making this feel like the setting of a horror movie, not a party. The room reeks of oil and sweat and with fifty extra people, the smell is amplified.

No one around us seems to notice. They’re all too wrapped up in conversations, smiling and laughing and just having a

good time.

But when we step inside, everyone stops talking and conversations halt.

A girl I recognize from school, I think her name is Ashley, says all too loudly to her friends: “Lock your boyfriends up, girls. The Cole sisters have arrived.”

It stings, to put it mildly. But conversations quickly start back up, even with a few people snickering behind their hands. To most of these people, we’re nothing but white trash, which means the boys think they can get between our legs and the girls think we’re nothing but trouble. And no matter how many times I hear cutting remarks aimed toward my sisters and me, it always stings. It shouldn’t matter. Yet it does. No one wants to be constantly rejected throughout life.

Alba’s reaction is the exact opposite from mine.

She walks forward, her head held high, itching her nose with her middle finger before she raises her hands in the air, palms facing the ceiling. “Step aside, motha fuckin’ fives! A ten has arrived!”

There are a few catcalls and cheers, and then Alba blends into the crowd, no doubt attempting to hunt down some alcohol.

Nick, Maren’s boyfriend, steps through the sea of people and grabs Maren by the waist. She squeals and wraps herself around him, as though they’ve been separated for months when, in reality, they saw each other two hours ago.

They’ve been dating for four months. And in high school land that equals two years. They’re that sickly sweet couple that call each other, “babe,” every other sentence. Nick is in my grade. He moved here last year and didn’t, and still doesn’t, give a shit what everyone whispers behind our backs. Even though he’s a good guy, I want to protect Maren; I see the expiration date on their relationship, but she doesn’t. We may look a lot alike and have the same views of the world, but when it comes to love, we couldn’t be more different. Nick is going off to college and even though they’re going to try to

have a long-distance relationship, someone is bound to get hurt, and to me, it seems like my sister's the one with a target glued to her heart.

While Maren and Alba socialize, I stand with Lennon, trying to ignore the glances in our direction. Because of *him*, people have backed off considerably. Now they just stare at me with a mixture of confusion and curiosity.

How did she do it? Their eyes scream. How did she lure him in?

The funny thing is, I've thought over it numerous times myself and I don't know either.

Maren drags Nick over and hands me a red solo cup. I smell the drink and try not to recoil. "What the hell is in this?"

"A lot of Vodka and some soda."

For the sake of the party, I take a sip then cough violently, making Nick crack up.

"Maren," I gasp as I shove the cup at her, "that is disgusting."

She takes a sip and barely makes a face. "Well, I didn't say it would be good, now did I?"

"Is there any water around here?"

Nick and Maren just stare at me as if I have three heads. I slip my arm through Lennon's. "For Lennon."

"Do you need a drink?" Nick reaches around Maren, pulling a beer out of one of the many coolers, and hands her one.

I snatch it from him. "She's fourteen," I point out.

"So? Mom let me drink with her when I was thirteen."

"That's not something to brag about, Maren."

Maren shrugs as if it's no big deal. "I doubt there's going to be water."

"It's okay," Lennon says quietly. She leans in and points to her left. "I see some of my friends."

She slips away, and once she spots one of her friends, squeals and hugs her.

I look around. All of my sisters are doing their own thing and I'm just standing here in the middle of the barn. I feel out of place. I don't blend in like everyone else seems to. So I take a step back, closer to the work space, but that just makes me feel like even more of a loser. A country singer croons loudly from the speakers and the couple to my left looks dangerously close to getting it on for all to see.

Before they start to procreate right next to me, I quickly hurry out of the barn. Outside, I lean heavily against the door, closing my eyes and greedily sucking in all the fresh air I can.

“Need to get away?”

I smile at the deep voice. “You know it.”

Matty stands next to me, and like me, watches everything happening around us. He takes a long sip of his beer before he looks up and stares at the sky. “Eighty-four days. Five hours, two minutes”

“And sixteen seconds until we get the hell out of this podunk town,” I finish for him. I look around at the people slowly trickling out of the barn, hanging out in small groups. “Sometimes I want to leave right now and never look back,” I confess.

Matty grunts and takes a long drink. I don't know where he's been, but he reeks of weed.

“If it wasn't for my sisters, I think I really would.”

He gestures toward the barn, where Nick and Maren are all but humping each other and Alba's playing beer pong. “Your sisters seem to be doing pretty good without you.”

“Clearly, the party gene wasn't passed onto me,” I reply wearily.

He laughs loudly.

I lift a brow. “Matty, how much have you drank?”

“Enough to find our lives funny. Hysterical even.”

“Then that’s one drink too many.”

“Why don’t you have one? Relax and have some fun.”

“Why does everyone keep telling me to relax? I’m relaxed!”

“When you say you’re relaxed and yell it, you’re not relaxed.”

My lips threaten to pull up in a smile. “You’re lucky I like you, Matty.”

“Oh, I’m lucky,” he mutters before he takes another drink. This one longer than the last. The wind picks up and I get a whiff of his cologne and something else.

“You reek of weed,” I blurt out. With him, I can be honest. God knows he’ll be honest right back.

“You reek of girlie perfume.”

His reply is quick and easy, but I see the tension in his shoulders. Like me, he’s grown up around drugs and alcohol. But his dad is a dealer, peddling drugs to anyone who can afford them. Even to kids our age. To his dad, age doesn’t matter. If you have money, he has what you want.

I know Matty uses occasionally, but I have this deep-rooted fear that it will become his addiction. Sometimes I want to shake him and tell him, *Just a few more months and you’re out of here! Hold on until then.*

Silence stretches between us. I kick at the gravel. “Is that why you came to this party?”

“Drop it,” he says bluntly.

Crossing my arms, I continue to look around. There’s a group of football players hanging out across from us. I don’t see a tall, imposing figure, with wide shoulders and brown hair, which allows me to breathe easy.

“You don’t have to worry. He’s not here.”

My lips form into a thin line. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Sure you don’t.”

There’s a beat of silence.

I look at Matty. “Do you know if he’s back in town?”

“How the hell would I know that? You think me and him are pen pals or something?”

I shrug. “Could be.”

“That’s a big fat negative.” Matty peers at me. “Have you spoken to him lately?”

“The last message I got from him said that he would be home sometime in June. For all I know that could be early June, mid-June, late June. Who the hell knows?”

Cutting him out of my life completely isn’t possible. When he left, there were a few texts here and there. But it was too hard for me. I wanted more. I wanted to hear his voice so I started dodging his texts, only answering messages sparingly. I knew I was being a coward, but when it came to Sam, I found myself breaking at every turn.

“You know you’re going to see each other at least once, right?”

I nod.

“So, what are you going to do?”

“Nothing.”

Matty shrugs as if it makes no difference to him. Before I can say another word, Maren pokes her head out of the barn. “Sable! Get in here, woman.”

I sigh and pat Matty on the shoulder. “I’ve been summoned. I’ll see you later.”

He waves at me with his beer and continues to stare out into the nothingness.



CHAPTER FOUR

SABLE

NOW

BEEP...BEEP...BEEP...

Rolling over in bed, I grab my pillow and put it over my head. My body burrows deeper into the covers as the loud beeping continues.

“Turn the damn thing off before I chuck it out the window!” Maren shouts from her bed.

I’m not a morning person, but I have nothing on Maren. Anytime she has to wake up early, she’s a beast.

My hand snakes out of the sheets. My fingers move blindly across the nightstand until I feel the alarm. I hit the very top and it stops shrieking.

Maren and Lennon sigh in relief. Of course they do.

They’re not the ones who have to get up. I am.

Better yet, they didn’t fall asleep until five in the morning. I did.

My mind never shuts off. It’s constantly running, keeping me on high alert, just waiting for the front door to slam shut at 3 in the morning, our mom’s loud talking and giggling colliding with an unknown man’s voice.

It’s a cycle that never ends.

I stare up at the saggy ceiling. Rust-colored stains from past leaks dot the damaged surface. Sooner than later, it’s going to collapse. Actually, I’m shocked that it hasn’t happened yet.

“What time is it?” Lennon asks, her voice groggy from sleep.

“Eight.” I fling back my sheets and stretch. “Just go back to bed.”

I grab my shorts from last night and a black tank top. With my eyes still heavy from sleep, I step out of the room. The

house is deathly quiet. I look toward my mom's room. The door's shut. She won't be up for a couple more hours.

When we came home last night, she was in the kitchen, sitting at the table and eating a bag of stale chips before she left to go out for the night. She greeted us with a wide smile. We all knew her happiness would only last for a few hours, so we all made a mad dash to our room.

Quietly, I tiptoe to the bathroom and take my time getting ready. I might not be a morning person, but even I can't deny how soothing the quiet is. No raucous laughter from Mom's room. No arguments or a TV blaring.

Just silence.

When I'm done brushing my teeth, I lift my head and stare at my reflection. My green eyes are bleary from not enough sleep. My light brown hair hangs in a tangled mess down my back. I quickly drag a brush through it and put it in a sloppy bun. I use some of Alba's concealer, blending it beneath my eyes and across my chin. On second thought, I grab her mascara and bronzer, too. When I'm done, I take a step back from the sink, only to move closer to the mirror.

I don't know why I'm so worried. I didn't see him last night. That means I'm in the clear for today. How I look doesn't matter.

Alba, Maren, and I all have jobs. When you have a mom that can barely keep steady employment longer than a few months, you have to fend for yourself. We figured that out a long, long time ago.

The second I turned sixteen, I immediately went out and got a job.

Maren works in the kitchen at a nursing home. Alba cleans beds at a tanning salon. Lennon is too young to work, but her time is coming.

We save money, but most of the time, we pool our paychecks together so the rent, electricity and groceries are paid for.

When Mom happens to have money, it goes to two things: alcohol and drugs.

Some months I don't know if we'll make it through with all the bills paid, but we always make it by the skin of our teeth.

Sighing heavily, I look away from the mirror and walk out of the bathroom. I step out onto the front porch, making sure the door shuts as quietly as possible behind me.

Alba's sitting on the top step, staring at a newspaper in her lap. "Why are you up, Needlebutt?"

Needlebutt was this charming nickname that my sisters gave me years ago. I was ten, watching them while our mom was out doing God knows what. I didn't let them eat all of the macaroni during lunch. Instead, I made them wait until that night because I didn't know if we would have food the next day. But they thought I was strict and uptight and since then, the nickname's stuck as...Needlebutt.

I roll my eyes and sit down next to her. "I'm watching Audree today."

I take in her appearance: oversized basketball shirt and boxers rolled up around her waist. In her hands, she cradles a hot mug of coffee. Her hair, put up in a messy bun, looks like a bird nest. The sun glasses perched on her nose, not only block the sun, but they hide bloodshot eyes and smeared eye makeup.

"Why are you up?" I ask.

She grunts. "Can't sleep. Maren kept waking me up with all her snoring. Didn't you hear her?"

Alba can claim Maren's snoring kept her up. (And for good reason since Maren's snores can wake up half the block.) But we both know that whether she had a good night's sleep or not, she's always up early. And I mean always. In the summer, she always sits outside, just watching the world around her. When winter rolls around, she sits at the kitchen table, pulls up the blinds and looks out the window.

By now, it's something that I'm used to. But it can be slightly unnerving to see Alba so quiet.

"Nope. I actually didn't hear her," I finally answer.

"Consider yourself lucky. The girl sounds like a fucking chainsaw trying to start up."

Next door, the neighbor's dog barks incessantly. A bald man, with a stained white shirt, jerks open the door. "Shut the fuck up!" he screams at the dog.

It only makes the dog bark louder. I gesture to the screaming and barking match between man and dog. "As loud as that?"

"Hell no. Nothing's as loud as that." She takes a sip of her coffee and looks around. This place isn't much to brag about. Eighty percent of the trailers around us have yards that either serve as makeshift driveways or garbage piles, mostly aluminum and metal and tires stacked high with the occasional rusted trucks with no motors or tires up on cinder blocks.

Brambles tangle in the wire fence lining our small property. Most homes in Antsett have landscaping around their houses: flowers and trimmed shrubbery. We have overgrown weeds that always come back, no matter how many times you rip them out. When we moved in, I think the yard was a healthy green, but now it's dried out. Turned into dirt, courtesy of the men that Mom brings home who think the front yard is a perfect place to park their trucks or cars.

Sprouts of green grass try to grow, but they never survive. Much like the hope that always tries, but can never grow inside me.

As a consolation, I tell myself that this area isn't all bad. Two doors down is Ms. Nova. She's an older woman who wears housecoats all the time and loves to bake. She looks rough and mean, calling most of the kids on the block 'little shits,' but she's really a softy. When we were younger, she would bring food over constantly, all under the guise that she accidentally made too much. Actually, she still does. We never

turned her food away (we still don't) since it's hard to have any pride when you have nothing.

"I can't wait to get out of here," Alba states.

I slowly nod. "Me too."

Alba and I are a year and five days apart. As kids, all we knew was each other. We were raised as twins, able to predict the other's movements before they were done. Most of the time, it didn't bother me. I thought of it as a comfort.

Afraid? Don't worry, Alba is there.

Nervous? Alba is there.

Most of my good memories have her in them.

All that closeness, though, got old. Growing up, we always had joint birthday parties and it was a guarantee that whatever I got in the color blue, Alba would get in green. And you can't forget the nasty fights. Because we knew each other so well, we always knew the other's insecurities and weaknesses, and we had no problem shoving those things in each other's faces.

Through all of that, though, we still loved each other the only way sisters know how.

Out of the corner of my eye, I glance at her. Will she be okay when I leave?

Abruptly, I stand and brush the dust off the back of my shorts. If I stay here any longer and reminisce, I'll crawl back into bed, close my eyes, and wish for a better life.

"I gotta get going."

"Have fun," Alba says distractedly. She scans the page, her eyes reading each horoscope for today.

I look over at her. "Don't you work today?"

"Unfortunately, yes. I go in at twelve." Her eyes widen and she lifts the paper, concealing her face. "Work has been consuming your time lately." She snorts. "Sagittarius, it's okay to take a break and relax."

Alba drops the paper onto her lap and smiles at me. “See? Even my horoscope is telling me to take a break.”

Maren has an obsession over quotes. Alba’s obsession is horoscopes. Mine is reading. We all have our own quirky obsessions, so desperate to hold onto something that will keep us going.

“Last week it told you that a fortune would fall into your lap,” I point out.

Alba rolls her eyes. “No, it didn’t. That sounds like a fortune cookie.”

“Does it even matter? In my eyes, the two are kind of the same.”

“Don’t knock the horoscope, Neddlebutt.” She pauses and scans the paper. “Do you want to know yours?”

“No.”

“Too bad. I’m telling you anyways.” She clears her throat dramatically. “Libra, beware. An old romantic flame will come back into your life. You share a deep intellectual or spiritual bond with this person. Do not try to fight the occasion. Just be prepared.”

“Whatever,” I say and walk away.

I’m at the end of the driveway, getting ready to turn left, when Alba shouts, “Have fun at work today!”

I don’t need to turn around to know that Alba is wearing a shit-eating grin.

As I walk down the sidewalk, I stare straight ahead, refusing to look at the trailers around me. In my mind, I change the scenery with a nicer street in Antsett, where the sidewalks don’t have weeds growing through the cracks. Where the sun gladly shines down on rows of perfect houses, highlighting the healthy green grass and brightly colored flowers and brand-new cars.

I want the perfect visual to last, but I nearly fall on the uneven pavement. My eyes look to the right and I see a trash bag next to an aluminum trash can, it’s lid long gone. The

black trash bag has been ransacked by animals and now flies hover around it.

I pick up my pace.

“Sable, where is your coat?”

I turn my head and see Ms. Nova across the street, standing on her small porch. Faded pink rollers are in her white hair. She’s wearing an old house coat and pink, worn-out house slippers. Her black cat rubs against her. The same annoying dog that’s been barking all morning starts up again, making the cat’s ears perk up. The cat jumps effortlessly onto the railing, which just makes the dog bark louder.

“It’s summer! I don’t need a coat,” I holler over to Ms. Nova.

Her hands go to her hips and even from where I’m standing, I can see her frown. “I don’t care if it’s summer. It’s chilly right now.”

No, it’s not. Early in the morning and it’s already in the 80s. But I don’t say that. Secretly, I covet Ms. Nova’s concern; she’s the closest thing I have to an actual mother.

“I’m fine,” I half-shout and walk down the street.

It would be pointless to drive; where I work is only a few blocks away. Most of the time, these walks feel like the only quiet time I have to myself. I love these moments because I can gather all my thoughts, mesh them together and stretch them apart like putty. I can separate the good thoughts from the bad, and figure out which ones are the most important. It’s a stupid thing to do, but some days, it feels like my worries never let up. Some days I feel like I’m drowning.

I need some kind of control, no matter how small that control may be.

When I round the corner, the nicest house in Antsett comes into view. I stop for a second and just stare. Standing tall and proud on the corner of Main and Segal Street, this beautiful home is considered a historic landmark for this town. Every summer, the exterior is repainted white. So are the dark blue shutters flanking the spotless windows. Numerous tall oaks

pepper the front lawn. Unlike the ones concealing my family's trailer, these trees seem to compliment the house. The lawn is freshly mowed with perfectly straight lines in them. Wicker furniture decorates the wraparound porch. A pink bike with streamers and a plastic basket attached to the handle bars lies abandoned on its side on the lawn.

In this area, there are never any annoying dogs barking throughout the night. Or tire-less trucks being held up by cinderblocks. People on this street walk and clean up after their dogs, and cars have four wheels and are always parked in the garage.

Sometimes the difference between this street and my own is so vast that I feel like it's two different worlds.

I take the front steps two at a time. These stairs don't creak underneath my feet like the stairs at my trailer. To the left is a porch swing that slowly sways in the breeze. Two large, potted plants flank the door. Before I go inside, I glance at the driveway, looking for the black Jeep that's usually parked there.

It's not there.

I take a deep breath of relief; he isn't here...yet.

As I walk to the door, I see the living room curtains slightly drawn back and a small, pixie-like face staring back at me. I smile and the face disappears. Seconds later, the door is jerked open.

"Sable!" Audree shrieks and jumps into my arms.

"Hey!" I give her a big hug and let her down. "You're up early."

She grabs my hand and guides me to the living room. "I have to be; my favorite show is on."

I hate to break it to her, but that favorite show will play practically every two hours on TV. Thanks to Audree, I know an obscene amount of cartoon intros.

"In here, Sable!" Elaine calls out.

I glance at Audree as I make my way down the hall, but she's sitting on the couch, her attention directed toward the TV.

I started babysitting Audree last summer. It was an unexpected job, that I eagerly took. Even now, I can't believe this is where I go to almost every day. Audree is a bundle of energy, just like most six years olds. But with her blonde hair, blue eyes and sweet smile, it's impossible not to love her. I think of her as my fourth sister.

And the best part is that her parents are refreshingly real. Most of the time their house is picked up but sometimes there's a pile of dishes in the sink. Audree's toys are strewn across the living room floor. Next to the front door is a coat rack, the hooks weighed down by coats. Beneath it, is a pile of shoes. It looks like someone's tried to keep them organized but a few shoes always end up kicked over.

As I walk down the hall toward the kitchen, I do my best not to look at the family photos lining the walls.

To this day, I can't understand why such a wonderful family would open their doors to someone who lives on the wrong side of the tracks.

In the kitchen, the television on the counter is on, with the weather man pointing to today's temperature. Next to the kitchen table are real estate signs with Audree's dad smiling and holding a cell phone to his ear with, "Talk to Todd Today," directly above his number. All across Antsett and several towns in the county, I see his signs.

Elaine's grabbing a bagel from the toaster and tossing the halves onto a plate before she turns around and quickly pours herself a cup of coffee. "How are you?" she asks, her tone rushed.

I hop onto one of the kitchen bar stools. "Tired," I reply.

Elaine is the superintendent of Whitley Schools. Because Antsett is so small, we consolidated with Emden, another small town ten minutes away. During the summer, she's still constantly busy, which means she doesn't really have any

down time. If I ever doubted where Audree gets her energy, I just need to look at her mom.

When I was in elementary school, Elaine was the principal. I remember walking down the hall at the beginning of the day, and she would always be standing outside her office with a smile on her face. She seemed happy to see us kids. On the last day of school, before Christmas break, she and a handful of teachers would pass out gifts to some of the students. One time, she handed me a wrapped present, smiled at me, and told me to have a Merry Christmas. I almost asked her if I could hand her back the gift and just go home with her.

Later on, I learned those gifts were for kids in the reduced-lunch program, or who came from low-income families.

“Why are you tired, Sable?” Audree says, as she jumps up onto the chair next to mine.

“I went to bed late.”

“You don’t have a bedtime? I have a bedtime. Eight thirty sharp on school days, but in the summer, I can stay up till nine.” Audree’s eyes widen as if this is big news.

“Nine?” I whistle. “That’s really late.”

“I know.” Audree sneakily reaches for a piece of Elaine’s bagel, but at the last second, her mom moves the plate away.

Just then a high-pitched grinding sound of metal cuts through the air, making us all turn toward the hallway.

“Stanley!” Audree yells happily.

Audree’s family has a Wiener dog they adopted from the local animal shelter years ago. No one wanted him, mainly because he only had his front legs. He walks around in a blue dog wheelchair. You can always tell where he is by the creaking noise. Surprisingly, he’s much faster than anyone thought.

He’s not a mean dog, by any means, but he definitely isn’t hyper. To me, he just looks bored. As if we humans bore the shit out of him.

He nudges my leg, so I bend down and pet him. “How are you, boy?”

“Guess what?” Audree gushes.

I look over at her. “What?”

“We’re getting Stanley a new wheelchair. My dad said I can pick it out.” She streaks her hand in the air, as if she’s creating the perfect design. “I’m thinking of pink. With diamonds and glitter everywhere.”

“Stanley doesn’t need diamonds and glitter on his chair,” Elaine says as she tucks the short strands of her blonde hair behind her ear.

“Why not?”

“Because,” she replies as she goes through her briefcase.

“Because why?”

Elaine looks close to snapping at Audree. I quickly step in. “What if you take Stanley to the dog park on a clear, bright day. He steps through the gates and BAM! the other dogs are blinded by his blinged-out wheelchair, and a few of them run into the fence while another one runs into another dog on accident. But that other dog? Well, he’s angry. So he gets into a fight and it’s a bloodbath.” I pause dramatically. “It becomes headline news and everyone wants to see the dog who caused such chaos. Think about it...does Stanley need any extra stress?” I sneak a glance at Stanley. He’s snoring at my feet.

“True, true...” Audree taps her chin and stares at the counter with a thoughtful expression. I smile widely.

“Okay,” Audree announces loudly. “No glitter or diamonds.”

“I’m speaking for Stanley and all the other dogs at the dog park when I say: I think that’s very wise.”

“Me too,” Audree replies.

“Alright. I have to go.” Elaine grabs her purse and kisses the top of Audree’s head. “Be good!” she calls as she walks out the door.

I eye the coffee pot, knowing that today is one of those days where I'll need a cup...or twenty to keep my eyes open.

"If you're still tired, you can take a nap the same time I do," Audree pipes up.

I smooth down the fly away strands around her temple. "I'll keep that in mind." I pour myself some coffee and lean against the counter.

"Soo...whatcha wanna do today?" she asks.

"I don't know. What do you wanna do today?"

"Swimming." Audree stabs the air with a small, chubby finger. "Oh, oh! We can play dress-up and we can borrow my mom's lipstick and play house. You can be my daughter."

My head is starting to pound; I don't want to do a single thing she said. But I don't have the heart to say that. I'm a sucker when it comes to Audree. With my sisters, I never feel like I'm really one of them. I'm more their mom than anything else. But when Audree greets me with her hugs and big bright eyes, I'm given a glimpse at what me and my sisters' lives could've been if life would've been kinder to us.

"We can do all of that," I say gently.

"Excellent!" she chirps as she runs up the stairs. "Let me go change!"



"I THINK WE SHOULD COLOR."

"I think we should take a small break," I reply.

It's twelve in the afternoon and we just got done with lunch: peanut butter and jelly sandwich, with half the jelly smeared across her face and on her hands.

Right before lunch, she played outside for more than an hour. I think she would've played longer if I didn't make her come in. Sometimes I think this girl is the Energizer Bunny.

Audree hops down from her seat and hands me her plate. “Are you sure?”

“I’m sure.”

She shrugs and stands on the step stool in front of the kitchen sink and washes her hands. “That’s okay. My favorite cartoon is on right now.”

With her hands still wet, she jumps off the stool and runs down the hall to the living room, leaving a trail of water droplets on the wood floors. I continue to clean up the kitchen, my gaze intermittently moving between the mud room and front door. It’s been hours and there’s still no sign of him.

Maybe, just maybe, he isn’t here.

“I should be so lucky,” I mutter to myself.

I try to relax, but I’m so worked up that it’s impossible. A headache that’s been building all day starts to get stronger and stronger.

I finish cleaning up the kitchen and walk into the living room. “Audree, do you know where your mom keeps the Advil?”

Without removing her eyes from the screen, she points toward the stairs. “In the upstairs bathroom.”

“Thanks.”

She barely nods.

The second floor is absolutely quiet. Sounds from the television drift upward. Most of the doors are closed, except for the bathroom. Down the hall is Audree’s parents’ bedroom. To my left is Audree’s room. On her door is a drawing of a stick figure in pink, holding what looks like a fork but is supposed to be a wand. Beneath the drawing, in purple, shaky letters, it reads: PRINCSSSES ONLY!

I smile at the misspelling and the fact that the S’s are backwards. I’ve been in her room a few times, when she’s talked me into playing Barbies with her, and it’s every inch a little girl’s dream: the walls are striped in pink and a white canopy bed sits to the left. A huge Barbie doll dream house is

right next to the closet. Barbie and her friends, along with their accessories, are scattered around on the floor. Plastic containers that Elaine has labeled for said Barbies are ironically in the corner, completely untouched.

When I look at the closed door to my right, my smile fades. I've been in that room many, many times. I stop in front of it, my hand poised above the door knob.

I hesitate, and when I do, I realize how ridiculous I look.

I hurry down the hall and shove down the memories before they try to rise to the surface. I get to the bathroom and leave the door cracked. On the bath tub ledge is a row of ducks and Audree's kid shampoo. A bath storage basket, suctioned on the tile, holds an inordinate amount of mermaid dolls.

This bathroom used to smell like him. In fact, his cologne used to sit on the corner of the sink. It's gone now, replaced with kid's toothpaste. But I swear the scent still lingers in the air.

I raid the medicine cabinet like a desperate junkie and quickly find the Advil. I push and turn down on the lid, but it doesn't give, so I turn the lid a bit harder.

"Aud? You doing okay?" I shout.

Faintly, I hear her call out, "Yeah!"

I keep trying to get the lid off, and by this point, I'm squeezing so hard the cap is imprinted on the inside of my palm. "What, is this thing superglued on?" I grunt.

"Possibly. Or maybe you're just freakishly weak."

At the sound of his deep voice, I whirl around. Pills fly everywhere, like small bits of hail. Dozens pelt my head, but I am too numb to react because he's only a few steps away.

Audree's older brother.

Samson McShane.

Antsett's golden boy.

The guy who's had a hold of my heart for almost a year.

Him.

All six foot five of him.

Smirking, he leans against the doorframe, just wearing boxers. He looks amused by my reaction and stares between me and the pills scattered around the tile floor like confetti. As for me, I'm completely paralyzed. I can't move, even if I tried.

He finally breaks eye contact and points to the now empty Advil bottle in my hand. "Have a headache?"

"Just a small one," I mutter.

Quickly, I spring into action, gathering all the pills into my shaky hand. I try to grab them all as fast as I can, just so Sam doesn't help. But I'm not fast enough. He kneels down, swiping a handful of the small white pills and holding them out to me. My hand snakes out, snatching them out of his grasp. The scent I was reminiscing about seconds ago engulfs me until all I can smell is Sam.

I dump the pills back into the bottle. The whole time I feel Sam's eyes on me. I don't have to look into the mirror to know that my cheeks are beet red. After a few awkward seconds of staring down at the bottle, I glance his way.

"Look at his face. Look at his face. Look at his face!" My mind screams. But, of course, that means that I look at his chest. It's nothing but hard muscle and tan skin. My eyes betray me and drift down and linger. Each ab is cut and defined as though carved from stone. But my weakness has always been the V lines above the waistband of his boxers.

Alba calls them dick lines. I don't care what they're called. They're mesmerizing. My mind begins to short circuit a bit every time I see them.

Sam clears his throat, and I pull my eyes from his perfect body. He gestures to the Advil bottle in my hand. "Don't you need those?"

Embarrassment causes me to stutter over my words. "O-hh...yeah. I'll just take them downstairs."

Once again my eyes veer toward his chest. Doesn't he own a shirt or something?

"When did you get home?" I ask.

"Late last night. I just rolled out of bed."

Funny how he says he 'rolled out of bed,' when, to me, it looks like he 'rolled' out of an ad for Calvin Klein underwear.

He crosses his arms, which only brings my attention to them. Sometimes I think his biceps are bigger than my head. Just staring at them brings back a flash of a memory: my fingers curling around them, nails digging into his skin as Sam's forehead touches mine.

At the memory, my heart starts to pound a mile a minute. I blink rapidly and just like that the image is gone.

Very slowly, Sam starts to look me up and down. His eyes leave a blazing trail against my skin. My breath comes in small pants as my nipples harden. Grabbing the first thing I saw this morning seemed like a perfectly fine idea, but now I'm pissed that I didn't put a little more thought into my outfit. A small part of me wants to show Sam that I look good...no, better, since he's been gone.

Tension and something more than that descends around us. What is it? Oh yes, desire. We're picking right back up where we left off. I shift from foot to foot. I wait for Sam to take the hint and step back, so I can walk away, but he stays put.

"Well," I draw out slowly, "I gotta get back to Audree." I move to the left, planning on ducking under his arm. Sam intercepts me, blocking my path, so I dodge to the right.

He follows and I slam right into his chest.

I take a deep breath, but that's a big, big mistake. All I do is breathe him in. I fight the urge to arch against him.

"Can you move, please?" I say through gritted teeth.

"Not yet," he says gruffly. "I want to catch up with you."

My neck tilts back, so I can meet his piercing blue eyes. "There's nothing to catch up on. We message each other."

“We?” He dips his head and it’s not enough to make our eyes level, but it brings him a bit closer. Inadvertently, I take a step back. My heart is pounding so fast, I can’t breathe. I need to get out of here. “It seems like I’m the one doing all the messaging.”

I swallow and try to gather my thoughts but he continues, “I think talking face to face is much better, don’t you?”

“There’s no difference to me,” I lie.

“Liar.” Again, there’s that smirk. That stupid, beautiful smirk. God, I miss it. And the dimple that appears in his left cheek. I’ve missed so much about him. It’s only been a year, but a lot has changed. His brown hair is longer, grazing his jaw. He’s taller and filled out even more, which I didn’t think was possible.

“Look, the summer just started; there’s nothing to really catch up on,” I reply with an air of indifference.

“To me there is; I’ve tried calling you.”

“My phone’s broken,” I lie.

“And then I e-mailed you and DM’d you on Facebook,” he continues.

“They’re broken,” I rush out before I can think twice.

Broken? Is that the best excuse I can think of? At this point, I’m so embarrassed that jumping out the window doesn’t sound like a bad idea.

Sam’s brows lift. “Your e-mail and Facebook are both broken?”

I shrug. “Yeah...”

“Well, since your Facebook and e-mail are tragically broken.” He says the last word in air quotes. “That means we have a lot to catch up on.”

Maybe for him. But not in my eyes. I recognize that Sam is bad for my heart and I need to make it out of this town with my emotions and heart unscathed.

“Please move, Sam.”

Silence. I've always been one for quiet; people and conversation exhaust me. But this quiet is enough to drive someone insane.

Finally, he steps aside. I hesitate for a small second, just waiting for him to jump right back in my way. But he stays put. When I walk past him, my arm brushes against his. Ripples of awareness shoot through me and my skin turns hot to the touch.

For the barest of seconds, my eyes close. I wait until I'm out of the bathroom to take a deep breath.

Just from that single touch, I'm reminded that once upon time, Sam was my temporary bliss from my chaotic world. But he was something that I could never, ever keep.

I'm halfway down the stairs when Sam calls out behind me, "I'll see you later."

I don't reply. His words are a promise. With my hand on the banister, I all but run the rest of the way down.

I can't pinpoint when the story of us really began, or why.

I just know that we somehow happened.

And then we ended.

CHAPTER FIVE

SAMSON

THEN

“MR. MCSHANE, CAN I SEE YOU AFTER CLASS?”

Frowning at Ms. Phillips, I grabbed my binder from the desk and walked to the front of the class. One of my friends, Drew, waited by the door, gesturing to his watch.

2:35.

Before football practice started, we wanted to get a quick bite to eat but who knew what Ms. Phillips wanted to talk about. Either way, I couldn't be late for practice or I'd spend the remainder of it running laps around the track. In this heat, it was about the closest thing to torture.

“Mr. Davis, I don't believe I asked to speak with you,” Ms. Phillips said, without looking up from the papers in front of her.

Drew gave a shrug and bolted before our teacher could say another word. I wanted to call him a pussy, but if our positions were reversed, I'd get the hell out of dodge, too.

When I stopped in front of Ms. Phillips' desk, she straightened the papers on it, as if she had all the time in the world.

I looked anxiously at the clock directly above the door. I cleared my throat. “You wanted to see me?”

Ms. Phillips looked up. I smiled, but she didn't smile back. Which wasn't surprising. No one liked her. She was a young teacher. A newbie, as we called her. We thought she would be relaxed, try to relate to us. But she didn't. She took herself way too seriously. Never smiling. When she did, it was directed to the teacher's pets who always had the right answer.

I was not one of those students.

On the second day of school, she handed out a syllabus (her word, not mine) of books we were reading this year.

Most, if not all the books, I'd never heard of, let alone read. Books like:

Beloved by Toni Morrison.

Don Quixote by some guy with a long-ass name.

Fahrenheit 451 by Ray Bradbury. That title was vaguely familiar and gave me a small amount of reassurance that I wasn't completely destined for an incomplete in this class.

But the first book we were reading? *Anna Karenina*.

Judging by the cover of a woman from the late 1800s, this story was not going to be up my alley. At all.

"Here's your test from yesterday." She slid a test across the desk, a big fat F was at the top, front and center. And just in case I didn't notice the grade in red marker, she added a circle around it. "I'm afraid I had to fail you."

I took the test and barely scanned the first page. This wasn't the first time I failed and it wouldn't be the last.

But it was a big deal.

This F was another bad grade in this class and even if I was only failing one single subject, I would still have to sit out a game. I'd always gotten pathetic grades, but I'd never missed a game.

"This latest test score has sent your grade to a 62%. And because you're on the football team, I spoke with your coach."

At that, I stood up straight. Scouts came to every game and even though I knew which school I wanted to commit to, it was important that no other player get comfortable as the quarterback and take the role that I'd worked my ass off to claim.

"He agrees with me it's important that you get your grade up."

I snorted because it was complete bullshit. He may have said that, but now my ass was going to get reamed. Hurrying to practice was slowly falling down the list of things to do. At

this point, laps around the track were looking pretty damn good.

“Isn’t there any extra credit I could do, to get the grade back up?” I gave her my most charming smile. The one that had gotten me out of failing grades many times before.

The look in her eyes showed that there was nothing I could do or say to sway my grade. She was unmoved. “There will be chances to receive extra credit in the future, but not so early on in this school year.”

“But this is my first failing grade in your class,” I pointed out.

“I realize that. Hopefully it will be the last. My suggestion is that if you’re struggling, you should get a tutor.”

I stepped back and buried my hands in my pockets. “A tutor,” I repeated.

Ms. Phillips nodded and rifled through her paper work. “I had a tutor in mind.” She pulled out a single sheet and handed it to me.

On the right-hand corner, in bold letters, was **Cole, A. Sable**. Below her name was what I could only assume were her tutoring times.

I peered at the teacher. “Are you kidding me?”

“Why would I kid about this, Mr. McShane.”

This had to be a fucking joke. Everyone at school knew of the Cole girls. They were like an urban legend. But for all the wrong reasons.

White Trash.

Whores.

There were many things that people whispered behind their hands, but the thing that made the Cole girls almost fascinating was that they never reacted.

Especially the oldest sister.

Since elementary school, Sable had always been so serious. Back then, she was nothing but skin and bones with waist-length hair that was consistently done in sloppy braids. Her shoes were always coming apart at the soles and her shirts had moth holes in them. Kids made fun of her and she hardly flinched. Even then it was strange to see someone never react.

She kept to herself and hardly talked to anyone, but her sisters. As the years went by, her solemn demeanor and hair stayed the same. But she grew up and stopped being the kid that everyone made fun of and the girl that people stared at from afar and tried to figure out. Names were still whispered behind her and her sisters' backs. Girls said she and her sisters would fuck anything with a pulse. 'Slut' would be hurled at them as they walked down the hall. It's the way they carried themselves. Shoulders back, chin up. Confidence rippled off of them as though the world was theirs and they were doing us a favor by being in our presence. The guys, myself included, we always did a double take.

Yet it didn't matter how hot she was. There was no way in hell that I was going to sit across from Sable Cole and endure that stare of hers that bordered on creepy.

My feelings must've been written across my face because Ms. Phillips lifted a brow and gave me that stern look. "Is there something wrong with Sable?"

I backpedaled. "No, she's...okay. But is there anyone else I can choose from?"

"Sable happens to be an incredible student. She's read every book on my syllabus. She can help bring your grade up."

Just my fucking luck. I glanced back down at the paper. "Well, this won't work. Her available time slots are after school and I have practice."

"Ah," Ms. Phillips said, nodding with understanding. "This does present its challenges."

I smiled with relief. She was finally getting it.

"From what your coach said, practice starts at 3:30 and school gets out at 2:35." She glanced at the clock directly

above the door. “That gives you plenty of time to meet with Sable, go over the reading material and worksheets, and make it on time to practice.”

She gestured to my binder where I shoved the worksheet she handed out today. “I’m sure Sable will be willing to work around your games and practice schedules. And if that still doesn’t work for you, maybe you need to consider if playing football is really right for you.”

Fuck.

Message received, loud and clear. I folded up the paper and put it in my binder. Right next to the worksheet. Ms. Phillips smiled. “You won’t regret this.”

“I doubt that,” I muttered.

“Having a tutor is nothing to be ashamed of, Mr. McShane. Everyone struggles in something. You’ll see Ms. Cole twice a week and I’m more than positive that will help with your grade.”

And with that, she went back to grading the papers in front of her.

I was dismissed.

I waited until I was outside the door and it was clicked shut behind me to glance down at the paper. I swear Sable’s name grew in size, almost taunting me.

This was the only choice I had left.

I was placing my football career in the hands of Sable Cole.

School ended ten minutes ago, yet a few kids lingered next to their lockers. Some formed small groups, either loudly talking and laughing or whispering amongst one another. Sneakers squeaked against the floors. I ignored them all, telling myself that I just needed to get this done and over with.

Beads of sweat formed at my hairline as I hurried down the hall. How could it be so fucking hot? Half the time this place felt like a sauna, which didn’t mix well with the sweat of so

many people moving through the halls. It didn't matter what the temperature was, the foul stench always seemed to linger.

As I neared the guidance counselor's office, I pulled out the English worksheet handed out today. I read through the questions, thinking to myself that I really didn't need Sable. I could turn my grade around all by myself.

But the questions made no fucking sense. It didn't matter how many times I read them. Maybe, if they were worded differently, it would all connect.

Feeling defeated, I folded up the worksheet and put it away. It was finally sinking in that if I ever wanted to touch another football, I needed help.

How many sessions would it take to get my grade to passing level? Three, maybe four? I wasn't looking for an A or B. Quite honestly, it'd take a miracle for me to pass this class.

With or without a tutor.

I rounded the corner where the guidance counselor's office was. The janitors' closet flanked the small office. More students were in and out of this small office than any other space. Every one, at one point, was bound to talk to the counselor. Whether it's due to issues with classes or college selections, students all found themselves here.

The door was open, letting out the cold air blowing from the small window unit. I glanced at the guy sitting at the table in front of me.

"Uh...this is where tutoring is, right?"

The guy lifted his head. He was lanky, with a beanie covering his head. His hair curled around the edges. He was in one of my classes, always sat in either the first or second row and always got As. On everything. It figured he was a tutor. I think his name was Tom.

"Yeah," he said carefully, looking at me like I'd lost my mind. "This is the place. But only on Monday, Wednesday and Thursday. On Tuesday and Friday, sessions are held in Ms. Johnson's room."

The only perk out of all this was that this room had air conditioning. That was it. The walls were covered in motivational posters about achieving your dream. The kids on some of the posters looked like they were from the early 80s. There was a bulletin board with a calendar and our football team's schedule. I swore it was there to mock me. Right next to the door was an old school pencil sharpener with a trash can beneath it. Small bookshelves ran the length of the wall, holding old textbooks, supplies and stacks of printer paper. And in the middle of this small room were two tables, back-to-back, with a cup of pencils sitting in the middle.

Tom was using one and though no one was at the other table, the binder, pencil pouch and open book indicated that someone was occupying it.

And then, Sable Cole walked out of the guidance counselor's office, whose office was attached to this small area. A wide smile was on her face. Normally, she was so serious and intense that seeing her look almost...happy was a shock. The guidance counselor followed behind her, continuing their conversation. "If you hurry, you still have a chance to send in your essay. You've applied for enough scholarships, but this is a really good one."

Al, the guidance counselor, may be the only teacher that let us call him by his first name. Because of that, he had easy camaraderie with the students.

He looked up and saw me and smiled widely. "You came! Ms. Phillips said you might show up, but I was starting to give up hope."

Immediately, Sable's eyes zoned in on me and that brilliant smile disappeared. Her eyes narrowed and her shoulders stiffened. I took the opportunity to look her up and down. Her hair was pulled back in a ponytail. She wore a pair of short shorts that looked like they'd seen better days, but it didn't really matter because she had great fucking legs.

She had on a pale blue baggy shirt that was almost as long as her shorts. A beat-up pair of Converse were on her feet. I swear she'd worn those shoes for years now.

Sable looked like she threw on the first thing she saw on the floor (she always looked like that), but somehow still looked good enough to give her a second and third look. It was something that I would never be able to figure out.

I finally looked away. “Yeah...sorry I was late.”

“Well, you’re here now.” Al gestured to Sable. “You two know each other, right? I don’t need to make any introductions?”

Sable arched a brow and then pointedly looked away from me. “Oh, I know him.”

Al, completely oblivious to sarcasm, beamed brightly. “Wonderful.”

Tom awkwardly cleared his throat and said he needed to speak with Al. They went to his office. And then I was left with my new tutor. She looked like she wanted to grow a pair of talons and claw my eyes out.

If this was a pre-cursor to how our sessions would be, I was fucked. Plain and simple.

But I couldn’t throw in the towel yet. My playing time on the field was riding on these stupid sessions. I had to *try* and be nice to Sable in some form so I could get a passing grade.

I leaned against the wall. “How long have you been a tutor?” I asked randomly.

She continued to look at me with that sharp, probing gaze. “Since my sophomore year.”

“Oh,” I replied dumbly.

Silence.

Sable finally uncrossed her arms, sighed heavily and gestured to the table. “Let’s get started, shall we?”

“Let’s.” As I sat down, I pulled out my tattered copy of *Anna Karenina* and tossed it onto the table. “This is what’s failing me.”

For once, the Ice Princess didn’t say anything. Just picked up my copy and skimmed through it as she sat down. “How far

into it are you?”

“Twenty percent.”

She continued to scan the pages. “I’m going to go out on a limb and say that you hate this story.”

“What makes you think that?”

Sable lowered the book, her sharp green eyes meeting mine. “Well, for starters, you threw this book on the table like it was poison.” She slid the book across the table. “You have continued to keep reading...haven’t you?”

“I’m sitting across from you and holding a 62% in the class...what do you think?”

“Part of your problem is you have no idea what’s going on.”

“And I don’t because this book is boring as hell.”

“No, it’s not. You’re just reading it the wrong way.”

“I didn’t know there were multiple ways to read a story,” I commented.

Her lips pulled into a tight line. “It doesn’t matter. You’ve barely sank your teeth into the story so that means you can’t be too lost in it.”

“Oh, you’d be surprised,” I murmured.

“Do you have any worksheets?”

I pulled out the one I was given today.

Sable skimmed the questions. “Hmm. Not too bad at all. Just looks like basic questions on the characters and plot.”

She made it sound so easy. Like riding a fucking bike, but in my mind, it was nothing but a chaos of jumbled words all from one story.

She cleared her throat and read aloud the first question. “When you first met Kitty, what were your impressions of her?”

“I don’t know. What did you think?”

“I’m your tutor, not your answer sheet. You read the book and I help you with your worksheets, okay?”

What a little bitch. I should’ve known the second I came in here that she wasn’t going to make this easy. “Oh, I get it now,” I said with a knowing smile, “you’re one of *those*...”

She lowered the worksheet and looked at me curiously. “One of those?”

“Yeah. The do-gooder. The person that thinks you can only learn if you try.”

Sable arched a brow. “I’ve been called many things before but a do-gooder is not one of them.”

I was going to tease her. Ask her what she’s been called, but she glanced back at the paper. “So...your impression of Kitty?”

“That’s the main character, right?”

“No,” Sable said slowly. “That’s Anna. You know, the character the book is named after.”

I waved my hand impatiently. “Yeah, yeah, yeah. I remember now. The chick whose brother cheated on his wife.”

“That’s one way to put it, but yes...” She sighed. “Back to the question though: what did you think of Kitty?”

The book, by that point, was just a scattered mess in my mind. I thought over every character, until I got to Kitty. I couldn’t hold too many details to her name right now, but I had a few.

“Young.”

Sable looked at me expectantly, as if there was more I should be saying.

“What?” I asked defensively.

“Look, I agree with her being young. But because she’s so young, don’t you believe that might make her a little naive?”

I shrugged. “I guess so.”

Again, she stared at me like I needed to finish my sentence. Finally, she looked away, and for the next fifteen minutes, we went over every single question.

When that was finished, I thought we were going to go over a chapter or at least more of the characters, but Sable glanced over at the clock, stood up and gathered her things.

I cocked a brow. “Where are you going?”

“Home,” she replied as she zipped up her book bag.

I slowly stood up. “Aren’t we supposed be doing this thing called studying?”

“We are, but I can’t do anything until you actually read at least some of the chapters.”

She gave me a smirk, but there was nothing friendly about it. It said: *I’m better than you, but I’ll let you think we’re equals.*

“See you next week, Samson,” she called out.

And then she left.



CHAPTER SIX

SABLE

NOW

“SO WHAT HAPPENED AFTER THAT?”

“What do mean ‘after that’? I ran down the stairs and avoided him the rest of the day,” I reply.

Maren squirts a large helping of ketchup onto her plate. All four of us, plus Maren’s boyfriend Nick, are at a local diner eating dinner. It’s the only place that you can get a huge plate of fries and a cheeseburger all under three dollars. Even though we are quietly talking, other patrons eating keep glancing over at us as though we’re having a food fight. Our waitress only comes by the table once in a blue moon and that’s only because Nick is with us. After the day I just had, being stared at like I’m an animal at a zoo is the last thing I want to deal with. The encounter with Sam was just hours ago, but my entire body is still shaking, as though a bolt of lightning struck me.

“I don’t understand what the big deal is,” Alba says around some fries. “So you slept with him a few times, who cares?”

My heart cares and that’s the issue. Those few times were more than a few and each time is ingrained in my memory. I thought I was over that time of my life but seeing him face to face was just a stark reminder that I’m not.

My sisters talk over each other as they each try to insert their opinion. I try to listen to them, but I look to the left, and when I do, I see the small booth in the corner where I would sometimes help Sam with his English.

I knew of Sam, even before that one awful scene on the playground as a kid. Of course I did. Everyone knew of him; he’s the town’s pride and joy.

There’s nothing subtle about Sam. He has a cocky grin and knows he’s good looking, usually lapping up the attention like a cat in the sun. For those reasons alone, he shouldn’t be my type. I’m attracted to guys that aren’t much different than me. Quiet. Bookish. Shy.

Throughout middle school and high school, our paths only crossed in the halls or during lunch. That well-worn routine of ours probably would've stayed that way if I wasn't asked to tutor him.

Trust me when I say he was the last person I wanted to tutor. I'd helped athletes in the past, and most, if not all, had rocks for brains and expected me to do all the work for them, like trying to get good grades wasn't an option for them.

But Samson tried. Tutoring wasn't a joke to him.

"Do you want my opinion?"

I blink rapidly, until Alba's face comes back into focus. "No."

Alba feigns a hurt expression and takes a drink of her soda. "Why not?"

"Because Lindsay Lohan makes better decisions than you."

Alba flips me off before she attacks her burger with gusto.

"Don't listen to her," Maren says. "Listen to me. I'm the only one out of the four of us that has had a successful relationship."

"Yeah, because Nick's afraid of you," Lennon chimes in.

"That's not true." Maren elbows Nick. "Tell them it's not true."

"It's not true," he says dully.

"Whatever." Maren waves her hand in the air, as if she's brushing our words aside. She rests her elbows on the table and gives me a serious look. "You need to address the situation immediately."

"What?" Alba laughs. So do I.

"Yeah." Maren nods so fast, she reminds me of a bobblehead figure. "You need to either tell him you want nothing to do with him or *everything* to do with him."

"I vote everything," Lennon murmurs shyly.

Alba cuts in. “You want to see what happens if you go down Maren’s route?”

I nod.

She mimics a bomb exploding. “This was one simple encounter. You had to know that on some level, you were going to see him again. You are his sister’s babysitter.”

Alba is right. I did expect to see him, but when I did, I always pictured myself ready. I would be composed. There wouldn’t be pills flying all around me and looking like the hot mess I am.

I close my eyes. “This is a nightmare.”

Alba sighs. “If that’s a nightmare, then I’d love to see what a dream is.”

“You’re thinking way too hard over this. It was one awkward encounter. That’s it,” Lennon says.

“But it’s not just one awkward encounter. It’s never that easy with him and I don’t want to get all wrapped up in him again.”

“Why?” Maren asks.

“Because I have a lot riding on my future and I can’t afford to fuck that up. I get distracted for one second and...poof!” I snap my fingers. “Scholarship gone. And then I won’t get my dream job. I won’t have money. That leads to me becoming the Team Member of the Month at IGA until I fuck that up and move in with Alba or Maren and mooch off them. Then, after a few months, they kick me out and I become homeless.”

“Wow. Well, the good news is you’re not being dramatic at all,” Alba says dryly.

Maren rolls her eyes. “Don’t listen to her. Listen to me. You’re overthinking this,” she insists.

I smile with relief. “Really?”

“Yeah. I mean, I would at least give you a week until I kicked you out.”

I give her an unamused look. “You’re too kind.”

She grins. “What are sisters for? Anyways, you need to move on. Go find someone else.”

“That’s not a bad idea,” Lennon remarks.

Alba grins triumphantly. “Take my relationship with Joe. I was over him within seconds.”

“Who’s Joe?” Nick asks.

Alba’s eyes cloud over with anger. “Oh, just some dickhead that cheated on me last January. But whatever. I’m over it.”

“Could’ve fooled me,” I murmur.

The truth is that Alba dated Joe for almost six months, which, for her, is the longest relationship she’s ever been in. She loved him. But he was only out for one thing. When they broke up, she wallowed in self-pity and played nothing but Coldplay for months. To this day, I cringe when I hear Chris Martin’s voice.

It took a long time for her to get over him, and even though she’s able to smile now, it still drives home the point that when you open yourself up to someone, you always risk the chance of your heart being hurt.

“If you’re so worried about seeing him again, why don’t you just quit?” Nick asks.

“Because...” Everyone looks at me expectantly. I start to squirm. “Because it’s hard to find a job.”

That isn’t the truth. The truth is that I genuinely enjoy Sam’s family. Audree, with her sweet giggle and crazy energy. His mom, with her unfailing kindness and his dad, with his corny jokes and jovial voice.

Simply put, they are the family I’ll never have.

“Can we change the subject?” I blurt out.

“Oh!” Alba’s eyes brighten. “I have something I want to bitch about.”

I smile at Alba gratefully.

“What do you have to bitch about?” Maren asks.

Alba points a fry at her. “You and Nick. The cute nicknames have got to stop.”

Nick, as always, looks confused. Maren, on the other hand, goes on the defensive. “What are you talking about?”

“The nicknames.”

“Like what?”

“Oh, where do I start? There’s sweetie, honey, and my personal favorite, babe. They are totally obnoxious.” Alba points to me and Lennon. “Back me up here, guys!”

Maren turns her glare toward me, as if I’m the one speaking. “Is that true?”

“Uhh...well, you do say *babe* a lot.”

“I do not!”

“It’s. All. The. Time,” Alba enunciates slowly.

Alba clears her throat and smiles at me. “Hey babe. Can you pass me the salt?”

Playing along with her little game, I smile and grab the salt. “Here you go, babe.”

“Thanks, babe.”

“No problem. Love you, babe.”

“Okay,” Maren snaps, “we get it.”

Nick just shrugs and continues to eat.

Maren furiously chews on her food before she looks over at me. “Didn’t you and Sam ever have nicknames for each other?”

“No. Never. And I thought we were done talking about him?”

“*You* were the one that wanted to change the subject. I didn’t.”

“Maren, you’re just pissy because we called you out on the obnoxious nicknaming,” Alba blurts out before she glances my

way. “Just ignore her.”

“I’m not pissy. I’m bringing up the subject again because Sable will see him. In fact, there’s another party tonight. I’m sure he’ll be there.”

All eyes turn my way. Even Nick stops eating his food long enough to look at me. “I’m not going,” I say firmly.

Maren frowns. “Why not?”

“I’m sorry. Have we not met? I’m not going to state the obvious again. Besides, I’ve already met my yearly quota of parties. And if Sam’s going, I’m definitely not.”

Maren continues to stare at me. “You can’t run from him forever.”

“I’m *not* running from anything,” I say a little too heatedly.

Maren laughs, almost as though she has a crystal ball and saw the moment today where I practically sprinted down the stairs to get away from Sam. “Of course you run. That’s what you do. When you don’t have a solution to what you see as a problem, you shut down and run.”

This conversation is beyond done. I’m tired of talking about Sam, of thinking about Sam. The room suddenly becomes too hot. I stand up. “I gotta go.”

“Sable, please stay!” Lennon bursts out.

“And she’s off!” Maren announces loudly.

I shove my way out of the booth, stepping on Maren’s foot and jostling plates on the table. Before I leave, I drop a five on the table. “I’ll be at the library.”

I rush out of the diner and run across the road. My heart is furiously pounding in my chest. It’s all I can hear. I wait until I’m right in front of the library to stop walking and take a deep breath.

It’s the start of June. I only have to deal with Sam for twelve weeks. Before I know it, I’ll be leaving for college and Sam will be right where he belongs—in the past.



CHAPTER SEVEN

SABLE

NOW: MID-JUNE

“EENY MEENY MINY MOE. CATCH A TIGER BY ITS TOE...”

Audree points her finger at each of her six friends as she slowly turns in a circle. I watch them with boredom, idly waving my book in front of my face.

You know it’s hot when you willingly slip out of the reading world to fan yourself with your paperback. I might be more pissed off about that fact, but the truth is that it’s been fun to watch Audree with her friends. It’s incredible the amount of energy these girls have. Their cheeks turn rosy and sweat drips down their temples, but they barely pay it any mind. Instead, they remain focused on their friends and the games they’re playing.

I remember having that non-stop, unquenchable thirst for fun. I can’t say for certain when it faded away. Truthfully, I think it was a slow decline.

I wish I still had it.

“Eeny, meeny, miny...MOE!” Audree points a finger at her friend with white blonde hair. The girls spread out across the yard like a group of ants on a sidewalk. I watch them for a minute or two before I go back to reading my book.

A few minutes later, the girls turn quiet. I’m not an expert on kids, but I’ve been around my sisters enough to know that silence means they’re up to no good. I lower my book and see Audree’s friends huddled around her beneath a large oak tree.

“What are you doing?” I call out.

A few girls jump, looking guilty. Audree just turns around, almost looking proud of herself, and runs over to me. The whole time her hands are cupped together tightly to her chest.

“What do you have?” I ask.

“Oh, it’s so pretty, Sable!” Audree exclaims. “Just look.” Leaning forward, she opens her hands enough for me to see

the butterfly, its colorful wings fluttering madly as it tries to escape. After a few seconds, Audree closes her hands and looks up at me with her big doe eyes. “I’ve been trying to catch this for days,” she confesses.

Highly unlikely but I nod along.

“Do you think Momma has a jar I can put her in?”

“It’s a her?”

She cracks open her hands and peers at the butterfly. “I think so. Her name is Peggy.”

The name makes me smile. “I don’t think you should put Peggy in a jar.”

“Why not?”

“Because Peggy can’t live in a jar.”

“Why not?” Audrey repeats.

“Because you have to let her free.”

“But I don’t wanna. She’s so beautiful!”

“I know but look at her frantically trying to escape. She’s dying to get out and roam free.”

Kind of like me.

After a bit of goading, Audree reluctantly agrees and opens her hands. Not even a second later, the butterfly is gone, quickly moving away from its ex-owner. Audree mournfully looks at the sky.

“Cheer up, Audee. You still have Stanley you can love on!”

Audree’s face perks up. “You’re right!” She turns around and advances on Stanley’s spot on the deck, directly beneath the patio table. “Stanley! Oh, STANLEY! Come play with me!”

Stanley lifts his head long enough to stare at me, with a look that says, *Thanks a lot, Bitch.*

With that crisis done and over with, I sit back down and continue to read.

So far there's been no sign of Sam. No surprise there. In one of his e-mails, he told me that he got a job over the summer working for his uncle's construction company. The chances of us running into each other during the day is unlikely. Yesterday was just a fluke. Even with the odds on my side, I still find myself looking over my shoulder, feeling like an on-the-run convict.

Last night, Alba and Maren ended up going to the party. Lennon stayed at home with me. I'd love to say that it was a relaxing night with her watching TV and me reading, but what really happened was me re-reading the same page over and over, while I kept wondering if Sam really was at that party and what he was doing.

So I stayed up until two in the morning, waiting for Alba and Maren to get home. When they finally walked into the room, I rolled over in my bed, pretending to be asleep. It was clear from the way Alba slurred her words and giggled loudly that she was drunk. And Maren laughed at everything Alba said, so she was obviously tipsy. They changed into their pajamas and turned off the light before they got into bed.

A few minutes later, my mattress dipped to the left.

"He was there," Alba whispered in my ear. "He didn't flirt with anyone."

The relief I felt was palpable, and even now, hours later, it's still there. Which is ridiculous because what he does on his own time is his business. Not mine. I can only imagine what he did while he was away at college...

Nope. I stop myself.

It's not my business.

And I don't care.

"I don't care," I mumble aloud.

"Don't care about what?"

Yelping loudly, I whip my body around, causing my book to fall into the grass, and see Sam hunched over me, his hands

braced on his knees. He's wearing a baseball cap backwards and a shit-eating grin.

"Shit," I breathe. "You scared me."

"Don't care about what?" he repeats, his bright blue eyes twinkling.

Calmly, I grab the paperback, bookmark my spot and set it down on my lap. Inside my heart is pounding a mile a minute. "I was just speaking aloud," I mutter.

"Yeah. But about what?"

"None of your beeswax."

Sam groans as he sits down next to me. "God. You just used beeswax. You really are spending too much time with Audball."

He's actually dressed today—thank God—in an old football shirt with the sleeves cut-off and blue jeans that look like they've seen better times along with a pair of work boots that are just as bad, if not worse, than the pants. But the way my body reacts and my heart pounds in my chest, show that it doesn't matter what he looks like—he'll always get a reaction from me.

I turn my face back to the clear blue sky. But that doesn't help because the sky reminds me of his eyes. God, I can't escape this guy. "I'm her babysitter. I *have* to spend time with her. So what are you doing here in the middle of the day?"

"I'm allowed to take a lunch break, aren't I?"

"I guess." I shrug, but give him a little smirk.

He grins and I sit up a bit straighter and wrap my arms around my legs. It puts more distance between us, but Sam closes that gap by stretching out his legs. His knee brushes against mine, and I have to stop myself from flinching.

Silence stretches between us. On the opposite side of the yard, Audree and her friends continue to chase after each other. (They gave up on Stanley minutes ago.) Their shrieks linger in the air. I thought that after a while, Sam would get

bored and go back inside. Maybe go make himself some lunch and enjoy the cool air-conditioned house.

But he sits there next to me as if he has all the time in the world.

“I saw your sisters at a party last night,” Sam says offhandedly.

I continue to stare straight ahead. “Oh?” I ask nonchalantly, when I’m really dying for him to say more.

He rests his elbows on his knees, and like a moth to a flame, my eyes zoom in on the action and stare at his muscle-bound arms. Just for a few seconds. It’s only been one day in the sun and his skin is already darker than mine will ever be.

“Yeah,” he finally replies, “it’s good to know that Alba is still the same. She was hanging out with some guy.”

“Some guy...that really narrows it down.”

He lifts a dark brow. “Should I have gotten a background check on the guy?”

Yes, yes, yes! Is what I want to say. But I don’t.

“Anyways, I talked to her for a few seconds. She was already pretty...”

“Shitfaced,” I cut in. “Just go ahead and say it. She was shitfaced.”

“She was feeling the alcohol,” Sam says graciously. “But you know she said the craziest thing...”

I groan. “Oh, God. What?”

He leans in and that half-smirk appears. “That you went to a party the night before.”

My breath becomes stuck in my throat. I swallow. “And that’s crazy because?”

“Because you hate parties. You once told me that you’d rather get a colonoscopy in front of a group of strangers than go to a party.”

What Sam doesn't know is that I still feel that way. But I'm not about to tell him that. So I shrug. "People change."

"Yeah, they do." I can feel his eyes on me and suddenly it's not the sun making my skin tingle. "Are you going all wild on me, Cole?" he nearly purrs.

My cheeks turn bright red. "Hardly," I mutter.

"I don't know. First you go to a party...what's next? Reading after lights out?"

"Reading after lights out has been happening for a while."

Sam whistles. "Rebel."

My lips have a mind of their own and curve up into a small smile. He smiles back and it makes my stomach flip. "Also, Nick and Maren are still together?"

I'm grateful for the change of subject and quickly speak up. "Now that actually is a shock."

"What—you don't like Nick?"

"No, no! He's fine. It's just that I don't understand why they're prolonging the inevitable."

"The inevitable of what?"

I impatiently wave a hand in the air. "You know...of them breaking up."

"Why would they break up?"

The reasons for having such a long, in-depth conversation about my sister's relationship is beyond me. Yet at this point, I'm too caught up in all of it. And Sam is a rational person. Even he should understand where I'm coming from.

"Because he's going to college in just a few short months that's why!" I burst out.

I can feel Sam's eyes on me. "So you don't think long-distance relationships can last?" he challenges.

The question is a trap. If I was smart, I wouldn't answer, but I can't help myself. "No," I say slowly. "I don't think they can."

Sam holds my gaze for a second before he lifts a brow. “I see you haven’t changed at all either.”

His words hurt, even when they shouldn’t. But it’s the reminder I need—we shouldn’t be talking. My shoulders straighten and I subtly move away. Sam doesn’t say a word, but a muscle along his jaw jumps as he stares straight ahead.

Awkward silence ensues and I’m about ready to tell Audree that it’s time to go inside when she runs over, grinning like a maniac at her brother. “Sammy! Come play.” Eighty percent of her hair has fallen out of the braid that she begged me to do this morning. Her entire face is beet red and her bright pink shorts have dirt and grass stains all over them.

For a split second, her friends stop running long enough to stare at Sam. Then they’re running, again, their giggles mingling in the air.

Ah, kid crushes.

In love one minute.

Off to something else the next.

I wish it stayed that way. The amount of broken hearts would drastically lower.

“I can’t Audball. I gotta get some lunch and go back to work.”

Audree laces her fingers together. “Just one game, Sammy. Pllllleeeeeeasssee!”

“Yeah, *Sammy*. Go play,” I challenge.

Sam turns in my direction, with a devious gleam in his eyes. Without warning, he drapes a heavy, and really sweaty, arm around me, as if we didn’t just have a really uncomfortable ending to our conversation minutes ago. I elbow him in the stomach to get him to let go, but he’s immovable. “Audball, I’ll play if Sable does.”

Maybe it’s the fact that my face is practically shoved into Sam’s armpit, cutting off all fresh air. Or maybe it’s the fact that I’ve been up since eight dealing with Audree’s crazy amount of energy. Either way, I say yes.

Audree cheers and continues running around the yard like a psychopath. Sam holds a hand out for me, which I reluctantly take. He yanks me up so fast that I slam into him.

Just for a second, our bodies touch.

Just one, tiny second.

But it's enough to make my hands start shaking. I jump back like he has the plague and cross my arms. "Audree, what game are we playing?" I shout.

She turns around. "I haven't decided yet!" she yells and whips her head back toward her friends.

Sam rocks back on the heels of his boots. "By the way, are your e-mail and Facebook still broken?"

My mouth opens and shuts. Ultimately, I say nothing because he has me cornered. "Uhh...yeah, I think so." I finish my words with a yawn.

Sam zeros in on the action. His eyes narrow slightly. "What are you tired for?"

Do I detect jealousy in his words? And why do I feel almost happy that he cares about what I was doing?

"I'm tired because I was up late reading," I confess.

God, the truth is so pitiful. I should've lied.

"Of course you were," Sam murmurs with a half-smirk. He holds my gaze and I remind myself to breathe. "Are you still obsessed with *Anna Karenina*?"

I stare straight ahead. My heart's beating so loud, I swear Sam can hear it over the girls' laughter. If he can think back to something so small as my favorite book, what else does he remember?

It's none of your business. Leave it alone, my mind begs.

So I do.

"Absolutely," I finally answer. "It's a classic."

We both go silent, but my mind won't turn off. It's pleading with me to ask things that I have no business

questioning.

“I can’t believe you remembered that,” I say quietly.

Sam looks down at me. “Sable, when it comes to you, I remember everything.”

Before I can reply, Audree taps Sam on the shoulder. “Tag! You’re it!”

CHAPTER EIGHT

SAMSON

THEN

“WHAT’S YOUR GRADE UP TO?”

I stopped in the doorway and glared at Sable. No preamble. No friendly greeting of any kind. She’s been my tutor for three weeks and we were not on the friendliest of terms.

The problem was I made the mistake of thinking that Sable was the quiet, intense Cole sister. I’d never been more wrong in my entire life. Sure, she was intense, but there was nothing quiet about her. She stored everything inside: her feelings, her words. All of it. And then, when you least expected it, she hurled everything at you.

The girl was a force to be reckoned with.

And you were either ready, or you weren’t. Most people weren’t. Myself included.

“Well?” she said, her voice louder than before. She crossed her arms over her chest, impatiently waiting for me to answer. But now my attention was on her tits. She always wore baggy shirts, and even now, her flannel shirt was two sizes too big. But the material was stretched tight over her chest, emphasizing that beneath her baggy clothes was a droolworthy body.

“My eyes are up here,” she snapped.

Reluctantly, my eyes met hers. I gave her an unapologetic grin, which seemed to piss her off more.

Good. It was a lot of fun getting underneath Sable’s skin.

I loudly dropped my books onto the table and pulled out the pop quiz from yesterday and handed it to her. She took one look at the C and frowned.

“I don’t get it. We went over the chapters!” She looked more upset over the grade than I did. I hated to break it to her, but for me, a C was actually good. Finally, she dropped the

paper and shot those green eyes in my direction. “You were listening when I went over the chapters, right?”

“Of course,” I replied truthfully.

Sable narrowed her eyes. She didn’t believe me.

I could tell her that the second Ms. Phillips stood up in front of the class and announced there would be a pop quiz, all of us collectively groaned. I could tell her that when the girl who sat in front of me handed me the quiz, I thought about how easy it would be to look at her answers. It would be my second choice, of course. Besides, I’d done it before. Chances were, I’d do it again.

But I didn’t need to this time because I read the chapters. I went through said chapters with Sable, which led to me knowing more about Anna Karenina’s fucking life than I cared to admit.

I could tell her that when I read through the questions on the quiz, the words started to blur together until they looked like Egyptian hieroglyphics. And while I was panicking, everyone was hunched over their desks, writing down answers.

I mimicked their body language and read over the first question. Then read it a second time.

And a third.

And a fourth.

Ten minutes had passed and I still had no idea what the answer was, so I skipped to the second. It was easier. The answer was sitting in my mind, just waiting for me.

My confidence started to build.

You got this, McShane, it chanted. So you didn’t get one question. Big fucking deal. You got the rest.

After I answered the fourth and fifth questions, without any problem, I began to believe that steady voice in my head. But then the sixth question tripped me up.

Was I the only one struggling to string just one simple sentence together? This wasn't rocket science. I wasn't finding the cure for cancer here.

I could tell her that I was the last person to finish the test and that I swore everyone was watching me, knowing that I completely fucked it up.

Of course, I *could* tell her that, but I never would because she didn't want a long-drawn-out answer. She wanted something short and sweet. So I did just that.

"I tried," I said.

She arched a brow and I shrugged.

"Well..." Her words faded away as she gave the quiz one last look. "We'll just go through the chapters and worksheets better this time." Then she flipped the quiz over, as if she couldn't stand the sight of it, and got to work. "Chapters twenty through twenty—two are good. Sometimes this book can have a lull, but now it's really starting to pick up." Sable skimmed through her book until she reached the right chapter. She continued to speak, but I had no idea what the hell she was talking about. When she talked about books, she transformed. Almost like the words gave her life. Blood swimming through her veins. Air for her lungs.

That frown faded away and she looked...relaxed.

"...my favorite part of the book is coming up," Sable confessed.

I blinked rapidly and tried to figure out what the hell she was talking about. I had no clue.

"Hey, Sam," a sweet voice said. A sweet voice that definitely wasn't Sable's.

I looked up and saw a girl leaning against the doorway. She was a sophomore. Or maybe a junior? I didn't fucking know.

She played with a strand of her blonde hair as she looked at me. Her brown eyes were wide as she waited for me to

answer. She bit down on her lower lip. Ah, now I remembered her. She was at some party last weekend.

But what was her fucking name? I wanted to say it started with a K.

I leaned back in my chair and grinned. “Hey.”

Sable rolled her eyes, but didn’t say a word.

The girl stepped into the room and stood so close to the table that Sable’s notebook threatened to fall off of it. The girl didn’t notice. In fact, it was almost as if Sable wasn’t even here.

“—And I just wanted to see when a good time worked for you?”

I shook my thoughts away and blinked at the girl. She stared at me with an expectant look in her eyes.

“I’m sorry. What did you say?”

Sable tossed her pen onto the table, crossed her arms and leaned back in her chair. “She wants to know when’s a good time for the two of you to ‘hang out’?” Her eyes were blazing with anger as she put the last two words in air quotes.

I suppressed my smile. I got way too much pleasure pissing Sable off. She never stayed idle or cowered. No, there was always a hot retort on the tip of her tongue just waiting to be fired in my direction.

I ignored Sable and looked at the girl. “Why would we hang out?”

“When we were at Madeline’s party, you said that we should hang out some time,” the girl replied tentatively.

I frowned. “Are you positive you have the right party?”

She nodded.

I tried to go back to the memory of that party. I was getting nothing. I glanced back at the girl. “Are you sure it wasn’t at Drew’s?”

She paled and took a small step back. “It was at Madeline’s.”

“Are you sure?”

“Dear God,” Sable interrupted. “Were you *that* drunk?”

I crossed my arms and looked at Sable with mock reproach. “Um. Do you mind? I’m kind of having a private conversation here.”

Sable gritted her teeth and glanced down at her notebook, muttering words underneath her breath. I only caught the word asshole.

I turned back to the girl. “Give me your number.” I paused awkwardly. “Your name is Amanda...right?”

“She said her name’s Ashley four times!” Sable blurted out. She looked at the girl. The girl looked back at her with fear in her eyes. “Ashley, if you don’t kick him in the nuts for being a dickchin then I will.”

Ashley took a step back.

Sable sighed. “Look...you seem like a nice girl.” Sable jerked her chin in my direction. “You’re definitely better than this asshole.”

I’d had girls call me every name under the sun, but never, *never* did they say those things to my face. I sat up straighter in my chair. “Hey, now wait a minute, Sable.”

She turned to me. “Oh, look he *can* remember a girl’s name,” Sable quickly cut in.

I rose from my seat. “The only reason I know your name is because I’m forced to see your face every other week day.”

“If that bothers you, we can easily find you another tutor.” She twisted around in her chair and nudged Tom. “Hey, do you want to be Sam’s tutor? He’s looking for a new one.”

Tom just gawked at Sable, as if he’d never seen a female in his life.

“No,” I said through gritted teeth, “I’m not. Don’t listen to her. She’s delirious from being such a raging bitch.”

Was Sable a bitch? Not really. I thought of her more as an ice princess. But I said the name just to watch her cheeks go red.

At the word bitch, she whipped her body back to me and mimicked my body language. Fine by me. From this angle, I could see down her shirt.

And what do you know? Perfect tits.

“I’m not a bitch,” she gritted out.

I leaned in. “You are. All the time.”

“Well, I wouldn’t have to be such a bitch if you didn’t piss me off *all the time*, now would I?”

She was driving me crazy, pushing my buttons like I was a switchboard. So why the fuck was I smiling?

“Uh...you guys?” Tom interjected.

“WHAT?” We yelled in unison.

“Where did that girl go?”

The two of us turned toward the now empty doorway. Ashley was gone and who knows for how long. Sable and I were too damn busy ripping each other’s heads off to notice.

I threw my hands up in the air. “Look what you did. You ran that poor girl off!”

Sable pointed to herself. “Me? I didn’t run her off! You did with your charming qualities.” She crossed her arms and gave me a scathing look. “You were unbelievable by the way.”

Just to get further under her skin, I smiled and winked at her. “Thank you.”

She narrowed her eyes and sat back in her seat. “I can’t believe girls throw themselves at you.”

“Why do you care?”

Her eyes narrowed. “I don’t care.”

“Clearly, you do or you wouldn’t have made a comment.”

“I was just in shock that anyone would find you a catch. Besides, that girl actually seemed nice. You could’ve thought of a smoother excuse or, better yet, you could’ve told her the truth: that you were drunk when the two of you hooked up.”

“How do you know we hooked up?”

“Alba was at the same party. She told me all about it.”

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

For the first time, during this entire exchange, I felt a level of shame.

I was getting ready to explain that it meant nothing, but then I realized I owed Sable no explanation. She would think whatever the fuck she wanted about me no matter what I said.

“I mean, nothing you do should surprise me; you’re a seasoned womanizer. You know how to smile and say all the right things to get a girl into your clutches. You should have your own PSA, just so girls are forewarned about you.”

Sable took a deep breath and leaned back in her chair. For a second, I was stunned because her words hurt like a motherfucker. But I quickly smiled, like her words didn’t mean a damn thing.

“You seem jealous I wasn’t hitting on you,” I pointed out.

I sat back in my chair. Underneath the table, I relaxed my legs. My knee brushed against hers. Sable sucked in a sharp breath and I smirked. I was pushing my luck. I knew that. But I wanted to prove that Sable wasn’t completely immune to me. Instead of moving away, her leg stayed put. And then, with her elbows resting on the table, she leaned forward.

We stared at each other, both of us refusing to pull away or back down. “I can promise you that there’s not a single part of me that’s jealous.”

Sable didn’t know that from my vantage point, I was afforded another perfect view of her tits. It took all of five seconds for me to get hard, and suddenly, my bright idea to touch a single part of Sable didn’t seem so smart.

I swallowed loudly and said, a little too gruffly, “I think you’re lying.”

Her green eyes widened before she blinked rapidly. Up close, I could see flecks of gold swirled in her irises. Thick black lashes lined her eyes, which I’d never noticed before. There was a lot I hadn’t noticed about her.

Sable sat back in her chair. Her leg was no longer touching mine, which meant my view down her shirt was gone.

“Let’s get back to work,” she muttered.

Her attention returned to her copy of *Anna Karenina*, but I wasn’t ready for the conversation to end. I tried to remember if Sable had ever dated anyone, but I couldn’t think of a single guy. Alba seemed to have that area covered for all the Cole girls.

“What do you find appealing?” I abruptly asked.

Sable lifted her head and stared at me with confusion. “Excuse me?”

“In a guy.” I narrowed my eyes, staring at her thoughtfully. “Let me guess...you go for the nerds. No! Wait!” I snapped my fingers. “I change my answer. You go for the emo, I’m-so-misunderstood type. Am I right?”

Another eye roll. “I don’t have a type,” she replied.

“Would you be like Anna and go for Vronsky?”

Sable shook her head. “Absolutely not.”

“Why not?”

“He’s too cocky. When I read the book, I kept picturing a peacock, strutting around. He is...” Her words drifted away and she smiled at me. “He’s just like you.”

I slapped a hand against my chest. “Ouch. Give a guy some warning before you pull the trigger. Also, that’s more than judgmental.”

Sable paused. “You’re right. That’s unfair to Vronsky.”

She grinned wickedly, and against my better judgment, I found myself wanting to smile back.

“You know nothing about me,” I pointed out.

Sable crossed her arms and looked at me thoughtfully. “All right then. Name the last girl you were in a relationship with.”

Shit. That was a hard one.

Sable smirked. “How about the last girl you slept with?”

It was on the tip of my tongue to say the girl that was just here, but even then, I couldn’t remember her name.

“Are you kidding me?” Sable threw her hands up in the air. “She was *just* here.”

When I still said nothing, Sable reminded me, “Does the name Ashley ring a bell?”

I snapped my finger and pointed at her. “Ashley! I knew it. You just didn’t give me enough time to think it over.”

“If you had to ‘think it over’ you didn’t know.”

“What’s your point?”

“My point is that I know a lot more about you than you think.”

“I think you think you know me when you’re really just judging me.”

“How is that any different than what you and all your friends do to me and my sisters?” she countered.

Silence.

There was nothing to say to that, mostly because it was the truth.

The fire in Sable’s eyes, that’d been there during our entire conversation, slowly died away. It didn’t matter that we were going at each other’s throats like two rabid dogs; for a second, we were on the same level, meeting each quip for quip. But now that high was slowly fading and we were back in our same positions that we’d always been in our entire lives.

Sable shut her book and placed it on top of her notebook. She kept her eyes on the pen still in her hand. "I'm not stupid. I know what everyone says about us."

Awkwardly, I shifted in my seat. Saying anything along the lines of I'm sorry would be a fucking lie. Just a few hours a week with Sable Cole didn't instantly reverse my opinion.

Okay, so she wasn't terrible. But that certainly didn't mean we were friends.

"Sable!" One of her sisters came rushing into the room. I think it was the third one. Maren, maybe? Hell, I didn't know. It was impossible to keep track of them. In the looks department, she was similar to Sable: long hair that was a shade darker. She had the same green eyes and high cheekbones. But the similarities stopped there.

Sable sat up straight in her chair. Her eyes softened, but her entire body was alert and ready. "What do you need, Maren?"

Ah, Maren! For once I was right.

Maren hopped onto the table, her back facing me. She held her left hand out. "I need the keys."

"For?"

"When most people want car keys, I think their reason is pretty self-explanatory."

"I get that. But *why* do you need the car?"

"Alba agreed to give me a driving lesson."

Just then Alba breezed into the room. I didn't have to think twice about her name. With her blonde hair and clothes that were always violating dress code, she was the sister everyone talked about. If you wanted to get technical, half the reason the Cole girls had a negative connotation to their name was because of her. And their mom.

Alba leaned against the wall, with her arms crossed and looked at Sable. "Technically, I need them. Maren thinks she's going to get a driving session or something."

Maren hopped off the table. “You promised!”

“It’s called a lie. You were on the phone for an hour and I said something to get you off.”

Maren turned back toward Sable in disbelief. “Can you believe her?”

“Umm...I’m kind of busy right now.” Sable gestured toward me and Maren whipped her body around, looking completely shocked that I was sitting here.

At the same time, Alba pushed away from the wall and stood right next to Maren. The two of them openly stared at me.

What’s worse than one Cole girl staring at you? How about three.

I could feel them dissecting every part of me. In fact, getting my ass reamed by Coach was more pleasant than this.

Sable saw my discomfort and instead of getting her sisters’ attention, she sat back and gave me a smug grin. She was getting a kick out of this.

“Hi, Sam,” Alba finally said, her dark blue eyes looking me up and down.

“Hey.”

She tossed her long blonde hair over her shoulder. “Having a good study session?”

“Uh...yeah. I guess so.”

Maren gave me a wide, open smile. “Good...good.”

Alba narrowed her eyes. “What’s Sable helping you with?”

I lifted up my copy of *Anna Karenina* and Alba smirked. “Ah, you picked the perfect tutor, now, didn’t you?”

I didn’t know if I was supposed to answer that or not. Alba was the presumed wild child. The carefree sister. In fact, just two weeks ago, I saw her at a party, drunk out of her mind and dancing on a table. But right then she was anything but. I felt like I was talking to an adult with all-knowing eyes.

“Anyways,” Maren drawled out before she turned to Sable and snapped her fingers. “Chop, chop. Give me those keys.”

“Don’t give them to her.”

“And don’t listen to Alba!”

Sable’s eyes volleyed between Maren and Alba. In the end, she tossed the keys over Maren’s head. Alba caught them with one hand. “Ask Alba for them. They’re no longer in my possession, so it’s no longer my problem.”

Maren slammed her palm onto the table. “You know she’s not going to let me drive the car.”

“Well, I would if you hadn’t almost killed me last time,” Alba remarked.

Maren shifted away from us and faced Alba. “I didn’t almost kill you!”

“You practically went into the ditch because you were too busy messing with the radio.”

“I was changing the song! You know how I feel about Maroon 5.”

“Their last album isn’t *that* bad,” Alba said.

“Compared to *Songs About Jane*, it is.” Maren sniffed.

At that, Sable gave her two cents. “Yeah, that was their best album.”

Alba turned to her. “You think so?”

“I know so,” Sable stated confidently.

Alba paused as if this was a serious topic of discussion. “You’re kinda right. SAJ is their best.”

“I told you,” Maren said and grinned at Alba, like they weren’t just arguing two seconds ago.

Watching Sable and her sisters talk was like being in the middle of a sudden, powerful storm — once it’s finished, you look around thinking, “*What the hell just happened?*” They jumped from one topic to the next, which made it impossible to keep up.

“If I don’t touch the radio, can I drive?” Maren persisted. This time, though, she laced her fingers together and gave Alba an innocent puppy dog look.

“I’ll think about it.”

Maren clapped her hands and grinned. “That’s not a no, so it’s good enough for me.”

By now, Sable was impatiently tapping her pen against her notebook, staring at her sisters with impatience. “Can you guys leave now?”

Now that the car key debacle was over, Alba turned her full attention back to me. Wonderful.

“Did we interrupt? The two of you looked like you were having an intense...stare down.”

“No,” Sable said, the exact same time I replied, “Yes.”

Maren and Alba looked at each other and slowly smiled.

Quickly, I spoke up before Sable could. “I was just getting ready to ask Sable what she’s going to college for.”

“Oh, that’s an easy one.” Maren pulled up a seat from the table next to us and sat at the head of the table, looking like a mediator between Sable and me. “She’s going to be a social worker.”

With that little tidbit of information, I turned toward Sable. She was pointedly looking away from me, glaring at Maren. “Really?” I said.

Maren was blissfully oblivious. “Oh yeah. She’s known what she’s wanted to do since she was a kid. Right, Sabe?”

Sable gave a tight-lipped nod.

I grinned, relishing the fact that, this time, it was her enduring the scrutiny. “That’s great, *Sabe*.”

Finally, she looked my way and if looks could kill, I’d be writhing on the ground, breathing my last breath.

Maren’s smile slowly faded as she glanced between Sable and me. She slowly stood. “I think I should go.”

“Please do,” Sable replied through gritted teeth.

As Maren scrambled for the door, Alba twirled the key chain around her index finger. “Bye Sable.” She looked at me and arched a brow. It wasn’t a suggestive brow raise, more of a you’re-not-fooling-me raise. “Bye Samson,” she said.

And as quickly as Maren and Alba arrived, they were gone.

The silence in the room was so deafening that, for a second, I simply stared at Sable, stunned. Her attention was back on the book.

“Is it always like that?” I asked.

“Like what?” Sable asked, her tone defensive.

“So...chaotic. That might have been the most disorganized conversation I’ve ever experienced.”

The smallest smile tugged at the corner of Sable’s lips. “Yeah, we all tend to do that. I’m used to it by now.”

Even though her sisters were long gone, Sable looked more peaceful and relaxed, making the remaining tension in the room disappear.

We worked independently: me working on my English worksheet and her taking notes for her Economics class.

After a few minutes, I cleared my throat. Sable lifted her gaze to mine.

“By the way, I really was going to ask you what you were going to college for. I wasn’t just saying that.”

At that, Sable frowned. For once, she genuinely looked confused. “Sam, why do you care what I want to be?”

If I had the chance, I would’ve told her the truth. I would’ve said that I honestly had no idea why I cared. But I didn’t because Drew came in. He looked Sable up and down. His stare crude and dismissive before he looked at me. “You ready?”

The only reason Drew hated the Cole sisters is because last year, he asked Alba out. I think her exact words were: ‘Hard

pass; you give me the douchebumps.’

She walked away and he spent the next week telling everyone that he fucked her at the party, and since then, she’d been trying to get with him again and wouldn’t stop stalking him.

Everyone believed him.

As I grabbed my books, I looked at Sable from the corner of my eye. All the happiness and easy-going nature that I witnessed just minutes ago was now gone. Her shoulders were rigid and her back was perfectly straight. Her brows formed a tight V as she stared down at her copy of *Anna Karenina*.

“Let’s go,” I muttered, practically pushing Drew out of the room. Before I left, though, I turned and gave her one last look. “I’ll see you later all right, Sable?” She lifted her head. Her gaze moved behind me, where Drew was standing. Her eyes narrowed and then she looked at me, and I swear I saw disappointment there.

“Bye,” she finally said.

Walking through the hall, he slapped me on the shoulder. “After the game, there’s a party at Ashley’s or do you have another study session with her?”

“Her name’s Sable.”

“Doesn’t matter. She’s a Cole girl. They’re all bitches,” he spat.

“Try telling that to the half-chub you’re sporting, dumb ass.”

As we walked toward the back entrance of the parking lot, we ran into Maren and Alba. Once again, they were arguing over the car keys.

“Slut,” Drew coughed loudly into his hand.

“Oh no,” Alba said in mock horror, “Drew just called me a slut. Whatever will I do?”

Maren snickered. Drew’s face turned beet red, so he flipped Alba off over his shoulder.

I wanted to turn back and tell Alba sorry on behalf of my asshole friend.

But before I got the chance, Drew opened his dumbass mouth. “Sluts like them will suck the soul and sperm out of you.”

He said his words loud enough for Alba and Maren to hear. Rather than cry or run away, Alba seemed emboldened by his words. She walked toward us as Maren tried to grab her arm, but Alba shook her off.

When Alba was close enough, she stepped between Drew and me and tilted her head back, her eyes inviting. When she spoke, her voice came out as a purr. “Trust me, Drew, if I’m sucking your sperm, you’ll give me your soul, just so I don’t stop.”

She polished off her words with a provocative smile that I’m sure every guy could feel in their gut. Including me.

She walked back to a smirking Maren. Drew opened his mouth to speak, but I shook my head. In one fell swoop, she cleared him. He couldn’t come back from that.

Instead, Drew coldly glared at her and we resumed walking. As we reached his truck, I saw a few of our teammates lingering around.

“What took you guys so long?” one of them asked.

Drew nudged his head in my direction. “This one was getting tutored. By Sable Cole, no less.”

“Didn’t she try to get with you at a party?”

“No. That was Alba. The sluttiest of them all.”

Our friends laughed. And normally, so would I. But I stopped in my tracks, and very slowly, a red haze covered my vision.

Drew turned and looked back at me. “Dude, you coming?”

There was no thinking. I opened my mouth and said the truth. “The only thing that happened that night is she rejected you because you were drunk and obnoxious. You ended up

making out with some sophomore in the kitchen. And chances are, later on that night, you probably pulled Alba's image from your spank bank to jerk off. That's about as close as you got to *any* Cole sister."

A few guys laughed because we all knew it was the fucking truth. But Drew looked at me like I'd punched him. His face turned an unnatural shade of red; I'd never called him out before. Ever. It didn't matter if either of us was right or wrong, we always had each other's back.

Until now.

There was no explosion of anger, or fist flying, though. But as Drew got into his truck and slammed the door, I could slowly see a line being drawn in the sand.

And we weren't on the same side.



CHAPTER NINE

SABLE

NOW: MID-JUNE

“...AND THEN THE MAN GOT THIS STRANGE MACHINE AND pulled her out! But she was covered in poop, so mom made me throw her away.”

I make a face. “That sounds...interesting.”

“It was...it was.” Audree frowns before she turns her bright blue eyes on me. “You know the most awful part?”

“You mean that wasn’t the awful part?”

“Nope! My mom took away my Barbies for the day and told me to never flush one of my dolls down the toilet again.”

“But if you do, at least put a Barbie floatie around her so that she doesn’t really get sucked in,” I say solemnly.

I know I shouldn’t be encouraging her, but Audree is so dramatic, I can’t help it. Age be damned, this girl has a flare for telling stories.

She licks at her ice cream as we walk down the sidewalk, back to her house. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

Ice cream trickles all over her hands. Tiny little drops splatter to the ground, practically sizzling in the summer heat. It was another brutal day, the highs reaching to the hundreds, with no clouds in sight to shade the bright sun or even a breeze to tickle your skin.

Yet I knew all this and still suggested that we go and get ice cream. It sounded like a good idea thirty minutes ago, but we’ve barely been outside and our ice cream is already melting.

“What do you want to do when we get back to your house?”

“I don’t know.” She continues to lick her ice cream, although half of it is all over her shirt. At this point, I’m going to have to hose her down in the backyard.

“We could play Barbies,” I say.

Audree mulls over my suggestion. “Nah.”

“Color?”

“We did that yesterday. Remember?”

Of course I didn’t because Audree did a hundred activities each and every day. Half the time I babysit, it’s spent chasing after her.

“Well, we gotta do something, Audee,” I comment as I open the front gate. Audree brushes past me, happily skipping across the sun and flowers that she created with chalk yesterday. The bright colors decorate the pathway, leading all the way up to the porch. If Audree had the chance, I think she would’ve colored all over the porch, too.

Before she moves for the first step, I hurry forward and detour her around the house to the back. She looks at me questionably. “Your hands are drenched in ice cream. You’re gonna rinse them off with the hose...and dump the ice cream.”

“But I’m not done!”

I look down at the poor cone, minutes away from falling apart. “Yeah, but I think the ice cream’s done.”

Audree doesn’t put up a fight as I throw away the now sticky mess. She holds her hands out in front of the hose and when I spray them, she shrieks that the water’s too cold.

“In this weather, saying the words ‘too cold’ is blasphemous.”

“What does blathsemouths mean?”

“Something that is profane.”

“What does profane mean?”

We’ve played this game before many, many times. Audree always wins. Quickly, I try to think of an answer that will leave no room for another question. “Something that is bad.”

She still looks confused, but doesn’t push it. I sigh with relief.

When her hands are nice and clean, we make our way toward the back door. At the same time, we both glance at the swimming pool. The clear blue water sparkles in the sunlight, almost beckoning me to dive right in.

Audree looks up at me hopefully. “How about swimming?”

I can count on one hand the amount of times that we’ve gone swimming this summer. God knows it’s been hot enough for it. But every time we do, Audree swims for five minutes, hops out and runs inside, claiming she’s either starving or has to pee. She’ll come back out, swim for another five minutes and then run off on another mission. Half of the water ends up along the edges of the pool.

But today it’s so hot, so humid, that the pool doesn’t seem like a bad idea at all.

“Sure.”

What ensues is a lot of screaming and hollering that causes me to go partially deaf in my left ear. As we walk into the house, Audree’s already talking a mile a minute. “Momma, got me a new suit. It’s pink with bright stripes.” I smile at her attempt to say stripes. “It even has a small pink tutu.”

I whistle. “A tutu? Sounds perfect for a princess.”

“That’s why she got it for me,” Audree says solemnly.

“Okay, you go change while I call my sister to bring over my suit.”

“Why can’t we go to your house to get it? I wanna go to your house. I’ve never been there!”

There’s no chance in hell that I’m taking Audree to my house. That’s hardly the environment she needs to be around.

I smile at her. “Because it’ll take too long and we have hours of fun waiting for us out in the pool!”

Audree accepts my reply with a bright smile. Then she’s off, running up the stairs, happily humming a theme song from one of her favorite cartoons.

I quickly dial the cell phone number, hoping that the person who answers is home right now.

“Hello?”

For a second, I hesitate. I can't figure out who I'm talking to. People say that we all sound alike on the phone. Alba once had a ten-minute conversation with Nick before Maren came into the room and demanded she give her the phone.

“Maren?” I guess.

“No, it's Alba. Who's this?”

“Your sister, dumbass.”

“Well, from the charming nickname you just gave me, I'm gonna have to say this is Sable?”

I roll my eyes. “Are you home right now?”

“Yep, but I'm getting ready to go into work. What's up?”

“Can you drop off my swimsuit.”

“Going swimming I take it?”

“Yep.”

“I see it's another hard day at work for you.” Alba sighs dramatically. “Poor you.”

I lean against the counter and stop myself from groaning. I should've known Alba wouldn't make this easy for me. “Can you drop it off or not?”

“Of course I can. I just like ticking you off.”

“Great. I'll see you when you get here.”

“See you then.”

“Hey, wait,” I rush out.

There's a pause. “Yeah?”

“Is Mom home?”

Alba sighs loudly into the phone. “Yeah, she just got home an hour ago. Right now she's in her room. The doors locked and her TV is blaring.”

The TV on means she's still up. And her up means she's either drinking at this very moment or shooting up. I hate to even think it, but sometimes it's just better when she's asleep.

I put my elbows on the counter and close my eyes. "Sounds awesome," I say without any emotion.

Alba snorts in reply. Seconds later, we get off and Audree's running back down the stairs, leaving me no time to mull over the conversation.

Good.

I didn't want to think about it anyway.



FIFTEEN MINUTES AND ONE SWIMSUIT CHANGE LATER, AUDREE and I are finally getting into the pool in the McShane's backyard.

Audree, in her swim floaties, smiles widely as she slowly moves around in the shallow end.

I submerge myself in the water.

I look around, feeling slightly uncomfortable. Apparently, Alba missed the part where I asked her to grab *my* swimsuit. Instead, she showed up at the McShane's front door with her skimpy black bikini. Our taste in clothing has always been different. She has no problem flaunting what she has, while I can happily wear billowy shirts for the rest of my days. But not only that, we are two different sizes in the chest region. And now I feel like I'm getting ready for an interview at Hooters.

I pleaded for her to go back and get another swimsuit, but she laughed off my words and walked away.

Yet the longer we're in the pool, the less I care. The sun is so hot today that the water is warm and inviting, tempting me to sink deeper and deeper.

"Sable! Look at me!"

I turn just in time to see Audree plug her nose and dramatically hold her breath. She's barely under the water before she's right back up, gasping for air. A triumphant smile plays across her lips.

"Very good," I applaud.

"Sammy said that he's going to take me to the deep end soon," she boasts proudly.

My pulse picks up at the sound of his name. It's pathetic and a little alarming. It's been five days since we last talked. I saw him as I was coming and going from the McShane's. He never said a word, just smirked as if we were playing some kind of game, and he knew he was going to win.

"He takes you swimming a lot?" I ask nonchalantly.

"Not really. He's *very* busy."

"Doing what?" I ask a little too sharply.

Audree gives me a strange look and I realize that I'm interrogating a six-year-old.

"I don't know..." She seems to give my question some thought. "I think he works a lot."

Something tells me that Sam does a lot more than work. I've made it clear that we don't need to keep in contact just because he's home, but I still get green with envy at the thought of him with another girl.

Will that ever go away?

I used to think so, but it's been almost a year since I've tried to move past him, and nothing has changed.

"That's good that he works. It keeps him busy," I reply.

"But I miss him."

I grab the lime green noodle drifting past me and hook my arms around it, allowing myself to float. Very slowly I drift closer to Audree. "I know...I bet he misses you too."

"Do you think so?"

“Oh, I know so.” I’m close enough to her that I nudge her with my noodle. She curls her small fingers around the edge and mimics my position.

“How do you know?”

“Because he tells me!” I exclaim. “Yep, he tells me all the time how much he misses you. I bet he cries at work because he misses you so much.”

Audree falls into a fit of giggles so powerful, I have to grab her hand so she doesn’t fall off the noodle. When her laughter fades, she says, “Sam doesn’t cry, silly! Well...there was that one time.”

Instantly I perk up. Potentially embarrassing story about Sam? I’m all ears. “What one time?”

“Last sthummer he accidentally fell down the stairs. When he landed at the bottom, he was saying a lot of bad words.” She looks me in the eyes. “I mean bad words. Mom told him to stop and he did. But kept holding his ankle and his eyes looked all glassy.”

I hold my laughter in as best as I can, but Audree tells the story so stoically, you’d think Sam was shot in the line of fire.

“See you two are having a rough day,” a deep voice says behind us.

Even without seeing him, I know it’s Sam. It’s all in the way the hairs on the back of my neck stand, how my heart races and the blood pounds through my veins.

I slowly turn and see Sam standing at the entrance of the pool. He’s dressed in his work clothes, which consist of a ratty shirt with the sleeves cut off. He looks confident and at ease as if he’s wearing a four-piece suit and doesn’t have sweat glistening on his arms and neck.

“Sammy!” Audree shouts. “You’re home.”

He crosses his arms and leans against the fence. “It was too hot, so I was sent home,” he answers Audree, yet his eyes never leave my body.

The sun’s got nothing on his heated stare.

“I’m starting to think that your job is to sneak up on me,” I call out.

“Actually, I wasn’t quiet at all. You and Audree are just completely oblivious.”

“What does oblviousth mean?”

Sam opens his mouth. My hands shoot out of the water, stopping him from answering. “Don’t even explain. You’ll end up answering a lot more questions than you bargained for.”

“Noted.” Sam gives his sister a bright smile. “So Audball, have you been doing laps in the pool?”

Audree giggles. “No! You know I can’t sthwim.”

Even I can’t deny that Sam and Audree have a sweet relationship. It’s clear that they both adore each other and if I’m perfectly honest, every time he smiles at his sister, the ice around my heart slowly chips away. Maybe because in this one regard, I can relate to Sam. Like me, he’s the oldest and it’s apparent in everything he does that he would do just about anything for Audree.

Just like I would for my sisters.

“Are you leaving for work again?” Andree asks with a small pout.

“No, I’m home for the day.”

Audree’s face brightens. “Good! You can teach me how to swim in the deep end!”

Right then, I want to throttle her.

Sam smiles. I wish he hadn’t. Why can’t he have a smile that doesn’t transform his face? Why does a small dimple faintly appear on his left cheek? Why does it affect me every time, without fail? He looks my way and his smile slightly fades as his eyes drift down my body. Very slowly, I lower myself deeper into the water until it reaches my chin. It still doesn’t stop him from looking.

“It doesn’t sound like a bad idea,” he finally comments.

“Yay!”

It's on the tip of my tongue to say that it's a bad idea, but how can I when Audree looks so happy? It's like taking Tiny Tim's crutch and beating him with it.

"Want me to get in, Sable?" Sam asks me.

Yes, yes, yes! My mind screams.

But I shrug, kick away from the side of the pool and momentarily float. "Sure. If you want," I finally say.

Sam grins, as if he can see right through me. He gives the fence post a small slap. "I'll go change then."

As Sam walks inside, Audree is checking off on her fingers all the fun games that we can play. She rambles on and on. I have no idea what she's talking about. My gaze furtively glances toward the second floor, the third window from the right. Even though my heart thumps with excitement over seeing Sam, I know it's bad.

So bad.

I've already seen him one too many times this summer. If I keep bending, allowing myself these small glimpses and short conversations, I'm afraid all my self-control will break.

"I think when your brother comes back outside, I'll jump out for a second?"

"No! Why?"

"So you guys can spend some time together," I explain with my best fake smile.

"But I want to spend time with both of you."

"Audree...I—"

The back door slams and my eyes shoot in that direction and I think my heart drops to my stomach. Sam walks out in his swim trunks hanging low on his hips. My nails dig into the foam of the noodle as he walks closer. Blatantly, I stare and honestly, I really don't care.

It wasn't too long ago that I saw him in his boxers and that same feeling is rushing through me now.

Sam opens the gate and lifts both brows. He's caught me staring and I finally look away.

"Sammy, jump in!"

He smiles at Audree. "You sure?"

"Yes, yes!"

He turns his eyes my way. "What about you?"

I shrug. "Sure."

"Watch out," he warns us. "I'm coming in."

Audree and I ditch the noodle. She wraps her arms around my neck and laughs. Sam takes a few steps back before he runs forward and cannonballs into the pool. Water pelts us both, making Audree shriek with excitement. When he comes back up, he rubs his eyes before he pushes his hair off his forehead. "Come here, Audball."

With her floaties on, she paddles her way over. I move over to the shallow end, my knees touching the bottom of the pool and watch as the two of them goof around. Sam really does try to teach her to swim, but Audree veers between really excited to go underwater and then completely terrified, probably because she's swallowing more water than anything else.

They float around the pool, with Audree holding onto Sam's arms for dear life.

"I'm gonna let go, okay?" Sam asks.

"NO!" Audree shrieks.

"You need to try."

"No!"

By this point, Audree looks seconds away from bolting out of his arms. Her eyes keep looking my way, pleading for help. I stay put.

"Just let go."

I swear Sam glances over at me when he says this.

Quickly, Sam loses his patience. And by the time Audree claims she has to pee, Sam gives up and helps her over to the ladder.

When she's on the deck, she shrugs out of her floaties, dodges the towels and runs inside, water dripping behind her. The door slams shut, and at the same time, Sam and I look at each other.

"That was..."

"A nightmare," Sam cuts in.

"I was going to say slightly successful."

Sam looks at me as if I've lost my mind. "I think you've spent too much time in the sun, Cole."

"I mean it," I say sincerely.

"You saw her, she completely panicked and acted like I was trying to drown her."

"She's six, everything she doesn't know looks scary," I explain.

Sam shrugs a strong shoulder indifferently. "It was a disaster to me."

Surprisingly, this time alone with Sam isn't as tense as I thought it was going to be. Sam's only looked at my chest a few times. He doesn't get too close, staying in the deep end, while I stay put in the shallow end.

"You can't tell me that you instantly started swimming."

"I can," Sam quickly replies. "My parents just threw me in the water and I took to the water like a fish."

I smile. "Liar."

In return, Sam gives me that shit-eating grin of his. "It's the truth, Cole." He ducks his head underwater and comes back, rubbing both hands down his face. "What about you? Did you freak out like Audree did?"

My happiness fades as I remember the moment I first learned to swim. I was seven, not yet aware of the harshness of

the world, but smart enough to realize that I couldn't trust everyone and everything. I remember being excited, yet scared, as my mom held my hand and walked me to my first swimming lesson with a toddler version of Lennon on her hip. It was a big deal then, with my mom saving up for my lessons. The lessons themselves are blurry, but my mom, as she dropped me off and picked me up, remained vivid in my mind.

I blink away the memory and see Sam looking at me expectantly.

Looking away, I say, "I took swimming lessons, you know...like a normal human being. I wasn't thrown into a lake like you, Lassie," I tease.

"Then you weren't given proper lessons," Sam retorts.

Just then Audree pokes her head out the door. "Can I have some ice cream?"

"No!" I say the same time Sam shouts, "Yes!"

She looks between the two of us, confused on who she should listen to. I shoot Sam a look and quickly speak up. "Audee, no ice cream. Come back out here and swim!"

"I gotta pee again!"

"You just went!" That's Sam.

"Well, I have to go again."

"Hurry up," Sam shouts.

Audree nods and the door slams.

The lime green noodle I'd been using earlier floats past me. I grab a hold of it and drape my arms across it while Sam tilts his head back to the sky, exposing the strong column of his neck. For once, the silence around us isn't filled with awkwardness or unspoken words from the past. It's comfortable. Allowing me to relax and take a deep breath. I close my eyes.

I don't know how long we stay like that.

For a moment, I feel his breath on my neck and even in the blazing sun, I shiver. One of his arms wraps around my

stomach, pulling me against his body.

Maybe I'm having a heat stroke. Maybe that explains why I go willingly and lean my head against his shoulder.

Against my ass I can feel how hard his dick is. I press myself against him and suppress a moan.

His other hand wraps around my stomach. Palm splayed as it travels up, brushing against the underside of my breasts.

"Sable," he groans, "I fucking want you."

My eyes flash open at his words. I spin out of his arms. Sam stares at me with shock as water ripples around us. "Why do you keep running away from me?" he asks, his chest rising and falling. He's leaning forward as though he's ready to reach out and grab me at any second.

"I don't know if it's possible to run in a pool," I point out with a nervous laugh. My voice nearly breathless.

Sam doesn't smile back. "First your internet breaks. Then ___"

Cautiously, I back away from him. "It wasn't my internet. Just my e-mail and Facebook."

"Okay. First your internet and Facebook mysteriously break. What's the excuse today?" Sam approaches me slowly.

I don't reply.

"Come on," Sam goads gently, "I'm dying to know."

"There's no excuse..." I chew on my lower lip, debating on whether I should just be honest. All the while, the two of us continue circling each other, waiting for the other to strike. "Don't you think it's best that we not hang around each other because of the...the past?"

Sam arches a brow. "That's your reasoning?"

Even though there's no one around us, I find myself leaning closer. "I think it's a pretty good reason."

"Well, I think it's bullshit," he says in a low voice. "It's just your excuse so you can push me away."

“Sam-”

“You know what your biggest problem is?”

Now it’s my turn to raise a brow.

“You’re way too fucking uptight. Live a little, Cole.” He lifts both hands from the water. “Have some fun.”

That right there is the problem. I once lived a little and it was one of the most memorable times of my life.

It was also my downfall.

He was part of that downfall, but he’ll never know.

“I do *too* have fun!” I reply.

He snorts with derision and looks away. “Yeah, sure. Okay.” After a few seconds, he turns his head and looks me straight in the eye. “When are you going to take what you want from life?”

Patiently, Sam waits for an answer. But I don’t want to respond. In fact, I just want to skip over this conversation and pretend that it never happened; the day has been surprisingly nice, and I don’t want to ruin it.

So what do I do?

I splash him.

Sam moves back, rapidly blinking the water out of his eyes. Before he can react, I lunge for him and dunk him. With a sister like Alba, I’ve been dunked, depantsed more times than I’d care to admit. After a while, you gain catlike reflexes and attack before the other person can.

Sam struggles against my grip for only a few seconds before his hands wrap around my wrists and pushes them away from his head. When he comes up for air, he’s sputtering and rubbing his eyes. “What the hell, Sable?”

“You need to live a little, Cole. Have some fun!” I say in my best male voice.

He grins. “Is that supposed to be me?”

“I think I did a pretty good imitation.”

“You did an awful imitation, but forget about that—you want to have fun? Okay. Let’s have fun.”

One second Sam’s only a few steps away from me. The next, he’s looming over me, one arm on my shoulder and the other over my head, pushing me under the water. It’s a rookie mistake on my part. Not being prepared. If Alba was here, she’d be shaking her head in disappointment. I make good time getting out of his hold, or maybe Sam just chooses to let me go. Either way, I break the surface within seconds.

He makes another grab at me, but I pull back and his hands slap the water.

With a laugh, I hurry past him, and before he can turn around, I latch onto him, wrapping my legs around his waist and my arms around his neck, trying my hardest to create a chokehold, but it’s a pathetic one. For the barest of seconds, Sam tenses up. Hell, even I tense up. There’s close and then there’s *close*. Where you feel absolutely every inch of the other person. But the exciting energy is too good for us to break over a little...awareness.

“What are you doing?” he half-laughs.

“Making you give up!” I tighten my hold, which makes him laugh harder. “Say the words and I’ll let go!”

“I think you’re doing more damage to yourself, Cole.”

“Give up!” I press on with a big smile on my face.

Someone loudly clears their throat.

Sam and I both look up at the same time, only to see Maren standing outside the deck gate. She’s staring at us with a mixture of confusion and a bit of smugness. “Alba realized she gave you her swimsuit so she asked if I could drop off yours.”

“Oh,” I reply dumbly.

“Obviously you’re...busy.” Her eyes jump between the two of us and it finally dawns on me that my arms and legs are wrapped around Sam’s body like a coiled snake. As quick as

possible, I untangle myself, which only makes me flail in the water like a weirdo.

Sam doesn't say a word, just drags a hand through his wet hair and gives me a smirk as I swim over to the ladder, and heave myself out of the pool. Instantly, my skin is covered in goosebumps, so I grab a towel from the chair and wrap it around my body as I approach Maren.

"Alba had to go to work, so she had me drop off the bathing suit."

"Thanks for doing that, but I don't need it anymore," I tell her.

"Obviously," she murmurs.

The gate squeaks as I open it up. Maren shoots me a look and walks toward the oak tree next to the driveway. I glance over my shoulder at Sam. Just in time to watch him hoist himself out of the pool. Water trails down his biceps and the rest of his perfect body as he sits on the edge of the deck. My mouth parts at the sight of him. He lifts his head as though he can sense my stare and smirks.

Quickly, I turn back to Maren and find her staring at me with knowing eyes. Her arms are folded across her chest. "What are you doing?"

I play dumb. "I was swimming."

"Sable..." She sighs. "Come on. What are you doing with Sam? I thought you were going to stay away from him?"

"I am." Maren looks at me as if I've lost my mind so I quickly backtrack. "I mean...obviously, we were playing around back there. But it wasn't anything to worry about."

"So let me get this straight. You stated after the first day you saw him that you were going to stay away from him and then you reward yourself by jumping his bones in a pool? Makes sense to me!" she says sarcastically.

I don't need my little sister to point out the error of my ways. Away from Sam, I see them clearly. "It's not going to

happen again,” I state and I can’t figure out if I’m saying that more for Maren or myself.

“Look, I don’t care what you do. But just...” She looks over at Sam and I can’t help it. I glance at him too. Sam’s back in the pool and Audree’s back outside, standing on the edge of the deck. Sam’s holding his arms out, coaxing her to jump. Audree looks hesitant. But something Sam says makes her laugh. Seconds later, she jumps in and Sam catches her.

Maren pats my shoulder, jerking my attention away from Sam. “Just protect your heart.”

She turns and walks away. I watch her until she’s a small, black dot in the distance.

“Sable!” Audree shouts. “Come watch me!”

I give my sister’s figure one last look before I walk away. Her words stay with me, though.



CHAPTER TEN

SABLE

NOW

“I DON’T UNDERSTAND WHY YOU’RE COMING WITH ME,” I mutter as I practically speed-walk to the McShane’s.

Alba shrugs, easily keeping up with me. “I have the day off and I like the little squirt that is Audree. So I figured... what the hell?”

I glance at her suspiciously. “You have never wanted to spend time with me on your day off.”

“Well, I’m in a family-bonding mood. Don’t wreck this beautiful moment!” She drapes an arm around me and tries to pull me close, but I shrug her off.

The truth is that she’s a spectator, anxious to see how I act at the McShane’s. Especially around Sam. I have no doubt that she talked to Maren last night. Maren has many wonderful qualities. Keeping any information to herself is not one of them.

Even though I’ve been babysitting Audree for two summers, I still find myself either ringing the doorbell or knocking before I enter. It just seems wrong to enter without knocking. Today, though, before I knock, I turn to Alba. “Look. Before we go in, I need you to promise me you won’t be all...Alba.”

My sister feigns shock. “What are you talking about? I’m a delicate wallflower.”

I snort. “Please. You once threatened to hit a guy over the head with a beer bottle at a party.”

“He cheated at beer pong and fucking lied about it! You know what...” She raises a hand and takes a deep breath. “I don’t want to get into it because it still makes me mad.”

“And I don’t want you doing anything here because it will make *me* mad.” I lower my voice, even though no one is around. “I’m not positive, but I think I know why you’re here.”

She bats her baby blues. “Oh, and why do you think I’m here?”

“To be nosy.”

“I have never in my life snooped in your business. Ever. I mean ev-”

“All right! I got it,” I hiss. “Just be good.”

“Okay, Mom. I’ll be good. I promise.” Alba gives me a sugary sweet smile that makes my stomach fill with dread.

“There’s nothing special about babysitting Audree. I don’t know what you expect.”

Alba crosses her arms, pursing her lips together. “I have a question.”

“What?” I snap.

“If this is a normal day then why do you look...” She gives me a quick once-over. “So...not Sable?”

By that she means I’m not wearing my typical loose-fitting clothes.

I’ll admit it—this morning, I turned into a cliché teenage girl and spent way too much time picking out my clothes. Ultimately choosing my cut-off shorts and rolling up the sleeves of one of my favorite flannel shirts, tying it around my waist.

“Because I felt like a change,” I lie.

“Mmhm,” is all Alba says and then lets the subject drop.

“What am I getting myself into today?” I mutter under my breath.

I knock on the door twice and walk inside. “It’s me,” I call out.

Within seconds, Audree peeks her head out into the hall. “Sa-” Her voice fades when she sees Alba, and suddenly, her happy expression turns ecstatic. “Alba, Alba!”

In the blink of an eye, she’s running down the hall and instead of launching herself into my arms, she goes to Alba.

My sister picks her and swings her around. For a second, I feel a small amount of jealousy. But it's there and gone because it's kind of fascinating watching Alba around kids.

Her provocative demeanor is gone, fully showing her true self, which is actually kind and caring. It's just hidden behind layers upon layers of sarcasm and biting words. Whenever someone remarks that she's good with kids, she actually blushes and quickly tries to change the subject.

"I didn't know you were coming!" Audree says as Alba sets her down.

"I thought it would be fun to see you. I've missed you this summer." She makes a move to tickle Audree, which leads into Audree shrieking and running toward the kitchen with Alba right behind her.

Stanley watches the entire thing from his dog cushion, and the expression on his face screams: *It's too early for this shit.*

"Hi Alba," Elaine says with a smile.

"Hi!" Alba replies over Audree's giggles.

If Elaine likes me, it shouldn't surprise me that she's more than okay with my sisters. Yet it does. Maybe because I'm used to the opposite reaction from people.

"So, what do you have planned for today?" Elaine asks me, having to raise her voice over Audree's shrieking.

I take a seat on one of the stools. "I don't know. Probably go to the park or go swimming."

Audree stops dead in her tracks, her shoulders slumping. "Again? I'm getting bored of that."

Truth be told, so am I. But there's only so much that you can do in a small town such as Antsett. I look over at her and shrug. "I'm out of options, Audee."

"Why don't you girls go into town. There's the mall or the zoo," Elaine suggests.

Audree's face lights up. "I love the zoo. Let's go! Let's go!"

Does she really love the zoo? Who knows. At this point, I think Audree would be excited to watch how potato chips are made as long as it got her out of the house.

Sighing, I say, "I'd love to, but Maren has the car today."

"Oh. That's too bad."

The topic is done and over with when I hear behind me: "She can use my car."

All four of us turn around and stare at Sam standing in the doorway.

He takes a step back, his eyes moving between us all. "What?"

Elaine, who just seconds ago was gathering all her things, stops what she's doing. "You're going to let Sable use your Jeep?"

"Yeah." He shrugs as if it's no big deal and heads straight for the refrigerator. We all continue to gawk at him.

"Your beloved Jeep?" Elaine persists.

Sam stops rifling through the fridge and gives his mom a look that says: *What's wrong with you?* "Sure. Why not?"

"Don't you have to work today?" his mom asks.

"I have today off." So that's why he's wearing basketball shorts and that old Whitley football shirt with the sleeves cut out and the material stretched so low, I can see the curve of his pecs and the edges of his abs. My fingers itch to reach out and slip beneath the flimsy football shirt and drag my nails down his stomach.

Sam, who's oblivious to my thoughts, grabs his keys on the kitchen counter and tosses them to me. I'm frozen in place, and seconds before they hit me square in the face, I grab them. I look over at him. "Thanks," I say quietly.

He throws his hands up in the air. "What's with you guys? You're acting like I handed her a million dollars."

"Well, you treat your Jeep like it's a million dollars. That's why it's so shocking," his mom replies.

Sam walks my way and leans against the side of the island, so close our arms are almost touching. “Tell me you’ve been practicing driving a stick.”

Wordlessly, I nod. Normally when I’m around Sam, it’s usually after he gets off work, with him smelling like sweat and outdoors. But this close, I can smell the scent of soap on his skin.

“Good.” His gaze veers between my eyes and the keys. “I trust you.”

My head tilts to the side. Sometimes being around Sam feels like playing a game of chess. I make a move; he makes the next. I’m always trying to anticipate what he does next, and right now, I don’t know what his angle is. I feel like if I take the keys, I’ll owe him something in return. “Do you really? Because we both know how you are with that damn thing.”

He snatches the keys out of my hand. “Easy, tiger. ’That damn thing’ is what’s getting you into town.”

“Did I say damn? I meant that great thing. *Great* thing.”

When I reach out for the keys, Sam lifts them out of reach and dangles them. I arch a single brow and grab onto his massive arm, trying to pull it down, but it’s no use. “Come on give them to me.”

Sam clucks his tongue. “Say the magic word, Cole.”

“Give me the keys...please,” I grit out.

“I’m sorry?” He cups a hand to his ear and leans in close. His body brushes against mine and I fight back a gasp. “Can you say that louder?”

The two of us know that I’d rather crawl over broken glass than ever say ‘please’ or ‘sorry.’ But Audree and Alba are probably waiting for me, so I have no other choice.

“*Please*,” I enunciate loudly, “give me the keys.”

Sam smirks, a dimple appearing in his left cheek, and drops the keys into my waiting hand. “That wasn’t so hard,

now, was it?" He pats me on the shoulder and gives me a squeeze. Instead of pulling away, his hand lingers there.

My eyes go straight to his large, warm hand all but burning a hole through my skin. His eyes follow suit before they drift back to mine. And then very slowly, his thumb brushes across my shoulder blade. Just for a second. Then it's gone.

"Well," Alba says loudly, breaking the silence, "I think it's time to get our shoes on and head on out."

Sam and I break apart like two guilty kids. I give Audree a bright smile, refusing to look at my sister. "Yep. Sounds good."

We walk down the hall, with Alba right next to me. Her mouth opens and I quickly say out of the corner of my mouth, "Shut up, shut up, shut up."

"You don't even know what I was going to say."

"Oh, yes I do." I pause. "It was nothing."

Alba holds open the door and grins mischievously.

It takes a few minutes to put Audree's booster seat into the Jeep. The entire time Sam watches, looking over the Jeep like I'm getting ready to key the sides and slash the tires. It's unnerving and I'm *this close* to tossing him the keys and telling him to forget about it. We'll just stick to our regular routine, but I'm too excited by the allure of getting out of Antsett for the day and heading to the nearest city, Rochester.

I get Audree buckled in and slide into the driver's seat. I'm waiting for Sam to rush forward and give his Jeep a kiss or a hug goodbye, but shockingly, he stands back.

Right before I put the Jeep into reverse, Audree asks, "Are we going to the zoo?"

Before I can reply, Alba butts in, "I have something else in mind." She gives me a meaningful look and I know just where to go.



“WHAT IS THIS PLACE?” AUDREE ASKS.

Alba slams the passenger side door and slings an arm around Audree’s bony shoulders. “This is where we shop. Welcome to Goodwill. Or as me and my sisters call it: ‘The Will.’”

“This doesn’t look like a store.” Audree stares all around as though she’s in a foreign country. The likelihood of that is high. The Will isn’t exactly located in the safest area. I definitely wouldn’t want to be hanging out in this shopping center once it’s dark.

“Well, sure. To the blind eye, it doesn’t. But when you walk in, it’s a smorgasbord of sales just waiting to happen,” Alba replies.

“What does sthmorthsbord mean?”

I grab hold of Audree’s hand and we hurry across the street. “Never mind Alba. She’s a bit dramatic.”

“No, I’m not,” Alba says, trailing behind us. “Tell Audree about the time in the furniture section.”

“She’s six. She doesn’t care,” I say over my shoulder.

“I wanna know,” Audree pipes up.

Once we’re on the sidewalk, Alba gives me a look and I plead with my eyes for her to shut up, but she ignores me. “Last year, in the summer time, we were here shopping. It was busy, crazy busy. Everything was seventy-five percent off. Basically, it was every man for himself. So me and my sisters all split up. Maren and Lennon took the clothes. Sable had the books and shoes.”

“What did you have?” Audree asks excitedly.

“I had the furniture section,” Alba says with pride.

I sit down on the bench outside the store. The rate Alba’s going, I’ll actually get the chance to see what happens in this shopping center at night.

“So, there I am, scanning the furniture when I find this beautiful headboard. Which is now Sable’s bed but whatever.”

I roll my eyes.

“Without even checking the price, I get the lady working in the back and tell her I want it. She then tells me that I need to go to the front register to reserve the headboard. So while I’m doing that, this other bitc-I mean girl, sees it and wants it.”

“Did she take it?”

“Not on my watch she didn’t! She didn’t know that I’d already went up to reserve the headboard. So I’m walking to the back of the store and run into her carrying the headboard with her boyfriend. I told her that it was mine. She didn’t believe me. Showed her the tag in my hands and said that it was mine.”

“What happened next?”

“Oh, she started cussing at me. Threatening to find out where I live and kick my as—butt.” Alba waves her hand in the air as if they’re talking about what she had for breakfast.

“I can’t believe you’re telling this to a child,” I mutter.

Alba looks over at me. “This is a story that needs to be told.”

“Again, not to a child!”

Audree doesn’t seem to mind though. She stares up at Alba in wonder. Before she can ask any more questions, I stand up and clap my hands together. “Let’s go inside, okay?”

The three of us walk into the building and instantly, Audree covers her nose and scrunches up her face. Thrift stores have a distinct smell, one I can’t pinpoint to just one single scent. Instead, it’s a melting pot of smells: smoke, mothballs, dust and sweat. It doesn’t matter how many times I walk through these doors, the smell always gets to me. Every time I buy clothes here, I have to wash them a couple of times to get rid of the smell.

I bend down and say into Audree’s ear. “Ignore the smell.”

“What *is* that?”

“What is Victoria’s Secret? Why do skunks stink? These are questions we’ll never have answers to,” Alba says.

I couldn’t say it better myself.

“Give it a few minutes and you’ll get used to it,” I say reassuringly.

Audree looks at me doubtfully, but slowly removes her fingers from her nose. Alba grabs a cart, with a wheel that spins around like it’s on speed and makes an obnoxious screeching sound. There’s always that one cart in stores and my family always seems to find them. I gesture grandly to the poorly-lit store. “Take a look around, Audee.”

“Usually we start at the clothes, but for you, we’ll mix it up and go to the toy aisle,” I say.

Like I expect, Audree’s eyes light up like it’s Christmas. “Toys? Where are the toys?”

We weave in and out of aisles until we’re in the back of the store, right in front of the toy section, which is putting it generously. Barbies are lying on top of toy trucks. Stuffed animals are tossed in. You can tell someone’s tried to make an effort to organize the shelves, but they’ve been ravaged.

Audree doesn’t seem to care. She runs down the aisle, scanning the shelves with wide eyes.

“The toys are .99 cents!” she exclaims.

“I know.”

“Can I have all of them?”

“Okay, let’s not go overboard,” I say hurriedly. “You only get one toy.”

Audree is like a stealth ninja. Quiet, but effective, searching through the toys. She grabs a few, inspects them before she puts them all back on the shelf.

“The force is strong with this one,” Alba says.

I smile. “I haven’t seen this much enthusiasm since 2011.”

“Ah, yes. Maren’s first time.”

Audree waves around a Barbie doll like a trophy. “I want her! I want her!” She runs up to me and pets the Barbie’s hair. “Can I get her?”

“What’s so special about this Barbie?” Alba inquires.

Audree dramatically hangs her head. “There was an accident with one of my Barbie’s at home...”

Alba, doing what she does best, plays right along with her. “Accident? What happened?”

“She was swimming in the toilet and she didn’t make it out alive. It took the plumber hours to find her. But by then...it was already too late.”

“Ah. I lost a Barbie the same way when I was your age.”

Audree pats Alba’s arm and shakes her head sadly. “It hurts.”

“It does,” Alba agrees. “It really, truly does.”

“I’m sorry for your loss,” I say dryly.

“It’s fine.” Alba pretends to wipe tears away. “Time heals all wounds.”

I stare at her a moment longer. “Yeah. So...anyways. Are we ready to go?”

“Woah, we’re not ready to leave yet,” Alba quickly speaks. “There’s still the clothes to look through and don’t you want to look through the books?”

The book section here can sometimes be hit or miss. But today, I don’t feel like sifting through the shelves. Partially because I’m afraid that if I turn my back for a second, Alba’s going to get into a fight with a random shopper and get Audree involved. “Why don’t we just go to the clothes section, all right?”

Normally, it takes us a good thirty-minutes to scan the racks of clothes, but today we go through them within ten minutes. Alba and I look at each other with mutual disappointment. “Well, that sucked,” Alba says.

“Can we go now?” Audree eagerly asks. She’s ready to go home and put her newest Barbie next to the other one hundred Barbies she owns.

Alba sighs with defeat and briefly hangs her head. “Sure. Let’s go.”

As we walk toward the front of the store, we stop in front of a mannequin dressed in a floral dress. Our heads tilt to the side in unison as we look at her as if she’s a piece of art.

“Where’s her left arm?” Audree asks.

“That’s the first thing you notice?” Alba smiles. “The better question is: where is her head?”

“Why don’t they fix it?”

“It’s a thrift store, Audee. Not Neiman Marcus.”

Alba shrugs. “She didn’t make the cut, which if you ask me, is tragic.” She dramatically sighs and pats the mannequin on the shoulders. “She had such a good head on her shoulders.”

“She’ll never be the head of a corporation,” I remark.

Alba snickers and raises her hand. “Good one.”

I slap it and laugh loudly. An older woman one aisle down glares at us.

Alba presses her pointer finger against her lips. “Shh...we can’t make a noise in here because, apparently, this place moonlights as a library.”

Audree gazes at her surroundings, looking a bit overwhelmed by the chaos. “Is it always this busy?”

“Not really,” I reply. “Today’s half-off tag Wednesday. This is the day that some ladies live for.”

“Remember that coupon show on TLC?” Alba asks.

“I think Mom watched it a few times,” Audree replies.

I nod grimly. “Ninety-nine percent of these women are coupon clippers.”

Audree nods as if she understands what that means.

We hurry up and pay. Once we're outside, we all take a deep cleansing breath of fresh air. It's now eleven in the morning, meaning it's much busier than when we first got here. Holding Audee's hand, we hurry across the road.

"This shopping trip was a bust," Alba mutters as she helps Audree into the back seat.

I glance at Audree, whose small hands are clutching her new Barbie. "Speak for yourself. Some people look pretty content."

There's a resounding click of the seat belt. Alba gives me a look. "She's a kid. She would've been happy with a Matchbox car."

Audree's head shoots up. "I *hate* cars."

As I start the Jeep, I smile widely. "Well, there you have it. Why are you pissed anyways?"

"I came here to shop."

"Well, you can shop later," I say irritably, as I put the Jeep in reverse.

"If I would've known that we were just going to shop for thirty minutes and then leave, I wouldn't have come!"

"Please. You only came because you wanted to snoop on me," I snap.

Alba goes from staring out the window to glaring at me. "Hate to break it to you, but I don't need to snoop to know how you really feel."

"How Sable feels about what?" Audree asks.

"Nothing," I reply, giving her a sweet smile in the rear-view mirror.

"Just drive," Alba says, her tone bitter.

"Why don't you just shut up?" I snap back.

Alba's nasty attitude came out of nowhere and now it's rubbing off on me. Taking a deep breath, I slowly pull out.

Alba twists around in her seat to start talking to Audree, effectively blocking my view.

“Move your big head. I can’t see,” I say impatiently.

“My big head as you so lovingly put it is not in the way.”

“Yes, it is,” I snap impatiently. “I can’t see anyth—”

Out of nowhere, there’s a slam against my side of the Jeep. My heart speeds up as I jerk to the right. My hands are gripping the steering wheel so tightly, my knuckles are white. I’m afraid to look to my left. Afraid at what I’ll see, but I have to. And, sure enough, it’s my worst fear: Sam’s precious Jeep has been hit.

Do I put the Jeep in drive and pull back into the parking space or do I stay right here? Do I get out and get the other person’s insurance information? Where’s Sam’s insurance card?

Frantically, I look at Alba. She stares back at me, equally as shocked. “Holy. Crap,” she breathes.

I jerk my head toward Audree. Her eyes are as big as saucers, but she’s not freaking out or crying. “Are you okay?” I breathe.

She nods and asks, “What happened?”

“We got into a small fender bender.”

“Small?” Alba questions.

I glare at her as I unbuckle my seat belt. “Shut up. Just stay in here, all right?”

“Oh, no. Audree and I are going to flag a cab and leave,” she remarks.

When I get out of the car, I instantly look at the side of the car. Honestly, it’s not as bad as I envisioned. There’s a medium-sized dent with paint chipped off. Sam’s going to flip the hell out when he sees it.

Wiping my sweaty palms on my shorts, I walk over to the other driver. She’s an older woman in her upper seventies. She gives me her insurance information. Alba finds Sam’s

insurance card in the glove box and the two of us exchange information. I have no idea if there's anything else I'm supposed to do. But there's cars impatiently honking, so I get back into the car.

I take a deep breath and stare straight ahead.

“Well?” Alba probes.

Blindly, I hand her back the insurance card. “We traded information. She was a nice woman.”

“That's not what I was asking about; how bad is the car?”

“Not bad,” I say evasively.

“So it's bad.”

My lips form a thin line. “It'll be bad for Sam,” I finally reply.

When I look over my shoulder, I see Audree staring at us with wide eyes. It's then that I realize that the dent isn't the only thing I have to worry about. It's making sure that Audree doesn't tell Sam about the wreck before I can.

“Audee, you can't tell your brother what happened, all right?” I say calmly.

“You want me to lie?” Audree asks with shock.

Alba murmurs in my ear, “Oh, she's one of *those*.”

I turn toward her. “What are you talking about?”

“You know, she's sweet. Hasn't been corrupted yet.”

“I'm not corrupting her!” I say a little too loudly.

“You want me to lie. To my brother,” Audree says solemnly.

I smile serenely. “I'm not asking you to lie. I'm just asking you not to say what happened. So if he asks, ‘How was your day?’ You can just say...and this is off the top of my head, ‘Great, Sam! We went shopping. I got a Barbie doll! And then we got some ice cream.’”

“We had ice cream?”

“We can if you don’t tell him.”

Audree pauses, seeming to think over my proposition. Finally, she nods. “Deal.”

“Oh, way to go, Sabe’s. You’re the babysitter of the year.”

“What else am I supposed to do?” I pause and think over all the reactions that Sam might have. “You don’t think he’ll be really mad, do you?”

Alba doesn’t respond, just stares out the windshield. She finally twists around and looks at Audree. “Hey, Audball. How much does your brother love his Jeep?”

Audree shoots me a nervous look as though she’s afraid to answer truthfully.

“Go ahead,” Alba prods gently, “tell the truth.”

Audree turns her gaze to Alba and smiles. “Oh, he loves it. A lot.”

Alba smiles. “That’s what I thought.” When she faces forward, her smile disappears. She leans toward me and says: “Sable, you better give your heart to God because your ass is Sam’s.”



WE ARRIVE BACK TO THE MCSHANE’S AND DREAD CREEPS into my spine the second I see Sam walking down the back porch steps.

Unbuckling my seat belt, I say to Audree, “Remember our deal, right?”

She nods. “Yep. I remember.”

It’s hard to say if she’ll go through with our deal and not say a word. God, I hope she does. We get out of the car. Alba’s oddly quiet, watching Sam and me with the smallest of smirks.

“You can go home, you know,” I say.

She shakes her head. “Oh no. The show is clearly about to begin.”

My hands are shaking as I help Audree out of the car. “Why don’t you take your new Barbie into the house and introduce her to the Barbie family?”

Audree glances between her brother and me. As if she can sense the upcoming tension, she scurries into the house.

“Did you have fun, Audball?” Sam asks with a smile.

Audree looks like a deer in headlights. “Uh...it was good!” She thrusts her Barbie in the air. “I got this and then we got ice cream,” she says like she’s a robot.

But that makes sense, considering I had her repeat that very phrase back to me nearly thirty times on the ride home.

Sam laughs. “Anything else?”

“Uh...” Audree stares at her brother before she runs inside.

He gives me a questioning look and I shrug, laughing nervously. “Kids? Am I right?”

Every move he makes, I watch carefully. When he walks around the Jeep and is on the driver’s side, I jump in his way. “Hey. Why don’t we go inside?”

“Why?”

“Because we never get to talk.”

“You never want to talk. Ever.”

“Well, I’ve changed my mind.” I tap the side of his head. “What’s going on in that brain of yours, hmm?”

I pull back, but Sam’s quicker and captures my hand. His eyes narrow as he leans in. “The better question is what are you doing?”

Pretending that nothing’s wrong can go on for a long time, but at this point, I’m just exhausted and ready to rip the band-aid off. Sam drops my hand, that suspicious gleam still in his eyes. And with a heavy sigh, I step out of his way.

Just as I thought, within seconds, his eyes zero in on the dent. He rushes over to his car. “What the hell happened?”

I peer carefully at the Jeep then look back at Samson. “I don’t see anything. Alba, do you see anything?”

Alba mimics my actions. “Nope. Nothing.”

I gesture to Alba and smile nervously. “There you have it. We see nothing.”

Hands on his hips, he glares at me. “Then the two of you are fucking blind. Because when you left there was nothing and now there’s a dent.”

I hold my hands out in front of him. “Now let me explain.”

“Please. Please explain how you wrecked my fucking Jeep.”

“Wreck is a harsh word. I prefer fender bender.”

Sam pinches the bridge of his nose. “I should’ve taken the first time you drove my car as a sign that you’re a terrible driver.”

“I’m not terrible,” I shoot back, my anger slowly rising.

“Tell that to my dented-up side!”

I pull out the woman’s insurance information and hand it over. “I got all her info, okay?”

He snatches it from me, barely giving it a second look. The muscle ticking along his jaw shows how pissed he is. “Thanks,” he mutters.

“I’m really sorry,” I say. “It could’ve been worse, Sam. We all could’ve been hurt.”

At that his shoulders slightly slump. He rubs a hand down his face. “I’m glad no one’s hurt. I’m just really fucking pissed.”

Something tells me that now would be a really good time to just back off. So I hold out his keys and say nothing.

He takes them and shoves them into his pocket. “You can go home today. I’ll take care of Audee.”

“I don’t mind staying with her. I—”

He narrows his eyes. “I said I’ll watch her, okay?”

“Sable,” Alba calls out. “Let’s just go home. I need to be at work in thirty minutes anyways,” she smoothly lies.

She’s standing at the edge of the driveway, but clearly able to hear everything said between Sam and me. Giving her a blunt nod, I take a few steps backward. “I’m sorry,” I repeat again.

Sam says nothing and turns his back, as if I’d never spoken.

I hurry down the driveway, anxious to get away from him and the entire moment. The walk back to our house is quiet then Alba finally speaks up. “I think it should be noted that you are really bad at a stick shift.”

“Thank you for the vote of confidence,” I reply, staring straight ahead.

“Just being honest.”

“If you want to blame anyone for my bad driving skills. Blame my teacher: Samson.”

Alba lifts a brow and glances at me. “Why the hell did he even teach you in the first place?”

“It’s a long story,” I sigh.

“I have the day off. And well, now you do too. We have all the time in the world.”



CHAPTER ELEVEN

SAMSON

THEN

“DID YOU READ THE CHAPTERS?”

“Unfortunately, I did,” I replied as I sat down.

“Oh, come on,” Sable goaded. “You can’t honestly tell me *Anna Karenina* is not getting good.”

“I can honestly tell you *Anna Karenina* is not getting good.”

Sable smiled such a bright, genuine smile that for a second, I was stunned. She didn’t smile much, if at all. So when one graced her face, I took it and ran. I treasured it because, chances were, I’d never see it again. “You clearly didn’t read them good enough.”

“I read the chapters,” I replied.

And that was the truth. I read them three times.

Nothing connected. Was I focused? I tried to be. I turned off every single electronic and read the story. But nothing made sense.

Sometimes I questioned how my brain was wired. Since second grade, my mom has always told me that everyone and everything in this world was different. And this was my different. At that time, it was enough for me.

It wasn’t anymore.

If I studied with a group of students in my class, chances were they would study, absorb the information, and be ready for the test or quiz. They would get an A or B.

For me, it was a whole other story. Yet, that didn’t mean I wanted Sable to get a glimpse at my struggle. Sometimes I swore she would stare at me, with her head tilted to the side, as if she knew something wasn’t quite right.

She never said a word.

“Let’s get to work,” she announced, breaking the silence.

Thankfully, the days of *Anna Karenina* were almost to a close. If I gathered one thing from the story, it was that Leo Tolstoy rambled. A lot. And the characters pondered about so much shit, it was impossible to keep up.

That was another road block for me — right when I was understanding a character, whether it was Anna, Levin, Vronksy, or Kitty — it was a new chapter with someone else's point of view.

When Ms. Phillips announced that next semester we'd be reading *The Bell Jar*, I nearly wept with happiness for two reasons. One, at the size and two, that I would never have to see *Anna Karenina* again.

I told Sable and her face lit up. She gushed about the story as though it was her personal manifesto.

Something told me it'd be another story I'd struggle through. Until then, I had to focus on all things *Anna Karenina*. If it wasn't for Sable, I'd never make it through the worksheets, quizzes and tests. Thanks to her patience, my grade was up to a solid B. I'd never had a B in English Lit. Ever.

So after six weeks, why the fuck was she still my tutor if my grade was solid?

Simple: I didn't want to take the risk. Clearly, she knew what she was doing. Clearly, I didn't. If the sessions stopped, I knew my grade would slip.

Maybe that was why I had a new level of respect for her. Which was something I'd never thought I'd have for a Cole.

We definitely weren't best fucking friends forever—walking around the halls together or seeing each other outside of school. And we still went for each other's throats, but it wasn't as intense. In some crazy, demented way, we were able to hurl insults at each other one minute and go back to talking about the book as if nothing had happened.

It was fascinating.

She was fascinating.

This girl was tilting my world in an odd angle, where I was forced to look at everything differently. I saw that she was far from weak and that she never cowered. She took what she needed from this world and offered no apologies.

Before every tutoring session, I always thought to myself: What am I going to learn about her today?

“Are you listening to me?” Sable snapped her fingers in front of my face, a small frown furrowing her brows.

Blinking her into focus, I nodded. “Uh...yeah.”

“So, what did I just say?”

“You were talking about...Esther and all her feelings and shit.”

Sable crossed her arms and arched a single brow. “Her feelings and shit?”

“Sorry. Her feelings and emotions.” I put the last word in air quotes.

“Well, you were wrong. Come on, Samson,” she admonished. “Focus.”

Anytime she used my full name, I knew she meant business.

“Look, I know you don’t care for this story. But your last quiz was good. You can expand upon Esther and what her feelings are.” She leans in, her eyes wide and sincere. “I believe you’re smart and capable.”

Her words were heartfelt and sincere, and I didn’t know what the hell to say in reply. Because the truth was, outside of sports, I’d never been complimented. Academics was never my thing and had always been a struggle. So after a while, I thought, “Why try?” I leaned toward what came natural: football and basketball.

I basked in the praise and accolades and told myself that I didn’t need to be told I was smart. Who fucking needed that?

Samson McShane. That’s who.

My mouth opened and closed several times before the corner of my mouth curved up. “You sound like one of those motivational posters on the wall surrounding us. Are you going to read some *Chicken Soup for the Teenage Soul* next?”

Seconds. That was all it took for Sable’s shield to come back up.

Fuck.

I wanted to take back my snarky words the moment I said them. I went too far this time. Her words felt too personal, as though she saw a bit too much of me. I didn’t know how to explain any of that to her.

So I said nothing.

“Yo, bro. Are you ready?”

Sable shot Drew a dirty look and turned the other way. A sour expression was on her face, as though she smelled something that was rancid.

Drew flipped her off behind her back.

My shoulders stiffened and my palms laid flat against the table. I was getting ready to stand up but stopped myself at the last second. What was I going to do? Fight for Sable’s fucking honor?

Too late for that.

“The team is waiting,” Drew said, sounding more like a needy girl than a friend.

Before every Friday night home game, he shoved his face with food at the local diner. Our meals would be paid for and the customers would nod in our direction. Because, for a second, we were important. On top of the world.

It was a great feeling, but I couldn’t care less about the diner.

“Just give me a second, all right?” My tone was sharp and impatient.

Sable lifted her head and looked at me, baffled.

Drew frowned. His gaze drifted from me to Sable. I almost wanted to step in front of her to break his view. Finally, he nodded and walked away.

Loudly, Sable cleared her throat. “Well, I need to be going,” she said as she quickly gathered her things.

I was about ready to tell her that our session wasn’t over, but when I glanced at the clock, I saw we were ten minutes over our regular time.

“Okay.” I stood up, closing my books. My gaze furtively drifting to Sable.

I grabbed my book bag and slung it over my shoulder. And followed her to the door. Sable glanced at me. “Everything okay, bro?”

I ignored her little dig. “Yeah. I just wanted to walk you out.”

“Walk me out? Were we transported back to the 1800s and I didn’t know about it?” she asked.

I shrugged. “Just being nice.”

“Well, you don’t have to be,” she said over her shoulder. “I’ve taken this walk many times before.”

The hall was completely empty, except for a janitor who was emptying trash cans. He looked like he’d rather have a lobotomy than be here. I took my time walking, but Sable had other plans. She speed-walked down the hall, as if hell was nipping at her heels.

“Wait!” I hurried my pace and caught up to her. “You walk? Don’t you live in Antsett?”

She turned around. Her eyes were cold and withdrawn. “Yeah.”

“Look...I...” In the middle of the hallway, I stared down at her and adjusted my backpack that was slung over my shoulder. “I’m sorry for what I said back there.”

Wordlessly, she stared at me.

“I was being a dick, okay?”

Sable looked at me intently for a moment longer before she nodded and looked away.

“Not a lot of people call me smart,” I confessed.

At that, her eyes returned back to me. “That’s what upset you? It’s true! You’re getting a B in that class.”

“With your help.”

“But am I taking your test and doing your worksheets?” She scoffed. “No. You’re smart.”

Her confidence in me was reassuring but also curious. I didn’t know what to do with it. “Well, thanks,” I said lamely.

She dipped her head in reply and tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. “Okay, bye.” Without another word, she bolted down the hall.

“Why are you taking off so quickly?”

“I already told you. I’m going home,” she said without breaking stride.

With ease, I caught up to her. “Antsett is at least five miles away,” I remind her. “On foot, that’s an hour walk.”

Sable shrugged impatiently. “So?”

I turned so I was walking backward. “So? That’s a long-ass walk.”

“This isn’t the first time I’ve done it.”

“But don’t you have a car?”

What I’d never tell her was that while I waited for the first bell to ring in the morning, I lingered next to the doors like a pathetic fucking puppy, waiting to see when she’d pull up. I could spot her shitty-ass car in the parking lot before I saw it. Her muffler was on its last leg, clanking loudly.

“I do have a car. But Alba had an early shift at the grocery store so she had to use it.”

“What about your mom?”

Sable raised both brows. “My mom?”

“Doesn’t she have a car?” I prodded.

“She does,” Sable agreed slowly. “But I don’t know where she’s at, so her car is useless to me at this point.

Her reluctant reply made me think she was lying. Spitfire Sable who held nothing back was hiding something. Rather than push the subject, I held my tongue on the matter.

Once we reached the exit, leading toward the parking lot, I placed a hand against the door. Impatiently, she looked at me.

“Let me take you home.”

Why did I fucking say that? Chances were, if the roles were reversed, she wouldn’t offer me a ride. Not that I expected her to anyway.

“No, thank you,” Sable replied calmly.

She ducked under my arm and pushed the door open. I stared at her back, ignoring the urge to run after her.

Ice princess rejected my offer.

Me.

She rejected *me*.

My gaze remained on her retreating figure. By now, she was off school property walking down Main Street. I stepped closer to the front doors. With her ponytail swinging back and forth and her backpack slung across her shoulders, she looked more like a kid and less like a high schooler.

“Are we going to go eat or not? I’m fucking starving.”

I turned around and saw Drew standing beside me. How long had he been standing there?

“I can’t,” I replied, without looking away from Sable. “I have things to do.”

“Like what?”

Annoyed, I looked at him. “Things.”

Drew narrowed his eyes. “We eat there every home game!”

“You realize we’re not a couple, right? If you want to go eat, then go eat. I’m not going to fucking stop you.”

I pulled my keys out of my pocket and shoved the door open with my shoulder. Drew followed behind me. “What’s gotten into you?”

Because Sable was so far down the street, Drew wouldn’t notice her. But I did. “Nothing.”

“It’s that Cole bitch, isn’t it?”

Just two months ago, I would’ve laughed at his words. But now, I didn’t even crack a smile. True, Sable could be bitchy half the damn time, but the other half? When she spoke about books and her sisters with a smile on her face? That side wasn’t bad at all. No one saw that side though. And the sad truth was that if I didn’t have Sable as a tutor, if I hadn’t been forced to spend time with her, I wouldn’t have seen it either.

“I gotta go,” I muttered.

Before Drew could say another word, I hurried to my Jeep and peeled out. It didn’t take me long to catch up to Sable. She was only two blocks from the high school. At the rate she was going, she wouldn’t make it home before five. I slowed my Jeep down, until it was creeping down the road, barely going five miles an hour. Traffic started piling up behind me, but I didn’t give a fuck.

Sable adjusted the straps of her book bag and looked at me from the corner of her eye. “May I help you?”

“Get in the car, Cole.”

“No. I’m fine.”

“Are you sure?”

Resolutely, she kept her gaze straight ahead. “Positive.”

“It’s pretty chilly out.”

It was cold enough to have a coat on and the ratty, blue jean jacket Sable was wearing looked like it had been dragged behind a bus and attacked by a swarm of moths. She was

trying really fucking hard not to shiver, but I saw the way she flinched whenever the wind hit her face.

“You might think it’s chilly. But I think it’s pretty out.” As she said those words, she crossed her arms over her chest, discreetly rubbing her hands against her forearms.

Sable quickened her pace. Fine by me. I pressed on the gas.

“Stop following me.”

“Get in the fucking car.”

She snuck another glance at me. “This is starting to feel like an after-school special, where a strange man in a van stalks a girl, trying to get her into said van.”

I rested my elbow on the edge of the door and leaned out the window. “I’m not stalking. I’m just trying to be a good Samaritan.”

“And why would you want to be a good Samaritan to a—and I quote—a Cole bitch?” She stopped walking and looked behind us, at all the cars. “You know some of your friends might see you talking to me.” She met my gaze. A challenge in her eyes. “Sure you want to risk the chance?”

“Is that what you think? That I don’t want to be seen with you?”

Sable stopped dead in her tracks. “Am I supposed to think otherwise?”

I put my Jeep into park. She wrapped her left hand around the strap of her book bag, walked up to my window and rested her elbows on the ledge.

Behind me, people continued to honk their horns. One driver lost their patience and pulled around me screaming, “Get out of the road, McShane!”

I stayed put because right then Sable Cole was inches away from me. Those beautiful green eyes pulled me in, and had me leaning toward her. When I did, her pupils dilated. She put up this unbothered shield, but she was full of shit. My gaze traveled down her face and zeroed in on her plump, lower lip.

The urge to pull her forward and kiss her took me by surprise. If I sucked on her lower lip, I bet her eyes would more than widen. She would gasp, but she'd let me continue.

Sable Cole was quiet and controlled, yet there was fury and heat buried deep inside. I wanted to light a fire and watch her come alive.

“Samson McShane, I don't know why you're suddenly being so nice to me. It's unnerving. Can we go back to hating each other?”

My eyes drifted back toward hers. It was the first time Sable had ever used my full name. And I wanted to hear her say it again.

When silence drifted between us, Sable raised a curious brow. I quickly shook away my thoughts and got back on track. “You think I hate you?”

“We aren't exactly best friends,” she replied carefully.

“No, we're not,” I agreed. “But I don't hate you. I hate pickles and obnoxious commercials. I hate a lot of fucking things in this world. You're not one of them.”

Instead of relenting, Sable said nothing. I'd never met someone harder to crack than this chick.

“Why don't you call someone to pick you up?” I asked.

“I don't have a phone on me.”

“You don't have a phone?”

“I just said that.”

“Everyone has a phone.”

“Everyone might. But they also don't have to share with three other siblings. I hardly get a chance to use it,” Sable countered.

“You could use it right now.”

“I get it, okay?” She huffed.

“Well, since you don't believe in carrying a phone on you, that puts you at risk. I'll follow you the entire way home.”

Sable tucked her hair behind her ear, giving me a glimpse of her face, more specifically, the smirk playing on her lips. “That’s not creepy at all,” she said.

“Come on, Sable.” My smile faded. “I’m just trying to help.”

Sable continued to stare at me with that intense gaze of hers. The longer we stared at one another, I knew she was seriously thinking about taking me up on my offer.

I cleared my throat and nudged my head toward the passenger seat. “Are you getting in or what?”

Maybe the temperature was starting to get to her. Or maybe she was tired of walking. Either way, Sable nodded quickly and walked around the truck. It was ridiculous, but I smiled as if I’d won some hard-fought battle.

She tossed her book bag onto the center console. It hit my thigh, making me wince.

“God, what the hell do you have in that thing?” I asked as I pulled back onto the road.

“Books,” she replied as she buckled herself in. Crammed in tight quarters, I could smell her. Some floral scent, but the smell of smoke was overpowering. Funny. I didn’t peg her as a smoker.

Her mom’s the one that smokes like a chimney you dumb fuck, my mind hissed at me.

My memories of Sable are few. The only one that I have stands out like a sore thumb...

We were in elementary school. I think I was a fourth grader. It was after school and most of the kids were gone. I was walking into the main office. My mom was still the principal and if I didn’t go to a friend’s house, I stayed in my mom’s office until it was time to go home. That day, Sable was sitting in one of the chairs lining the wall. Her book bag sat between her legs and her hands were tucked beneath her thighs. She kicked her skinny legs back and forth, watching them in a trance.

“Hi, Sam,” said one of the teachers using the copier.

“Hi.”

Sable lifted her head and glanced at me. Then she quickly looked away, her eyes veering back toward the ground.

I walked past her and down the hall toward my mom’s office. Mom spared me a quick glance. “Hi, sweetie.” She gestured toward the cleared-off desk in the corner, where I typically did my homework. “Do you have a lot of homework?”

Before I answered, I peered out into the hall and caught Sable staring at me and Mom from the corner of her eye. When our gazes locked, she whipped her head to the right, her long hair shielding her face.

“Not too much,” I said. I wanted to close the door, but I didn’t. I started to work on my homework, my gaze every so often veering toward the hall. Sable stayed perfectly still.

What was she doing here so late? If she was in trouble, my mom would’ve called her in and made me leave the room. But no one, not even my mom, said a word. I noticed a few times Mom would look away from her computer and glance at Sable before she sighed and went back to work.

It was about fifteen minutes later and an hour after school was let out, when Sable’s mom, Annie Cole, walked in. Everyone knew of Annie. She was like an urban myth of Antsett.

Rudely, I stared at her. In my defense, though, so were my mom and the secretary. Annie was dressed in a black tank top, with small holes through the thin material and short shorts. There were black smudges beneath her eyes and her brown hair was pulled back, but it didn’t look like it’d been brushed in a while. Her skin was pale, making the bruises on her arms and legs stand out.

She glanced around the room, looking a little lost before she finally saw Sable. Annie didn’t smile with relief; instead, she frowned at Sable.

“There you are!” she said in an accusatory tone. “What are you doing?”

Sable blinked at her rapidly. “You said you were going to pick me up.” Sable stated her words calmly, as if she always had these types of conversations with her mom.

Annie frowned before she scoffed. “No, I didn’t.”

Sable’s cheeks turned bright red. She glanced at me and the secretary before quickly looking away. “Yes, you did.” Her voice had lowered. “I had a doctor’s appointment after school.”

“Why?”

“Because of the cough I’ve had for the past two weeks. I told you last night that it wasn’t getting better and you made the appointment,” she pointed out quietly.

Her mom’s lips went into a thin line. I think if there wasn’t an audience watching them, she would’ve argued the point, but instead she asked, “Where’s Maren and Alba?”

“At Ms. Nova’s.”

Sable’s mom rolled her eyes and took a deep breath, as if this was a hassle for her. “That’s great.” She threw her hands up in the air, making her keys jangle in her right hand. “Just great.”

“Where’s Lennon?” Sable asked, her voice timid.

Shockingly, Annie grabbed her pack of cigarettes and pulled one out. She placed it between her lips before she grabbed a lighter from her back pocket and lit up. “She’s at home, napping,” she muttered. “Now let’s go.” She took a drag of her cigarette and reached a hand toward Sable. I saw Sable flinch slightly and pull back.

“Why didn’t you take her with you?”

Annie leaned forward. She lowered her voice, but I still heard her. “I’m not doing this here.”

Sable said nothing and slowly stood up, mechanically waving a hand in front of her to get the smoke out of her face.

Mom was out of her seat, walking toward the door. She stared at Annie with disbelief and anger.

Before Sable and her mom could walk away, the secretary, Ms. Warnick, jumped up, stopping Mom in her tracks.

“Excuse me, Ma’am.”

Sable’s mom ignored Ms. Warnick. The secretary was new to town and had no idea who Annie was. Most people in Antsett didn’t bother talking to Annie; they just waited until her back was turned to do the talking because Annie Cole was unstable. At least that’s what I’d heard from grown-ups. And what I was seeing before my very eyes backed up that comment.

“Excuse me,” Ms. Warnick said, raising her voice.

That got Annie’s attention. She whipped her head toward the secretary, a challenging look in her eyes. “What?”

“There’s no smoking on school grounds. You need to put that out or go outside...” With every word, the secretary’s voice became smaller and smaller, until it faded away. Probably because Annie was resting her elbows on the counter, staring sharply at the secretary. It was hard to say what was running through her mind right then.

“Oh my,” Annie said lightly, glancing down at her cigarette and back at Ms. Warnick. “Pardon me.” Her voice changed into some ridiculously cheesy English accent.

Then she dropped the cigarette onto the floor and flattened it with her flip-flop. She stared at Mom and Ms. Warnick the whole time, almost challenging them to say something.

When neither did, Annie laughed loudly, looked back at Sable and smiled. She had a look in her eyes that said: Can you believe this lady?

Sable looked down at the floor.

What was wrong with her? I looked toward my mom, but she was walking out the door.

“Is everything okay here, Ms. Cole?” she asked, her voice polite but authoritative.

“I’m fine!” she snapped and grabbed Sable’s arm, half dragging her to the door.

My mom took a step forward. “Are you sure?”

“Yes!” she half-shouted. “We’re going.”

Mom and Ms. Warnick stared at each other wordlessly. I had no idea what they were thinking, but I knew it wasn’t good. Mom looked away and stared at the cigarette on the ground.

“I’ll get someone to clean that up,” Ms. Warnick said quietly and hurriedly left the office, leaving just me and my mom.

“What was that?” I asked after a beat.

“Samson, do your homework,” Mom said curtly. She turned around and walked back into her office. Immediately, she went to one of the windows and peered through the blinds. I could see the figures of Sable and Annie walking down the street. My mom watched them. “How?” she muttered to herself. “How did such a lovely girl come from that woman?”

The memory faded away as I glanced over at Sable. I couldn’t help but compare the young Sable to the one staring straight ahead. Her physical appearance may have changed, but her eyes were still the same.

I looked at the road, but gestured to her book bag. “Did you decide to take home every book, for every single subject you’re taking?”

My question was sarcastic, but Sable stared at me, a solemn look on her face.

“Absolutely,” she replied.

I loved her answers. I loved how she was so unapologetically herself. Take her as you pleased, it didn’t matter to her. She knew who she was.

We drove in silence. I glanced at Sable out of the corner of my eye as she stared out the window, drumming her fingers on the windowsill as she quietly hummed along to the song

playing on the radio. I was going to say something, but seeing her so relaxed made me back down.

Then she glanced at me, determination swirling in her eyes. “What would you say if I asked to drive your Jeep?”

For a second, I didn’t say anything. Then, “I would say, I can’t tell if you’re being serious or not.”

She turned in her seat to face me and arched a brow. “Are there any other cars around us?”

I grinned. “Yeah. A mile ahead I think there’s an old truck on the Miller farm.”

“That truck is on cinderblocks!”

I shrugged. “Well, then you have to be specific with me.”

Her eyes widened with excitement. “Come on! Let me drive your Jeep!”

“You know you’re asking for something huge, right?” I lovingly petted the steering wheel.

She rolled her eyes. “Oh, God. Don’t tell me you’re one of those guys who treats their car like a person?”

“I’m not.”

Sable grinned. “I bet you have a name for your car.”

I scoffed. “No, I don’t. That’s fucking ridiculous.”

“Oynx. You call it Oynx, don’t you?”

“Why did you think of that name?”

“The color of the Jeep obviously. I doubt you’d name it Hans or something like Lucky.”

“It’s a her.”

“Wow.” The grin never left her face. With anyone else I’d tell them to go fuck themselves. “You are weirder than I thought.”

“Coming from you, I’m going to take that as a compliment.”

She grinned widely and slowly, her cheeks turning pink. It was the first time I'd earned a genuine smile.

"Come on," she persisted. "Let me drive."

"Do you even know how to drive a stick?"

"No," she slowly conceded, "but that's what will make it fun."

"I'm starting to think our definitions of fun differ. I don't feel like having my clutch burned out."

"Let me try, Sam. I'm helping you out at school and you can help me out with this." Sable gave me another smile. Any reservations I had were obliterated.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

"But I don't want to help you with this." I lifted my hand from the steering wheel and gestured toward her.

Sable was persistent. "Sam, come on." Her smile did dangerous things to me. In spite of myself, I found myself relenting, so I pulled over onto the side of the road.

As I shifted into park, dust moved through the air before disappearing altogether. I took a deep breath. Something told me I was making a big mistake. I unbuckled myself. "Fine. But treat Onyx with care, okay?"

"I'll treat her as good as I do my own car," she vowed.

We both got out of the vehicle, but before she could get into the driver's side, I stopped directly in front of her, making her crane her neck back. "That does not reassure me at all," I said.

Sable just smirked.

Hesitantly, I stepped aside and walked around the car, while Sable anxiously hopped in and adjusted the seat as I belted myself in. "Are you sure you want to do this?"

Her hands curved around the steering wheel. She smiled like a kid on Christmas morning. "Absolutely."



TEN MINUTES LATER, I WAS READY TO JUMP OUT OF THE CAR and give up all together.

“Stop! Stop!” I yelled.

Sable may be smart and a good tutor, but she sucked at driving a stick. She shifted the gears halfway, creating a nasty grinding noise that sounded like nails on a chalkboard. And no matter how many times I told her to use the clutch as she put the car into gear, she couldn't seem to get the hang of it.

“Stop yelling at me; I don't know what I'm doing!” she snapped back.

“Really? I couldn't tell,” I said sarcastically.

With a focused look on her face, Sable's gaze alternated between the road and the clutch. “Well, maybe if you quit barking orders at me, I'd learn better.”

“I'm sorry. I'm just fearing for my life over here.”

At that, Sable slammed the car into park and glared over at me. “This was supposed to be fun.”

“Again, our definitions of fun differ.”

Sable said nothing, just stared at the road. And very slowly tears started to form in her eyes.

Holy shit. She was getting ready to cry.

This was strange for many reasons. One: I didn't know the Ice Princess was capable of producing tears. Two: Was she mad at me for yelling or the fact that she wasn't catching on as quickly as she wanted? Three: Or maybe it was that time of the month? I've heard that women get really emotional during their periods.

Either way, the tears in her eyes made me uncomfortable. I wanted to comfort her in some sort of way, but I knew she'd pull away. But I had to make the tears stop.

“I’m sorry I yelled,” I hastily said. “Let’s keep going, and this time, I’ll talk quietly.”

Sable rapidly blinked and brushed away a stray tear in the corner of her eye. She finally nodded and exhaled loudly. “Sorry for the tears. I’m normally not a crier.”

I stayed silent.

“I’m just mad I’m not learning as quick as I thought I would,” she explained.

“It’s fine,” I said with visible relief. Mainly because the tears were pretty much gone. “We’ll just go back to the basics, okay?”

She nodded and started over by explaining the clutch, but that wasn’t really the problem for Sable. It was mainly the gears.

“Just get a feel for them.” I reached over to turn off the car. When I did, my shoulder brushed against Sable’s. Within seconds, she became as stiff as a board. I took my sweet time pulling the keys out of the ignition; I wasn’t ready to pull away, not yet.

Finally, I grabbed the keys and settled back in my seat. Sable released a small, pent-up breath.

“Remember to push the clutch in each time when you shift gears,” I said.

Sable sat there, unmoving, like a potted plant. I couldn’t tell if she was ignoring me, or just really focusing on what I was saying.

“Go ahead,” I urged, in a non-yelling voice. “Do it. The car’s off. It’s not gonna move.”

She put her hand back on the clutch and went through the motions. After the second time of her getting confused, I said, “You’re still not putting the clutch in.”

Again, I didn’t yell.

But Sable did. “Then show me!”

“Fine,” I muttered and reached over, placing my hand over hers. If she tensed up when we brushed shoulders, it was nothing compared to now. She sucked in a sharp breath. At once, her body locked up; I could tell that she wanted to move away, but she just stared at our hands. At the way mine swallowed hers whole. Her hand was so soft compared to my calloused one.

“Do it like this,” I said, my voice gruff. Unconsciously my hand tightened over hers.

Over and over, I showed her how to properly use the clutch. The whole time, my hand covered hers. Sable didn’t push my hand off hers once. Even when she finally got the hang of it.

After a few minutes, my voice faded and her movements stopped. The two of us were staring down at our hands.

The silence was strained; the energy heightened. Enough to where every breath I took felt like a punch to the gut.

Clearing my throat, I reluctantly removed my hand. “Want to start the car and try again?”

With her eyes on the wheel, Sable took a deep breath and nodded then started the Jeep back up. If I was a stupid guy, I’d tell her that holding onto the steering wheel for dear life probably wasn’t helping with her stress and tension, but for once, I was smart and only said, “You got this, Sable.”

We went through the steps once again, and very slowly, she moved down the road. I saw a car coming up behind us and looked at the speedometer.

“The car behind you is going fucking fast. Just let them pass, okay?”

Tight-lipped and a little pale, Sable nodded and continued to slowly cruise forward.

“If you really focus, you can feel, through your feet, every time the clutch is in and out of use.”

My suggestion seemed to help, because soon, she was moving at a cool ten miles per hour. She stayed the same speed

for the majority of the ride.

It wasn't a smooth drive back into town. She was putting some major wear on the clutch, but, then again, so did I when I first started driving.

"You can just drive all the way to your house," I said, once we reached the outskirts of town.

Her hand slipped on the gear shift. "No, that's all right," Sable quickly replied. Her eyes never left the road. "I'll just stop on Main Street."

I didn't say a word.

Everyone in Antsett knew where the Cole girls lived, but unless you lived in that area, you never ever went there. Unless you wanted to buy some drugs. Have your hub caps stolen or watch a couple screaming at each other out on their front yard.

Normally, I wouldn't. But today, I just didn't give a shit; I was curious to take a deeper look at her home. Not in judgment, but to further get to know her.

But Sable didn't want that.

She looked like she'd rather walk over broken glass than drive to her house. So when she parked in front of my house, I didn't stop her. Turning off the Jeep, she sighed with relief and looked over at me expectantly, with the smallest smile on her face.

"Not bad, Cole. Not bad at all."

She tossed the keys at me. I grabbed them with one hand. "Oh, be honest. I was terrible."

"You were...bad," I said slowly. "But definitely not terrible."

Sable sat back in the driver's seat and looked at me from the corner of her eye. "On a scale of one to ten, how bad was I?"

"Five?"

She raised a brow. A faint smile played on the corner of her lips.

“I mean seven. Definitely seven.”

“I’ll take a seven.” She smiled at me. “So when will you let me drive next?”

It was hard to tell if she was joking. I hesitated before I ultimately decided to go with the truth. “It’s gonna be a while.”

“I’d argue with you, but I know I sucked.” She gave me one last smile before her eyes looked behind me, toward my family’s house. “Your house is beautiful.” She said it almost wistfully.

There was no way for me to know what was running through that complicated mind of hers, but I wished I did.

Looking over my shoulder, I tried to picture my family’s house from a stranger’s point of view, but it was damn near impossible because that home was the only place I’d known.

I looked back at Sable.

“You can come in,” I said out of nowhere.

Where in the hell did that come from?

Sable arched both brows, looking just as shocked as me. She shook her head. “No, I gotta head home.”

She said that but we’d been in my Jeep for fifteen minutes and she looked in no rush to leave, but I didn’t challenge her. “All right. Maybe some other time.”

“Absolutely,” she replied, but I knew she was lying.

She paused, looking like she wanted to say something else. Yet in the end, she just gestured to her book bag. “Can I have that, please?”

“Sure.” I reached down and picked it up.

Sable’s right arm was outstretched, but I didn’t hand it over. Instead, I held onto it.

“Come to the game tomorrow,” I blurted out.

Sable didn't say yes, but she didn't say no, either. Just like I expected, she was silent. Finally, she asked, "Why?"

I shrugged. "Why not?"

Helplessly, she looked between me and her book bag. "Because...because I've never gone to a single football game. No, I take that back. I've never been to a sporting event in my entire life."

"Never?"

"Does watching Alba chase after a group of soccer players for calling Maren fat in sixth grade count?"

I smirked. "No."

"Then yes, never," she answered confidently.

"You should come then."

"How many games are there typically in one season?"

"Why?" I countered.

"Well, I'd hate to break this winning streak of not going."

Pushing past the jokes, I leaned in. Sable's cheeky smile faded. "Come to the next game."

She blinked rapidly and leaned in. For the barest of seconds, her nose brushed against mine. Before I could capture her face with my hands, she pulled back. "I'll go on one condition," she finally replied.

"And what's that?"

"Get a B on your test."

This time it was my turn to pull back. "What?"

"Your next test on *Anna Karenina* is tomorrow, right?"

I nodded dumbly.

"You'll get your grade back on Friday. Get a B and I'll go."

There was a good chance I could get a B. I could see it in my peripheral, but it seemed so far out of reach. I had a better chance of getting a C.

“You think I’m capable of a B?”

“We’ve been going over the chapters all week and you know it, Samson,” she replied, her voice confident.

“Fine.” I held my hand out and she took it, along with her book bag. “Deal.”



I SLAPPED THE TEST AGAINST SABLE’S LOCKER AND GRINNED. “Tonight’s supposed to be a cold one. Bundle up.”

Sable snatched the test from me and stared at the grade. When she lowered the paper, she was wearing a wide smile. “B+. Nice.”

I rubbed the back of my neck and watched people walking down the hall. “Well, it’s all thanks to you.”

“That’s not true. I didn’t take the test. Unless...” She narrowed her eyes. “Did you cheat?”

My eyes widened. “No! I studied for this.”

“I’m really happy for you,” she said. And out of nowhere, she leaned in and hugged me.

I’ve held many girls. But nothing felt like holding Sable. It was like a puzzle piece sliding into place. In so many ways, we came from different worlds, but this felt right.

It felt good.

Sable was the first one to pull away.

“So you’re coming, right?”

She looked insulted by my question. “Of course. A deal’s a deal.”

“Then I’ll see you tonight.”



IT WAS THE END OF THE FOURTH QUARTER, AND WE WERE UP BY twenty-two points.

During each timeout, I scanned the crowd with laser-sharp focus. The bleachers were typically packed with family members. Lining the chain-link fence were the dads of players and students.

I didn't spot the girl with green eyes and long brown hair.

Sable wasn't here.

My gaze veered across the field, toward the trucks lining the fence. A handful of students were tailgating. I scanned the students, hoping that Sable might be amongst them, but no dice. She was nowhere to be found.

Sable didn't seem like one to back out of something. At least that's how she made it seem hours earlier. But maybe she flaked because this wasn't her scene.

Who knew the reason for her not being here, all that mattered was that she wasn't.

I played the remainder of the game, but my heart wasn't in it. My teammates saw it, giving me side-eyes before and after each play. If we weren't up by twenty-two points then they, along with Coach, would've been screaming at me to get my head in the game.

When the game ended, I continued to send furtive gazes around the field, but there was still no sight of her.

Unhooking my chin strap, I took off my helmet and followed my teammates toward the locker room.

Plans for tonight were already being made, but contained, as Coach followed us into the locker room. He gave us a parting speech about playing as a team and with our head in the game. I couldn't help but notice when he said that, he glanced at me.

Most of the time, nothing distracted me. Most of the time I wasn't thinking of a girl named Sable.

He told us to be safe tonight and left. Immediately, we all started opening our lockers and changing. Drew came up

beside me and started taking off his gear. “Dude, you played like shit.”

“Oh, thanks,” I replied dryly.

“What the hell was wrong with you?”

I grabbed my shirt from my locker and quickly pulled it over my head. “Nothing,” I muttered.

He snorted. “It’s the truth. Two of your passes we’re weak as hell.”

Slamming my locker closed, I picked up my bag and slung it over my shoulder. “Even with my two shitty passes, we still won.”

“Yeah. That means it’s time to celebrate.”

Around him, cheers started to ring out.

“I can’t,” I said, the words rushing out of my mouth before I could think them over. But would I take them back? Probably not. It was the truth. I had zero interest in getting shitfaced.

Drew threw his hands up. “What’s going on with you?”

I began walking backward, my eye on the door. “Nothin’. Just tired.”

Drew didn’t buy my excuse for a second. “You’ve been like this for a while.”

“Don’t be a fucking pussy. I said I’m tired and that’s it.”

Another teammate came up to Drew and draped an arm over his shoulder. “Is wittle Drew going to be okay without McShane at the party tonight?” he said in a baby voice.

The guys surrounding us laughed.

Drew shrugged him off. “Fuck off, Taylor.”

As I turned toward the exit, I heard Taylor call out. “McShane, come back. Drew doesn’t have his bottle!”

I raised my middle finger but quickened my pace when I saw Luke. He was a fellow player and our best offensive tackle. He was a huge dude, who was my height, but he had a

good forty pounds on me. When there was a party, he was at it and he was also one of the easiest going guys I knew.

“Luke, come here.”

Before he left the locker room, he walked over. “What’s up?”

I leaned in. “Do you have Alba Cole’s number?”

His look gave his confusion away. “Alba Cole?” he repeated back slowly, as if he thought he heard me wrong.

“Yeah.”

“No.” He tilted his head to the side. “Why?”

“Just wondering.”

Before Luke could reply, I walked out of the locker room and pulled out my phone. Short of driving to Sable’s house and asking her why she didn’t come, I had no way of finding out what happened. Never had I chased after a girl like this.

Never had I been tempted to do so.

A few parents and students lingered outside the back doors. A few gave me slaps on the back and said good game. I nodded in their direction and said thanks to a few of them as I pulled out my keys.

Outside of school hours, the student parking didn’t matter. Any spot was up for grabs. During the school day, my regular spot was in the front, on the fresh pavement. It was closest to the gym and back doors and was regularly called Senior Row. Anything beyond that was for juniors. By the time I pulled in an hour before the game, most of the spots were already taken, which meant I ended up having to park clear out in the gravel parking lot. That was typically saved for sophomores.

I was a few steps away from the back door and the small crowd when I saw her.

Sable was standing near a few cars with her sister, Maren. They were having a conversation, quietly whispering and making it impossible for me to hear a damn thing. Maren saw me first. She immediately stopped talking and nudged Sable.

She glanced my way once, then did a double take. We faced each other, but neither of us took any steps forward.

“You showed up,” I said dumbly.

She frowned, confused by my words. “What do you mean I showed up? I’ve been here the entire time.”

“Score?” I countered.

“29-7,” she rattled off, as if she was a football devotee who followed every game. Had to admit, the very thought was a turn-on.

“Where were you then?”

“In the bleachers, huddled under a blanket with Maren.” She gestured to her little sister standing next to her. When Maren widened her eyes meaningfully, Sable rolled her eyes. “Maren, this is Sam. Sam this is Maren.”

I nodded in her direction. “How’s it going?”

“Good,” she squeaked out.

Maren was a freshman, a newbie. She was the younger version of Sable. Her hair was cut shorter, and her eyes set farther apart, but there was no mistaking the family resemblance.

“By the way,” Sable said. “You could’ve told me that it would be freezing out here.”

“Uh...it’s early November. I thought it would be pretty self-explanatory that it’d be cold. And I did tell you to bundle up.”

“No, cold is brrr; it’s chilly. I need to get a coat. Freezing is sitting on bleachers with the wind harshly hitting your face.”

“Are you two seriously arguing about the weather?” Maren piped in.

I smiled at her and she turned completely beet red.

“If I told you that you’d be freezing your ass off, would you have come?”

Sable hesitated and I had my answer.

“Exactly,” I said knowingly.

She rolled her eyes, but there was a playful smile on her lips. Maybe she didn’t realize it, but she took a small step forward. Her sister grinned at her knowingly.

“So, what did you think?” I prodded.

“It was a great game,” she admitted. “You played good.”

“Why don’t you come to more games?”

Sable’s mouth opened, but Maren beat her to the punch and hiked her thumb in Sable’s direction. “This one thinks they’re a waste of time.”

Sable looked embarrassed and ready to kill her sister. I just arched a brow at her. “Really? Kind, sweet Sable thinks that? Well, I don’t believe that at all,” I said dryly.

A few guys from the team walked out. They looked at Sable and me with confusion and gave Maren a lingering glance.

“Keep walking, perverts!” Sable shouted at them. All of them stared at her as if she’d lost her mind and then they quickly walked away.

All but one.

The new guy in school and fellow teammate, Nick, walked up next to me. His eyes immediately zeroed in on Maren. “I was going to say hi, but I’m afraid she’s” — he nodded toward Sable — “going to scream at me.”

“This...this is why we don’t go to football games!” Sable hissed at Maren.

Nick, who was completely oblivious, stood there, waiting for Maren to reply. Within seconds, she sized him up with that look that all Cole girls give.

Oh, shit. He was done for.

Ignoring Sable, she walked right up to Nick. “I’m Maren.”

Seemed like all traces of that shyness was gone.

“Nick. But no one answered my question. Is she” — again, he pointed at Sable— “going to scream at me if I talk to you?” He locked eyes with Maren.

“She’s only fifteen,” was Sable’s reply.

“And I’m only seventeen.” Nick looked back at Maren. And Maren hadn’t stopped staring at him for the last five minutes. “Are you doing anything tonight?”

“Home,” Sable cut in. “She’s going home. Because she’s fifteen.”

If it came down to it, I could easily see Sable tackling this dude, who was easily five inches taller and had a good sixty pounds on her, and totally kicking his ass.

Instantly, I was by her side, ready to hold her back if I had to. “Calm down, Cujo,” I murmured in her ear.

Sable shot me a venomous look but didn’t say a word.

“Walk with me to my truck,” Nick said and gestured to a black Silverado parked on Senior Row.

Sable went to take a step forward, but my hands shot out and wrapped around her forearms. “Let your sister answer. Nick is a good dude,” I whispered.

She shot daggers at Nick but didn’t say a word.

Before she replied, Maren looked over at Sable, almost for permission. Sable sagged into me, just for a second, before she nodded. “But only for fifteen minutes and then you need to meet me at the car.”

Maren’s face lit up and she walked away. Almost immediately, she and Nick started talking. I could tell by the way that Sable was craning her neck, it pissed her off that she couldn’t hear what they were talking about.

“Did I mention she’s fifteen?” Sable shouted.

Maren looked over her shoulder at Sable, like she was an embarrassing mother that wouldn’t let her be. She mouthed the word stop before she turned back around.

I tried to steer Sable toward the direction of my Jeep, but she kept looking over her shoulder every other second. “What the hell is wrong with you?” I asked.

Instead of answering, she asked a question of her own. “Who is that guy?”

“Nick.”

“Nick who?”

“Why are you asking me that? You know I’m useless when it comes to names.”

“So we just let my little sister run off with Nick what’s his face? He could be a killer!”

“Yes. Because high school killers are running rampant through this small town of ours,” I said dryly.

“Oh, God,” Sable muttered, completely lost to my sarcasm. “I can see it now. Dateline is going to be knocking on our door, interviewing everyone in the trailer park, wanting to know about the mysterious fifteen-year-old girl. And you know who they’re going to blame for her disappearance? Me! The sister she left home with.”

The imagination Sable had was powerful, but also slightly alarming. Who thinks of this shit? I shook my head. “You worry too much.”

“And you don’t worry enough!” she shot back.

By now, we were standing next to her car, which actually wasn’t too far from my Jeep. I stopped walking and grabbed her shoulders. “Just relax. Can you do that?” She didn’t reply and I took that as a good sign and continued on, “Maren promised that she’d meet back up with you and I’m sure she will. She doesn’t look like one to go off on her own and do her own thing.”

“But she’s fifteen. She’s just giddy that an upperclassman looked her way.”

“Are you sure she’s fifteen? I could’ve sworn you said she was eighteen.”

Finally...finally, the smallest trace of a smirk played on Sable's lips. Out of everything tonight that smile felt like the biggest win.

Gently, I placed my hands on her shoulders. I started to make slow, gentle circles with my thumbs. Sable didn't push me away like I expected her to. Gradually, the tension in her shoulders slowly started to fade away.

By now the parking lot was practically empty. The football stadium lights were still on, but all the way from here, they barely emanated any light. Just a weak glow. After the constant sound of people cheering and the announcer on the speakers, the quiet was nice. It highlighted the fact that I was finally alone with Sable. My hands were still on her shoulders and while I'd stopped rubbing, I tightened my grip slowly inching her forward.

And she moved without putting up a fight.

First, she let me touch her and now she was leaning in closer to me.

Did I get a concussion on the field and this was all some delusional dream of mine and I just didn't know it? At this point, I didn't give a fuck. I just wanted her closer.

"Were you bored out of your mind watching the game?" I asked.

"No, no!" Sable quickly spoke up. "It really was good. I'm just not a sports lover. At all."

I raised both brows and she relented. "Okay..." she drew out slowly. "It was a little boring. A lot of stopping and starting."

Her honesty made me laugh loudly. "How can I fault you for telling the truth?"

Sable seemed shocked at my reply, but she smiled warmly at me.

The energy between us slowly began to change. The proximity, the fact that we were alone, was starting to get to me. Swallowing loudly, I quickly thought of anything I could

say because if I didn't say something soon, I was going to maul Sable.

"You know there's something that's been driving me crazy since you started tutoring me..."

Sable's body stiffened as she narrowed her eyes at me. "Do I even want to know?"

"Well, considering it involves you, I hope so?"

"What is it?"

I rocked back on my heels, before I leaned back in. I grinned at her. "What is your first name?"

Sable's relief was palpable. "Why are you even asking that?"

"Because when you were assigned to be my tutor, the paper showed an A before Sable. So...what is it?"

I raised my brows, eagerly waiting for an answer.

She leaned back against her car and crossed her arms. "Guess," she said.

"You're not going to tell me?"

"You seemed to have fun torturing me seconds ago. I think it's fair to return the gesture."

I threw my hands up in the air. It was only a name but this was something I really wanted to know and if I didn't get an answer soon, I was going to go crazy. "Oh, come on Cole! Just tell me!"

But Sable was stubborn and shook her head. "Nope. You gotta guess."

"Amanda," I quickly said.

"No," she replied quickly.

"Annette."

"Think about that one for a second. Do I look like an Annette?"

Slowly, I looked her up and down. “True...Annette doesn't match you at all.”

“Keep going,” Sable encouraged. I could tell that she was having fun with this little game.

Even though I had a handful of A names waiting in my mind, I was impatient and I wanted her to tell me. “Can't you give me a hint?”

“Well, you know the name starts with an A. That narrows it down pretty good,” she replied with a smirk.

“But you know what it doesn't narrow down? The amount of girl names starting with A. Give me anything. The smallest hint will help.”

She bit down on her lip. My eyes zeroed in on the action.

Fuck me.

Sable looked oblivious to the war inside my mind. But that small, innocent gesture of hers screamed out to me, saying: *Come on. You want a taste.*

She continued to talk, but her voice sounded far away. I had a one-track mind and I was completely focused on her lips.

Kiss her. Kiss her right fucking now or you're going to regret it, my mind chanted.

“Sam? Are you listening?” Sable looked at me with her head tilted to the side.

My mouth opened and closed as I considered my words. But the more time that passed, the quicker the words left my head until the only ones remaining were, KISS HER.

Ah, what the hell?

Ignoring all the warning signs that this could be a colossal mistake, I caged her face between my hands and kissed her.

Everything I'd believed to be true was fucking destroyed.

Leveled.

All because of a kiss.

I took my time, my hands moving to the back of her neck. I firmly held her in place, but if Sable wanted to, she could move away. She didn't. Yet she was frozen. Her arms were locked at her sides and her body was almost rigid. Her lips hesitantly moved beneath mine though, and when I shifted my head, she did the same.

Go slow, go slow, go slow.

But it was damn hard to take those words to heart because slow wasn't part of my vocabulary.

When my tongue slipped past her lips and moved against hers, Sable finally reacted. It was like a light switch went off in her and she became a livewire. Her fingers moved up my chest and slipped past my jacket until her fingers curled around the material of my shirt. She jerked me toward her, and the abrupt action sent me stumbling forward and we hit the side of her car.

I expected Sable to push me away. Not to react like this. But I wasn't complaining.

By now, my hands drifted down her body. There were a lot of places that I wanted to touch, but I kept my hands in the safe zones, even though it was fucking torture.

Greedily, Sable sucked on my tongue. It was a move I didn't expect. My hands, which at this point were around her hips, tightened, and I pressed her against me.

She moaned loudly and the hands that had minutes before gripped my shirt were now touching my bare stomach and moving up.

All my self-control was quickly diminishing. Wrapping an arm around her waist, I slammed the other against the hood of the car until I was looming over her and her head was all the way back to keep our lips connected. I grinded against her, which made Sable dig her nails into my skin. Her reaction encouraged me further.

Fuck control.

I moved my hands beneath her shirt, loving the way she responded and moved against me and—

“Ahem,” someone said loudly behind us.

I didn't move away, but Sable jumped back and whipped her body around to stare at Maren. Awkwardly, she smoothed out her shirt and jacket as if righting her clothes would make everything look okay. Meanwhile, I had the biggest hard-on of my life. I tried to hide it, but judging from Maren's red cheeks, I wasn't doing a good job.

Maren stood there, her hands crossed over her chest and a smug look on her face. “I'm here. Just like you told me to be.”

“Oh,” Sable said dumbly.

Maren's eyes volleyed back and forth between her sister and me. “I can walk back to Nick's truck if you want more time alone.” She dragged out the last word and wiggled her brows.

“Don't be ridiculous. Get in the car,” Sable snapped.

Maren laughed as she slid into the passenger seat.

Before Sable got in, she turned and looked at me. Her hair was crazy, looking more like just-fucked hair than anything else. And it was all because of me.

Without thinking, I took a step forward. She held out a hand and took a shaky, deep breath.

“What did we just do?” she asked. The question wasn't asked in anger but true confusion because it obviously was more than a kiss.

The problem was...I didn't have an answer. I was just as taken aback as she was. “I don't know,” I replied, my voice gruff.

Sable didn't say that it shouldn't happen again.

She didn't say that it was a mistake.

She didn't say a single word. Just gave me a long lingering look and got into her car.



CHAPTER TWELVE

SABLE

NOW: JULY

“WHAT’S YOUR FAVORITE HOLIDAY?”

I pause in wiping down the counter and look over at Audree. “I don’t know...” I say the first holiday that pops into my head. “Easter?”

Audree anxiously leans closer to me, her small hands leaving fingerprints on the counter I just cleaned. “Oh! Easter is fun. Do you get lots of chocolate and wear something pretty to church?”

I smile at the way Audree says church as *turch*. “No, I don’t get lots of chocolate or go to church.”

Audree frowns. “So why do you like it?”

I shrug and continue cleaning up the kitchen. Some days Audree picks at her food, making lunch a battle. And other times, she wolfs everything down within seconds. Today is a wolf *everything* down day. The kitchen became a mess and now I’m left cleaning it up.

Audree tried to help out by putting her plate in the dishwasher, but she spilled crumbs on the floor as she tried to open it. She almost dropped the jelly when she put it back in the fridge. After that, I told her she could just sit and watch.

“I don’t know,” I finally reply. “I just do.”

“Well, I have a tie for my favorite holiday.”

“Oh?”

She nods. “I love the 4th of July and Christmas.”

Rinsing the rag, I look over my shoulder and whistle. “Those are two good ones. So you’re probably excited to see the fireworks tonight?”

“Yes, yes!” She hops off her chair. “They’re so bright and loud.”

She punches her tiny fist in the air as she mimics the fireworks, which sounds more like a gun going off.

Audree's energy is contagious. I find myself turning off the water, twisting around, and smiling at her.

"Are you going to see the fireworks tonight?" she asks.

"Probably not."

Audrey looks devastated. "Oh, but you have to! They're the most beautiful thing I've ever seen," she says dreamily.

She doesn't need to tell me that; I've seen them from my window for years, but I can't remember the last time I went outside and truly enjoyed the show.

Every year, the firework display is held at the middle school soccer field, which is only a minute away from where I live. Antsett's fireworks are nothing spectacular, but almost everyone goes, carrying blankets and lawn chairs. When they're done, there's a small traffic jam with everyone trying to leave at the same time.

"You have to go!" Audree pleads. She runs around the kitchen island, where she laces her fingers together and bats her eyes.

"Please go. Puh-lease! Puh-lease!"

I'm familiar with Audree's work. She'll keep this up until she gets her way.

"And Sammy is going," she adds in, as if that will completely change my mind.

"Oh?" I ask, trying to remain nonchalant.

Ever since the 'fender bender,' things have been tense between us. He'll give a quick head nod when he sees me, but that's about it.

Sometimes I'm tempted to tell him sorry, again, but then I realize that this freeze out he's doing is exactly what we need. Not to mention the fact that I've already told him I'm sorry a billion times. I didn't want to say it again.

“Yup,” Audree replies. “He wanted to go to a party, but Mommy said no. She told him that he had to spend some time with us.”

My curiosity’s piqued and now I’m wondering whose party he wanted to go to.

“Plus, my best friend Olivia is going, too,” Audree rambles on.

Quickly, I catch up with the sudden change of subject. “I thought Grace was your best friend?”

Audree scrunches up her nose. “That was last week.”

“What happened last week?”

“She pushed me off the swings!”

I whistle dramatically. “Things get real on the playground.”

Audree nods solemnly for a second before she gets right down to business. “But you have to come with me!”

“I’ll think about it.”

“Think about what?” Sam walks into the kitchen.

The back door slams behind him as he kicks off his dirty shoes.

His shirt and pants are smeared with what looks like grease and dirt, yet my heart starts to pound like I’ve never seen the male species before.

He sees me standing there. I know he does. Yet he barely glances in my direction.

“About coming to the fireworks,” Audree says as she runs over to him. She goes to hug him but stops short when she gets a good whiff of him. Quickly, she takes a step back and covers her nose.

“Oh, Sammy. You smell like doggy doo.”

Sam takes off his hat and sets it on the counter, ignoring the doggy doo comment. “The fireworks, eh?”

“I told Sable she should go.”

He glances over Audree, and for the first time in a week, looks straight at me. His eyes are still cold, but not as frigid as they've been. From how he's been acting, you'd think I killed one of his family members.

"You did, did you?" he says.

Audrey continues to talk, completely oblivious that I'm staring at her brother and he's staring back.

Why is it that even with him all but ignoring me, I still want to jump his bones? I have issues. Or maybe an addiction. I'm pretty sure I need to see a therapist for this. But no one is going to get rid of the tension between Sam and me except for the two of us, and since he won't do the talking first, I will. But again, no more apologies.

When Audree takes a deep breath, I take it as an opening and quickly speak up. "Aud, why don't you go color?"

She narrows her eyes at me, as if she knows I'm trying to get rid of her. But she nods and runs down the hall toward the living room.

"But don't color on the walls! The coloring book is your only canvas!" I shout.

"Okay!" Audree yells back.

The TV is playing in the living room, carrying down the hall to the kitchen. Sam walks my way and opens up the fridge. He grabs a water, letting the fridge door shut behind him. He leans against the counter opposite me and takes a long drink, his eyes looking at me the whole time.

"So, are you going?" he finally asks.

"I don't know."

"You should go."

"Are you done freezing me out?"

Sam rubs the back of his head, making his bicep look larger than ever. "I wasn't freezing you out."

"You haven't talked to me in a good week," I point out.

He takes a long drink of his water and smirks at me. “Keeping track of the days, Cole?”

I don’t return the smirk. “Hardly,” I reply.

Sam doesn’t look convinced and heatedly stares at me. There it is...that tingle in my veins. Every time he looks at me that way. It comes out of nowhere and my skin feels as if it’s on fire.

“Well, I repeat: I wasn’t freezing you out. I was just... upset.”

“I didn’t wake up that day and say, ‘Hmm, I’m bored. You know what? I’m going to wreck Sam’s car!’ It was an accident.”

“It’s not about the accident!” Sam cuts in.

Frustrated, I throw my hands in the air. “Then what is this about? Because I’m so confused!”

He finishes off his water and tosses the empty bottle in the trash. He rests his elbows on the counter and takes a deep breath before he answers. “Since I’ve been home, you hold me at arm’s length. Every time I try to talk to you about why you didn’t answer my messages this entire year or even get close to you, you push me away.”

And here it is. I knew this conversation was bound to come up, but I never thought this was the source of his anger.

“I don’t want to go down this road.” I groan and rub both hands down my face. I lift my head and look at him. “And I didn’t push you away. I told you that I hardly get the chance to check social media. My sisters always have the phone.”

“That’s bullshit. You’ve been avoiding me.”

Swallowing, I look away. I have no reply to that. We both know he’s right.

“At the end of the day, the truth is, you’re going to leave at the end of the summer.”

“So are you,” he points out.

“Exactly. We’ll both slip out of each other’s lives once again.” I cross my arms over my chest. It’s a pathetic excuse for a barrier, but a barrier nonetheless. “I want us to stay out of each other’s lives and at the end of the summer, it’ll be like nothing has changed.”

“You actually think that will happen?” Sam leans in. “You’re at my home every day watching my little sister. We’re bound to see one another.”

“We can keep things respectful and cordial.”

He tilts his head to the side as though I’m speaking another language. “From the jump, we’ve never been cordial or respectful. We’re either ripping each other a new ass or jumping each other’s bones.”

“You know what I mean!” I cut in.

Solemnly, Sam looks at me. “I can’t do what you’re asking of me.”

My heart races as I stare back at him. “I can’t fall back into where we were,” I say quietly.

I can’t fall for you again.

“Was it so bad what we had?” Sam asks.

My time with Sam was the best moments of my life and I’ll never forget it. No one in my life ever protected me the way he did. When I was with him, I could take a deep breath and not constantly look over my shoulder. There was nothing bad with what we had and that was the problem. I don’t want him ripped away from me again. I won’t survive it.

I push away from the kitchen counter and stand up straight. “It has to happen,” I say, trying to use my most firm voice.

Rather than agreeing, Sam narrows his eyes at me. And very slowly, the corner of his mouth tilts up. “You’re right. We don’t have to go back to what we had.”

“Okay,” I draw out cautiously. This is going in my favor far too easily.

“How about friends, but we create the rules?”

“What kind of rules?”

Sam shrugs. “I don’t know. We’ll develop them as we go. We’ll be ‘friendly.’” He puts the last word in air quotes. “And definitely not together, but if something happens where we’re more than friendly then...so be it.”

Doubtfully, I look at him. “I don’t know.”

“No attachments like before. Nothing bad will happen. I promise.”

Sam finishes off his sale’s pitch with a smile that’s a punch to my gut. The look in eyes says, *This is amazing. Nothing bad can happen with this offer.*

I want to believe him so badly. So I say, “Friends, it is.”

I hold out my hand between us.

His eyes bounce between my outstretched hand and my eyes as though he can’t believe I agreed.

“Friends.” He says the word in such a way that he turns it from an innocent word into something...wicked.

“Yes. Friends,” I say a little more urgently this time. One, because I need to hear him say the word friends, so I know we’re on the same page. Two, my arm is really starting to ache in this position.

Seconds go by, but it feels like hours before he finally takes my hand.

Why do I feel as though I’ve made a deal with the devil?

With my hand still in his, he says, “You didn’t answer my question: are you going tonight?”

“If I say yes, will you remove your arm?”

“Yes. I’ll let you go.”

The more time that slips by, the more I start to think that going to see the fireworks isn’t that bad of an idea. It’s not like we’ll be alone. His family will be around. And besides, what else am I going to do tonight besides read and people watch

from my window? Chances are Lennon has the same boring schedule for tonight. She'll love to go with me.

"Fine," I reply out of nowhere. "I'll go. But I'm bringing Lennon."

Sam gives me one final squeeze and grins wickedly. "Good."



A GIRL CLOSE TO LENNON'S AGE COMES RUNNING BY WITH A sparkler in her right hand. Her friends are hot on her tracks, while a frazzled woman trails behind them, warning them to slow down and be careful.

Lennon and I are on the quilt, legs crossed, watching everything around us. To my left is Audree, although she gets up every other minute, pestering Elaine with questions to do this or that. When her mom tells her no and to calm down, she turns to me and repeats her questions.

The sun's slowly starting to set, yet it's still muggy out, making my tank top stick to my stomach like a second skin.

The energy around me is infectious. Being here feels so... normal. I find the idle chatter and laughter around me calming. I feel like I fit in for once.

With my palms lying flat on the ground, I relax. Then, Audree taps me on the shoulder. "When are the fireworks gonna start?"

"In a few minutes." At this point, I'm so calm, that I don't care that this is the sixth time she's asked me this.

"Are you sure?" she asks.

"Positive."

"They're going to be good," Lennon chimes in.

Audree peers at Lennon carefully. "How do you know?"

The two of them go back and forth for the next few minutes.

Audree, finding her next victim, asks Lennon all kinds of questions. But my sister is patient and answers every one. And she gets Audree to sit down, which is a miracle in and of itself.

I open my eyes just in time to see Sam walking up. Well, walking is a lie. It's more like a slow stride. It's as if he knows he has all eyes on him and wants to give a good show. He smiles at me.

Hesitantly, I smile back.

And in front of everyone, he sits down next to me. I get a strong whiff of his cologne and ignore the sharp jolt of lust rushing through me. Men's cologne should come with a warning label: *Caution!- May induce goosebumps and erratic heartbeats. Breathe at your own risk.*

"You actually showed up," he says with a grin. The strands of his hair are damp. He's wearing cargo pants and a gray, worn U of I t-shirt that he looks way too good in.

I look back up at the sky that's smeared with shades of pink, violet and blue. I continue to smile. "Of course I did. Besides, I've been here for a while hanging out with your family."

He looks around before he nods at Lennon. "Hey."

She says hey back in the quietest voice. Her small crush on Sam has slowly dimmed, but that doesn't mean she's to the point of forming a coherent reply.

"Where are your other sisters?" he asks.

"Maren is two towns over, watching the fireworks with Nick."

"Traitor."

"I agree," I remark. "And last I heard, Alba had to work and then afterwards, she's going to a party."

"Whose party?"

I give him a look and say, "Do you think I know?"

Sam grins at me and I try to ignore the butterflies taking flight in my stomach. I really do. I also try to ignore my racing

pulse. I chalk it all up to the building excitement for the fireworks, or the fact that for the first time since he's been home, we've come to an understanding. But I know the truth. It's purely Sam.

I glance down at my watch. I've been telling myself that I shouldn't ask where he's been, but I'm dying to know why he's late.

So I ask, "We've been here for twenty minutes. What took you so long?"

"After I got home, I ended up going back to the house we're working on to finish up a last-minute project with my uncle."

It's dangerous, the amount of relief I feel over his words. "Yeah?"

He nods and adjusts his hat. "Yup. And now I'm fucking exhausted."

"Language, Samson Thomas McShane!" his mom pipes in behind us.

Sam looks over his shoulder and tips the bill of his hat toward his mom. "I'm sorry—I am horribly exhausted."

She nods and grins. "Much better."

The two of us turn back, and after a moment, I tease, "Really, Samson Thomas, you need to watch your language."

Sam cocks his head my way and lifts a brow. "Holy shit, is Sable Cole actually being playful?"

"I really am."

"Hell has truly frozen over," he says, as a group of kids come running by, laughing loudly.

We go silent, both of us watching everything around us. Kids' laughter carries over loud conversations.

"Is it normally this crowded?" I ask after a beat of silence.

Sam shrugs. "Usually. You've been to see the fireworks... haven't you?"

“Of course I have,” I say a bit defensively. I lower my voice. “I mean...yes, I have. I was twelve, I think.”

The exact year might be fuzzy, but the memory itself isn't. It was one of Mom's last-ditch attempts at being well, a mom. She held Lennon's hand in one hand and Maren's in the other. Alba and I flanked their sides. I remember holding the heavy quilt and being so proud of myself for not letting it fall.

That night is one of the few happy memories that I have with Mom.

“Lennon, are you thirsty?” Elaine asks from behind me.

She opens up the cooler next to her chair, right as Lennon twists around. Lennon glances between the cooler and Elaine as if it's a trick question. Ultimately, she nods and grabs a Coke. “Thank you,” she says shyly.

Elaine gives her a warm smile, as if it's her pleasure. I can't help but wonder what it could be like if we had a mom that did things for us out of the kindness of her heart, without expecting anything in return.

I glance over my shoulder. From here, our trailer is barely visible. Before we left, Mom was surprisingly up and dressed. She exited the bathroom just as Lennon and I were getting ready to walk out the door. With a face full of makeup and half a bottle of Aqua Net used on her hair, Mom looked like a different person. She stopped us and demanded to know where we were going.

It took me a few seconds to answer; I wasn't used to her asking questions. But I finally relented and told her. The motherly concern lasted for a second and then she was out the door, telling us not to wait up.

I slowly turn back around and it's then that I notice the curious looks being hurled in my direction. People look curiously at Sam then at me, as if we are a math equation they can't quite figure out.

Their judgment is clear as day. I feel my shoulders stiffening and pretend to ignore them.

“Don’t let them bother you,” Sam says, leaning in so only I can hear him. His shoulder presses against my arm.

“Easier said than done,” I mutter.

“They have nothing else better to do.”

“I’d beg to differ. The fireworks are minutes away from starting.”

Sam’s quiet for a second, and then he says, “When you go to college, you won’t have to deal with all this bullshit.”

My eyes widen. Sam and I never bring up college. We both know that when I leave Antsett, I’m leaving for good, cutting all ties, not only with this podunk town, but with him, too.

“That’s what I keep telling myself,” I finally reply.

Sam stares straight ahead. “The second you step foot on campus, you can be exactly who you want to be. You can make friends. You can have freedom.” He looks over at me, and grins sadly. “You can have it all.”

Right then, the fireworks start and everyone’s attention is immediately directed to the now inky black sky, but all I can think about is Sam’s words: *You can be exactly who you want to be.*

The only problem is, I don’t know who I am away from my sisters.



WHEN I ARRIVE BACK AT THE TRAILER AND STEP INSIDE, THE smell of weed hits me first.

Shit.

Mom is home. And she has a man next to her. They’re lying on the couch. Lying is the wrong word. More like slouched. Suddenly, my amazing night goes down the drain. The fireworks were amazing.

Better than I expected. I sat next to Sam the entire night, dazzled by the vibrant display of colors. Even Audree, who

normally talks a mile a minute, was silent. But the content feeling I walked through the door with is gone, replaced with apprehension.

I should've anticipated Mom's arrival, but I thought Lennon and I had at least an hour before she came back home.

"Sable? Is that you? Sable!" Mom calls out.

Quickly, I look at Lennon. No matter how many times Alba, Maren and I have tried to shield her from Mom's decisions, she somehow ends up seeing things. And right now, she doesn't look horrified or shocked. Just nervous. She takes a step closer to me.

I face Mom. The man next to her has thinning hair, a pudgy gut and won't stop leering at me. I glare back at him.

I swear to God if he looks at Lennon, I'll kill him. My sisters are a trigger point for me. We may have the worst kind of blow outs, but the minute I feel like they're in danger... well, I turn into a completely different person.

"Hi, Mom," I say stiffly.

"This is my oldest, Sable," Mom says to the creepy dude as she walks up to me. She puts her hand on my lower back and tries to push me forward, as if I'm a mare up for auction. But I stay put and she finally gives up. "She's smart. She's going places," she brags loudly.

I stand there, waiting for her to finish. I give her thirty minutes before she passes out on the couch. I give the creepy man twelve hours before he sneaks out of the house, tucking his shirt back into his jeans. I know this routine like the back of my hand.

"Mom, I gotta—"

"Oh, stop," my mom interjects with a slap of her hand. "I'm just talkin' you up, honey."

"I don't need to be talked up. I'm good."

"That's bullshit!" my mom yells. She pushes her shoulders back and gets in my face, but ends up losing her balance. Without Lennon catching her, she would've fallen onto the

floor. Mom doesn't look embarrassed by her almost fall. Instead, she makes eye contact with the creepy man. The two of them crack up as if it's the funniest thing that's ever happened.

Her laughter fades as she stumbles back to the couch. "I just want to brag about you, but fine! Go be the prissy little bitch you like to be."

"All right," I mutter. Grabbing Lennon's hand, I hurry down the hall, quick to get the hell away from Mom's words.

"Who did you watch the fireworks with, Sable?" Mom calls out.

Stopping short, I squeeze Lennon's hand. "Go to the room. Now," I rush out, leaving no room for argument.

Lennon doesn't put up a fight and all but runs into our room. She shuts the door but doesn't turn the lock.

I face Mom and cross my arms. "Lennon."

"And who else?" she persists.

"Sam and his family," I finally relent.

Mom laughs bitterly. "You were with him?"

"Yes," I grit out.

"Why?"

"Because they invited me." My voice rises defensively, which is ridiculous. I shouldn't let her get under my skin.

She clucks her tongue and looks at me with pity. "Sable... honey, they're not one of us."

She doesn't think I know that? The differences between mine and Sam's family are glaringly obvious. He grew up with two hard working parents. I grew up with one hardworking drug addict.

"You're stupid to think he doesn't see you for one thing. You know what that is?"

I don't say a word. Just stubbornly look her in the eye as though I'm bored with this conversation when, in reality, my

knees are ready to buckle.

“He just wants to get in your pants, Sable,” she continues. “Once he has that, he’ll be gone. Just like your daddy.”

“Stop,” I all but shout.

I’m barely containing my anger. I curl my fingers into my palm, ignoring the pain as my nails dig into my flesh.

“He wants one thing from you,” she continues, as if I’ve never spoken a word.

The urge to tackle my own mom is so strong. I take a step forward, and when her smile widens, I realize I’m giving her what she wants.

Without a word, or a hand laid on her, I turn around and walk into my room. I lock the door behind me and take a deep breath.

When I open my eyes, I see not only Lennon, but also Maren staring at me.

“When did you come home?”

“Like five minutes before you guys.” She stops folding the clothes lying on her bed and looks me over. “I take it by your expressions that you saw Mom and our ‘new stepdaddy.’”

Making a face, I fall onto my bed and drag my hands through my hair. “Do you know how long they’ve been here?”

“No clue, but judging from the empty bottle of Gentleman’s Jack in the kitchen, I’m gonna say about an hour,” Maren replies.

My lips go into a thin line. “Excellent.”

Maren gives me a look filled with sympathy. “Don’t listen to what she said. She’s just trying to get to you.”

It goes without saying that she and Lennon heard everything that was said out in the hall. My gaze veers to my feet. “Well, it worked.” Just thinking about what she said makes me shake.

Suddenly, I stand up and start to pace. “God, I can’t believe her.” I glance at Maren. “Did she say anything when you came home?”

Maren taps her index finger against her chin before she shrugs. “Well, let’s see...she did call me a slut and told our future stepdaddy that I’d be pregnant before the year is out. If you ask me, I think she got me confused with Alba, so I let it slide.”

Maren’s attempts at joking aren’t enough to get me to smile. All I feel is anger. And so much of it.

I finally stop my pacing and look between Maren, who is still folding clothes, and Lennon, who’s sitting on the floor trying to put the drawers back into the dresser. And then I get a good look at our room. With four people in one small, small space, it’s inevitable that it becomes cluttered. Right now, it’s a mess but not ransacked; we don’t have enough stuff for a mess to be possible. But drawers are half-open. Knickknacks on our dresser are moved around. Our mattresses are crooked, as if someone looked under them.

“What happened here?”

Maren glances at Lennon, then at the door. “Someone was in our room,” she half-whispers.

My shoulders stiffen and my heartbeat slows, but it becomes so amplified it’s all I can hear. “What do you mean?”

“What else could I possibly mean? Someone was in our room. And it wasn’t you, me or Lennon; we all just got home...” Her words fade away and her eyes narrow. “You did lock the door before you left, right?”

“No, I left it open and put a welcome sign on the door. Of course I locked it!”

Maren shrugs. “Then it’s Alba’s fault.”

“Can’t blame her. Lennon and I were the last in the room! Did you even check to see if the lock was broken before you came in?”

She gives me a blank look and I roll my eyes. “Start there before you blame someone else, Nancy Drew.”

Sure enough, when I peer at the door, I see multiple scratches, as if someone used something really small and sharp. “I’m not a professional burglar, but it’s obvious a bobby pin or paper clip was used.”

Concern starts to creep into Maren’s eyes. “I just thought you forgot to lock the door.”

“Well, I didn’t,” I snap.

This house is tainted by Mom and her bad habits. Our room is the one place that’s ours. And now that’s being taken away from us.

“Do you think Mom did this?” Lennon asks.

“Either her or the guy she brought home,” I reply.

Every part of me wants to place the blame on the creepy guy. Anyone else but Mom. Yet I can’t because he would’ve never been brought into our lives if she didn’t invite him in.

“Damn her,” I whisper before I turn to face Lennon. “Did you check to see if any of your stuff was missing?”

She nods. “It’s all there.”

Whoever came in here was looking for something valuable. I want to snort at the irony; they looked through the one place that has no value. No money. Nothing.

“So who’s going to talk to Mom about this?” Maren asks.

“I will,” I say quietly. “But not right now.”

Just then voices and a high-pitched giggle drift past our room.

Seconds later, Mom’s bedroom door slams shut. Lennon, Maren, and I all look at each other.

“Definitely not right now,” I mutter.

Slowly, we all work together to get things right. None of us says a word, and in total, it takes us about thirty minutes to get everything back into place. We find that nothing has been

stolen and figure that whoever was in here just wanted money. When we're done, Maren climbs to her top bunk, the cell phone between her hands.

"I'll text Alba and tell her what happened."

"Tell her the bedroom door is locked and to knock four times so we know it's her," I say.

Maren gives me a thumbs-up. Lennon grabs an old copy of *Seventeen* and flips through the glossy pages.

I walk over to my bed, but instead of sitting down, I move my bed back. My sisters don't spare me a glance. They know I have a hiding place, but don't care. Mainly because they know I'm not hiding anything from them. Just from our mom.

My gut has always told me that I should never trust my mom and that anything I treasure, I should protect. Tonight is validation that I'm right.

When there's enough space between the wall and the headboard, I find the small piece of loose, grimy wallpaper and pull back until it becomes a huge flap, revealing the small hole in the wall.

And right where I left it last is a small, tin box.

It should be reassuring enough to see it there, but I still grab a hold and pull the box out.

The original maroon shade of the box has faded with time.

Across the lid, in gold capital letters is LUCKY BRAND.

Every year, Ms. Nova gives us each a gift. Years ago, she bought me a gift set of Lucky Brand perfume. I used to say that I wasn't a fan of perfume, but I used that perfume every day until the bottle was empty. The perfume and lotion bottle were thrown away a long time ago, but the box stayed and quickly became a place to put anything I cherished. Anything that was mine and mine alone.

Which, to be honest, isn't much. But the small amount of stuff I do keep each has a special meaning—a story behind it that I will always remember.

One item is a picture of my mom. I think it's when she was my age. She's leaning against a wooden fence with white-chipped paint, wearing shorts and a tank top. Her arms are crossed, as if she doesn't want her photo taken. But she's smiling. It's the biggest smile I've ever seen from her.

She had life in this photo. Happiness. Optimism.

Maybe it was a bad idea to keep this picture, but I couldn't seem to let it go. It reminded me that once my mom wasn't so bad.

Although, right now, I'm still pissed at her, and I'm almost tempted to rip the picture to shreds. Quickly, I drop it and move onto the second item — an old watch that belonged to my grandma.

To anyone else this watch is broken. Useless. A throw-away item never to be thought of again. The middle is broken out, replaced with a now yellow paper. Numbers one through twelve are written in the circular scale. The only thing to set it apart is the fact that there are no dials drawn in.

She gave it to me a few months before she passed away. I cried when she handed it to me; I wanted a real-working watch. In her calm, yet assertive voice, she told me that I needed to calm down and stop trying to grow up, that time wasn't my enemy. That I should take a deep breath and enjoy the now.

Six years later and here I am, still struggling with her words. I still feel time beating down on me, telling me all the things that I did during the day aren't enough and will never be enough.

The third item is a book, barely used. The front cover has no finger smudges and the spine isn't cracked. I wipe the dust off the cover, a soft smile playing at my lips. I can't help myself. I open the book; the story is beckoning me to open it up and sink into its world. I skim through a few pages, before going to my favorite part.

“Sable, I'm turning off the lights. I'm really tired.”

I lift my head and see Lennon standing by the doorway, dressed in an oversized shirt that's used as her sleep shirt.

"Don't worry about it." Involuntarily, my thumb brushes against the page. "I'll turn off the light. I'm almost done."

"All right." She crawls into her bed. "Night," she says softly.

"Night."

Reluctantly, I close the book because I know if I read any farther, I'll be up all night. I put it back in the tin box. Once everything is in its correct spot, I place the box back into my hiding spot, make sure the wallpaper is flat as can be, and push my bed back against the wall.

Lennon won't complain, but it's been more than a few minutes. So I quickly turn off the light. Under my pillow are my pajamas: flannel shorts and one of Sam's old football shirts that he gave me last summer. It's so big, it almost hangs to my knees.

I crawl into bed, pulling the sheet up to my chin. I roll over to my side, facing the nightstand. The clock says it's midnight. I should be tired right now, yet instead, I'm wide-awake thinking about that book...



CHAPTER THIRTEEN

SAMSON

THEN

““WHERE AM I? WHAT AM I DOING? WHAT FOR?” SHE TRIED to get up, to drop backwards; but something was working at the iron above her.”

I leaned in, my attention rapt on Sable as she continued to read the final section of Part Seven of *Anna Karenina*. Her entire demeanor transformed when she read aloud.

““...Darkness, flickered, began to grow dim, and was quenched forever.””

She bookmarked her place and shut the book and looked up at me with a small smile. “So, what did you think?”

“Why are you smiling? She just killed herself.”

“I know, I know...it’s tragic. But it’s also my favorite part of the book.”

With a comment like that I could only lift both brows and lean back in my chair. “You’ve got a twisted mind, Sable.”

“Hear me out,” she said, resting her elbows on the table. She moved forward, as if her excitement was too much, so she had to hand it over to me.

“I could feel her pain and turmoil,” she explained. “Anna’s love for Vronsky may be passionate, but throughout the story, it’s slowly been making her jealous and that jealousy is causing her to go insane. And then,” Sable tapped the front cover, “here comes this scene. It’s so powerful that the first time I read this book, I had to re-read that part.”

I whistled lowly, because it caught my attention, but it wasn’t close to that. “It was good, I’ll admit it.”

She grinned. I found myself swallowing loudly, that smile was a little disarming. “Admit it, you really liked it. You didn’t look away from me once.”

Hated to break it to her, but my attention was more on her than the book.

“Anyways,” Sable dragged out. “You’re probably relieved that we’re almost done with this book.”

“Relieved doesn’t even begin to describe how I’m feeling. This book is the size of the Bible.”

Sable laughed, genuinely. This might be the first time that Sable and I were having a conversation during tutoring and not ripping each other’s heads off.

“It’s a big book,” she agreed.

“But now I have the final,” I pointed out.

There were only three weeks left until Christmas break. Study guides were handed out today.

I pulled it out and dropped it on the table. Within seconds, it was in Sable’s hands. She skimmed through the three pages and then shrugged as if it was nothing.

“It’ll be really easy,” she stated confidently.

“Why? Are you going to take the final for me? Because that’s the only chance of this being ‘easy.’”

“That’s not true. We’ve gone over all the chapters, and I think you know the book pretty well.”

At that I lifted a brow.

“You do,” she insisted. “You just clam up during tests and quizzes. If you go over this study guide multiple times, I think you’ll do fine.”

She seemed confident enough for the both of us. But I wasn’t. The best grade I’d gotten on any *Anna Karenina* test was a B+. I’d be lucky to get that again.

All too soon, our session was over. I took my time packing up my things, making Sable look my way, her brows furrowed. “You all right?”

“Yeah. Why?”

“Normally you can’t wait to get out of here.”

I shrugged. “Basketball practice doesn’t start for another thirty minutes.”

Which was kind of true. Football season was done and over with. Our team made it to semi-sectionals, but lost by seven points.

Was I sad to know I was done with high school football? Of course. But now there was basketball to look forward to. The thing about most small towns was that most athletes didn't focus on just one sport. If you played football, then you typically tried out for basketball, and then baseball or track after that. Football was number one, but I'd play any sport just to keep myself busy.

Sable said goodbye, giving me a look over her shoulder as she left. I waited a few minutes and then walked out of the room. The halls cleared out ten minutes ago, so I booked it, and stopped right in front of locker 201. I knew for a fact that he was still in the building.

Who knew what the fuck he was doing: loitering the halls, in the library, getting high in the bathroom?

Didn't know, didn't care. I just needed to talk to him for one second. Then I saw him. In all his emo glory, Sable's best friend walked down the hall.

His head was bent as it always was at school, and a stack of books was tucked close to his side. Strands of his hair were every which way. For the umpteenth time, I attempted to figure out what Sable and this dude could possibly have in common, other than the fact that they were both ignored by most people.

Quickly, I pushed that thought away. It didn't sit well with me at all.

When Sable's friend saw me, he stopped dead in his tracks, looking momentarily surprised before he narrowed his eyes.

"Hey, Twilight, I need to talk to you."

Sable's friend had an actual name. It was Matt, but Sable called him Matty. He turned and cocked a brow. "Twilight?"

I gestured toward his head. "You know, you got that dumbass spiked hair."

“Thanks for the compliment,” he said dryly as he turned the dial of the lock.

“No problem. Listen, what do you know about Sable Cole?”

The light faded from his eyes. He stopped and faced me. “What do you want with Sable?”

“Nothing. I just want to know more about her. She’s my tutor and I—”

“You want to get in her pants,” he cut in, giving me a knowing look.

“Did I say that?”

“No, but you’re thinking it.”

“Of course I have thought about it,” I conceded. “Many, many, many times. But that’s not what I’m here to talk to you about.”

“Then what are you wanting to talk about?”

“Christmas.”

“Are you one of Santa’s elves this year?” he asked dryly as he grabbed his backpack from his locker. “Did I make the good list or will there be coal in my stocking?”

It was taking all of my control not to punch this dickchin in the face. I gritted my teeth. “I want to get Sable a gift.”

He slammed his locker shut and smirked at me with derision. “You want to get her a gift?”

“Yeah.”

“And you want my help.”

“Yeah,” I said behind him.

He quickly turned around. I almost ran right into him. He swiftly took a step back. “Look, if you want help on what to get her, you’re not getting it from me. Do the work yourself. If you’ve spent any quality time with Sable, you’d know instinctively what she would like.”

He turned around and walked away. I watched him go because he was right.

This whole time I'd been wracking my brain on what to get a girl like Sable when the answer was in front of me the whole time.



AT FIRST, SABLE DIDN'T NOTICE THE PRESENT.

It was on the table, directly in front of the chair she usually sat in. She walked in with a flurry, unzipping her book bag, grabbing a notebook and dropping it onto the table. She draped her threadbare, black winter coat over the back of her chair. Was it wrong that I wanted to go out and buy her a new one? The smallest part of me said no. But an even bigger part said yes because Sable was a proud person. She'd never accept it. But right now, I had better things to worry about. Like her actually liking my gift, which she had yet to acknowledge.

She dropped herself into the chair in one giant heap, sighed and glanced at her shoulders long enough to brush the snowflakes off. There were a few clinging to her hair, but I didn't say a damn word. They made her look cute.

Cute?

Fuck. Had I ever used that word to describe something—let alone a girl? I don't think so.

“You're late,” I said.

She looked at me distractedly and flipped through the pages of her book. “I had to drop my sisters off at home and then come back here.” Sable glanced at the clock. “I didn't think you'd be here so early.”

“Maybe your diligence, as you put it, is rubbing off on me.”

At that, Sable looked up from her book and smiled. It didn't matter how many times I saw that rare smile. It still knocked me off my fucking feet.

“I want to believe you, I really do,” Sable replied and then shrugged. “But I don’t.”

“I’m being honest.”

She sighed. Her smile faded, but the slightest smirk played at the corner of her lips. “Can we focus on the book?”

I nodded and snuck a glance at the wrapped gift. Dear God, was she fucking color blind? Did the present need the words OPEN ME! in flashing neon lights?

Loudly, I cleared my throat, knowing that there was no way in hell that I could spend the next forty-five minutes not saying anything.

Sable looked at me curiously. I gestured to the present. “I think you got something.”

She glanced at the gift, her brows formed a tight V. “What’s this?”

I shrugged, keeping my expression blank. “Well, it’s wrapped, so I’m gonna go with a gift.”

Giving me a dubious look, she reached out and gingerly picked it up and shook it very gently, as though it was an explosive. She flipped it around, carefully inspecting the wrapping job. It was shit. I knew it. Even Audree told me as I walked out the door this morning that it looked like a mess.

“Are you going to open it?” I asked slowly.

Sable lifted her gaze to me. Her lashes fluttered as she blinked rapidly. This might be the first time I’d ever seen someone not happy to get a gift.

If it was anyone else, the wrapping paper would be tossed to the floor.

But not Sable. Very slowly, she cut the tape apart with a fingernail and then cautiously parted the wrapping paper. She treated it like that in itself was the gift. When she finally looked at her gift and saw the present, her eyes widened.

I found myself leaning in, watching her every move.

Her fingers brushed across the cover slowly, almost reverently.

She went to open the book but stopped short. Her eyes flicked in my direction. Her mouth opened and closed. For the first time, Sable Cole looked dumbfounded.

Figuring out what to get Sable wasn't as hard as I thought it would be. But finding the book I wanted to get her was. I'd spent the past few days trolling the Internet for a vintage copy of *Anna Karenina*. Paperback copies were easy to find at bookstores, and sometimes you could find a hardback. But I wanted more than that. I wanted this to be a book she would always treasure. Deep in my gut, I had a feeling that there were not many objects she coveted.

This had to be one of them.

The minutes passed by and Sable still hadn't said a word.

Suddenly, doubt crept in and I started to worry. Did I completely fuckup? Did she secretly hate this story and I didn't know?

"Did you get this?" she finally asked.

The plan was to tell her it was from me after she opened the gift. But seeing the look on her face—fear mixed with happiness and embarrassment—made me backtrack.

Quickly, I scrambled to figure out what I should say next.

There needed to be a manual for Sable Cole. I'd read that motherfucker inside and out. Memorized every word by heart, so I would know how to understand her better, to read her thoughts and to fix her problems before she knew there even was one.

"No," I blurted out. Sable gave me a look and I gestured to the book. "Why would I get you a book?"

Sable chewed on her bottom lip as she stared at me. After a few seconds, she glanced down at the book. "I suppose you're right."

"Of course I am."

“Maybe Matty got it,” she mused quietly.

My grip on the pencil was so tight, I’m surprised it didn’t snap in half. It took all my will power not to shout: I got you the fucking book.

Not him. Me!

But I didn’t.

Instead, I said through gritted teeth, “Yeah. Maybe.”

“Or maybe one of my sisters?”

I slammed the pencil onto the table too hard. It ricocheted off of it and fell to the floor. Sable stared at me like I was crazy.

I leaned back in my chair and crossed my arms over my chest.

“Can we talk about something else, please?”

Silence.

After a beat, Sable said slowly, “Sure. We can do that.”

So we did.

I didn’t remember anything about that study session. She could have been speaking Swahili for all I knew. I was too focused on the fact that she instantly thought that ‘Matty’ was the person behind the present.

Sure, I was a fucking prick to her not so long ago. But I thought we were understanding each other better. I thought she would’ve at least guessed that I got her that gift.

I thought wrong.

At the end of the session, the two of us gathered our stuff in awkward silence. I couldn’t stand it any longer.

“Are you doing anything for Christmas?” I asked her.

Sable’s shoulders stiffened—just for a second. I was beginning to notice everything about this girl.

“No,” she replied casually. “Just hanging out with my family. You?”

I shrugged. “The same. Everyone comes over: grandparents and aunts and uncles that I haven’t seen in years. The typical, you know?”

She zipped up her book bag with angry, jerky movements before she looked at me with annoyance. “Oh, totally.” She slung her bag over her shoulder, but clutched my gift to her chest like it was a shield. “Holidays with family can be rough,” she said in a flat voice.

“What are you mad about?” It was on the tip of my tongue to ask if it was about the gift, but I stopped at the last second.

Sable took a deep breath and took a step away from the table.

Away from me. I swear, she visibly relaxed. “Nothing is wrong. Nothing at all.”

“Sable—” I took a step forward because something was obviously wrong and it went beyond the gift.

“I’ll see you later, Samson. Have a good Christmas break.”

Before I could say a word, she was gone.



THE SOUND OF ROCKS HITTING MY WINDOW AT ONE IN THE morning woke me up. And also scared the shit out of me.

I was still awake, idly watching TV. But within seconds, I was up and out of bed. It was probably Drew being a dumbass. I jerked open the blinds and I didn’t see Drew.

It was Sable Cole.

Although it was impossible to tell with her standing in the dark, I saw the outline of her small frame. Her arms were wrapped tightly around her chest and her face was half buried in her coat, leaving only her nose and eyes exposed to the cold weather.

In shock, I stood there, trying to figure out what the hell she was doing. I was surprised she even remembered where I

lived.

Frantically, she gestured for me to open up the window. When I did, cold air slammed into me, making me suck in a sharp breath.

“Come down here,” she whispered as loud as a whisper could be.

Ignoring the cold, I rested my elbows on the windowsill.

“You’re stalking me now? My, my...how the tables have turned, Cole.”

I was positive she rolled her eyes. “Just get down here.”

“Or you can come up here,” I pointed out.

She paused and looked around like there were people all around watching us.

“It’s one in the morning. No one will see you.”

Sable still hesitated.

“Come on,” I urged. “Whatever you have to say, you can say it inside; it’s fucking freezing out.”

Sable chewed on her bottom lip and looked around one more time, before she finally nodded. “Okay.”

“Just go wait by the back door. I’ll go unlock—”

I stopped mid-sentence and watched as Sable jumped up and grabbed onto the tree branch above her. She swung her legs back and forth before she leaned back and hooked her legs around the heavy branch. Within seconds, she was sitting up and slowly scooting toward the base of the trunk.

I continued to stare at her in shock as she scaled that damn tree like it was nothing. When she got to the thick branch that extended toward my window, I moved to the side and she hopped into my room.

“Where did you learn to do that?” I asked as I closed the window.

Sable laughed breathlessly as she shook the snow off her jacket and hair. “Are you meaning to tell me that you’ve never

climbed a tree before?”

“Of course I have.”

“Well, so have I.” She took off her gloves, stuffed them into her pockets and furiously rubbed her hands together. “Matty and I used to climb trees all the time when we were kids.”

There was nothing between her and Matt. That much I knew. But damn if I didn't feel jealousy, hot and thick, run through me whenever she mentioned that moron's name.

Pushing away from the wall, I grabbed the gray fleece blanket at the end of my bed. Before I tossed it Sable's way, I subtly sniffed it. Shockingly, it was clean.

Sable caught it with one hand. “Thanks,” she said as she quickly took off her jacket and wrapped the blanket around her shoulders.

“Lover of books, overachiever, tutor and professional tree climber. You're quite the accomplished person.”

“I am.” She agreed and then mimed a curtsy. “I'm thinking of listing that as one of my many talents when I apply to colleges.”

“You should,” I said with a smile.

We became silent after that and suddenly I became aware that it was just Sable and me, alone, in the middle of the night.

I think Sable was aware of the same thing because she kept glancing at me from the corner of her eye before she quickly looked away.

“Umm...” She cleared her throat and flung her hand in my direction. “Are you gonna put something on?”

I looked down and realized that I was only wearing a pair of sweatpants. I lifted my eyes and smirked because Sable was trying her hardest not to stare, but she was failing miserably.

“Am I making you uncomfortable?”

She snorted. “Noo...” she dragged out. “I just didn't know whether you would be more comfortable with clothes on.”

“I’m good.” Actually, I was freezing, but I could wait a few minutes before I put a shirt on. The cold was worth it to see Sable’s cheeks turn all red.

I sat down on my bed while Sable made laps around my room. She was always so focused and put-together. It was more than a little amusing to see her anxious and...nervous. Finally, she stopped her pacing and sat down on the edge of my bed. Many, many, many times I’ve thought about what I’d do if I ever had the chance of getting her on my bed. In none of those visions was I sitting away from her...with my hands to myself.

I cleared my throat. “So what did you come here for?”

Instead of looking my way, her eyes dropped to her hands. “I just wanted to say I know you were the one to get me the book.”

I feigned confusion because I didn’t know if this was a trick or not. “Book? What book?”

Sable shook her head. “I know it was you, Samson McShane.”

Only one other person called me by my full name: my mom. But she only said it when she was pissed off and she never said it the way Sable did.

It rolled off her tongue just right. I wanted her to say it again.

“You got me that gift...didn’t you?” she asked quietly.

Finally, I gave up the act, and said, “Of course I did.”

“So why didn’t you say so?”

“Because you looked pissed and happy and afraid and I didn’t know what the fuck to say.”

“So you let me think Matty got me the book?”

“Like I said, I didn’t know what the hell to do! You can be a hard person to read, Sable.”

“I know I am. That’s why I came here!”

“To tell me that you know I got you the gift,” I stated slowly.

“No. To say thank you!” she said in frustration.

I whistled. “Hell, I’ve been told thank you many times, but this might be the first time it’s ever been said with anger.”

“I’m not good at...ya know...saying how I feel,” she rushed out.

It didn’t take a genius to figure that out. I knew from our first tutoring session that Sable Cole had a wall built around her to keep the world out.

“I would’ve never guessed,” I replied solemnly.

Sable glanced over at me and smirked.

I laid back, linking my hands behind my head. I’d never seen someone struggle to get their point across as badly as this girl.

Sable stretched out next to me.

There was a good distance between us, but my dick started to get hard. Which was pathetic. I was beginning to feel like a fourteen-year-old boy again, going through puberty.

Discreetly, I adjusted myself. If she was any other girl, I would have her underneath the sheets by now. But Sable wasn’t any other girl. Sable had the uncanny ability to remain blissfully unaware of what she did to me, giving me the worst case of blue balls known to man.

“I’ll say it again — this time without sounding so angry.” Sable took a deep breath. “Thank you for the book.”

“You’ve said before that you love that story.” I looked at her from the corner of my eye. “You do love it, right?”

“I do. It was the best present I’ve ever gotten.” Sable continued to stare up at the ceiling.

We were both silent. My TV was still on, filling the void. But I didn’t pay attention to the show. My gaze was fixed on Sable. I watched as her chest slowly lifted and fell. The TV screen filled the room with a soft glow. I could make out the

delicate features of her face. The way her lashes swooped down, nearly grazing her cheek. I wanted to lean forward and kiss her cheeks, then make my way down to her lips. Because the last kiss we shared had been too brief and too good for me not to want another.

“I lied about Christmas,” she said out of nowhere.

Her words pulled me out of my thoughts. I lifted my head and stared at her curiously. “What?”

“When you asked me if I had any Christmas plans. I lied.”

“Why?”

“Because we do nothing that day. There’s no celebration. No tree. Alba and Maren do have to work, but even if they didn’t, Lennon and I would be doing nothing. That’s what I lied about.” I avidly watched her as she stared up at the ceiling. “I can’t remember the last time we’ve had a normal Christmas.”

The fact that Sable Cole was in my room, sitting on my bed, was a fucking miracle. But Sable Cole opening up to me defied the way the world worked. There was no way in hell I was going to interrupt her.

We stayed silent for a few seconds. The wind picked up outside, causing the bare branches to scratch against the window.

Sable shivered as if the branches were grazing her arms.

“My family is so fucked up,” she finally said.

What could I possibly say to that? So I kept doing what proved foolproof: I kept silent.

Then, she said, “You’re not who I thought you were.” Turning her head, she finally looked at me and smirked. “I never thought I’d be telling you that. Especially after how cruel you were as a kid.”

My head turned in her direction. “What are you talking about? I wasn’t cruel to you. I don’t think we even had a conversation as kids.”

Sable held my gaze. Her eyes were somber. “Yes, you were. I was ten years old. It was after school and I was with Alba. You were with Drew. As always, Alba opened her big mouth, and Drew reacted and started throwing rocks. I didn’t think you were going to follow his lead, but you did.”

The more she talked, the quicker the memory materialized for me. Materialized wasn’t the right word. More like slammed into me.

How in the hell had I managed to forget something like that?

Everyone has done something that they’re ashamed of. No one was perfect, yet right then, I felt like the biggest jerk off.

“Sable...I’m so sorry.”

“I didn’t tell you that for an apology. I said it to get it off my chest.” She rolled over onto her side and faced me, resting her chin on her palm. “The present you—the one lying next to me is completely different than the Samson I remembered.”

I could match Sable barb for barb, but I didn’t know how to respond to this side-the sincere, vulnerable side- and even though she said that she didn’t expect an apology, it didn’t diminish the shitty feeling lingering in my gut.

“You never know. You might be right. Maybe I am a shitty person, because if you hadn’t brought that moment up, I would’ve never remembered it. I can’t help but wonder: what other fucked-up things have I done that I can’t remember.”

“You’re not a shitty person.” Sable quickly looked away. “This conversation is proof that you’re not an asshole.”

“You have a reply for everything, don’t you?” I asked.

“Not all the time.”

The corner of my mouth curled up. “No, you really do. I’ve never seen anything like it.”

At the exact same time, we turned our heads. Our faces were only inches apart. Sable looked me straight in the eye. “Can you blame me though? I want to be prepared for everything in life that could come my way. No surprises.”

“None at all?”

“Zilch. Zero. Nada.”

“But what about tonight?” I countered. “Throwing rocks at my window is bordering on spontaneous.”

“I guess you could say that,” Sable conceded with a half-smirk.

“So maybe you’re wrong. Maybe it’s good to be surprised—to not be so prepared all the time.”

Sable frowned. The conversation was slipping out of the neutral, friendly zone and we both knew it.

“Well, I guess. But I—”

I cut her off by slamming my lips against hers.

No matter the circumstances, there was always a level of tension and lust lingering between us, but we were never given the chance to act on those feelings. And when we were, someone interrupted us. But in the darkness of my room, on my bed, there was nothing keeping us apart.

Like the first time, it wasn’t slow and steady. It was hard and quick. Enough time for me to taste her. For my tongue to slide against hers and pull back.

When I did, Sable sucked in a sharp breath. She blinked at me rapidly.

I didn’t kiss her because I felt sorry for her and the shitty things I did as a kid. I kissed her because I wanted to. I needed to.

It took all of my willpower not to lean back in and act out every single thing I’d dreamed of doing. But my conscience reminded me that the more time spent with her, the more I got to know her, I saw her for who she was. I didn’t want to fuck this up.

“Wait.” Sable reached out and pushed against my chest. I froze in place. “Just wait a second,” she breathed.

She sat up, resting her weight on her elbow and half-looming over me. Her left hand was on my chest, keeping me

in place. As if I'd try to get away.

Like hell.

She stared at me with a confused expression. Was she angry? Was she happy? I had no fucking clue, and the longer she stayed there, the more anxious I became.

Then she whispered, "Let's do that again."

She moved in first, her lips tentative, almost shy. Instantly, my left hand curled around the back of her neck and my right banded around her waist, holding her so close, there wasn't a fucking chance for her to go anywhere.

Right then she was all mine.

Her lips began searching and became insistent. And soon, she was straddling me. The blanket I gave her fell to the bed. Her knees brushed against my ribs as she raked her hands up my chest and fought to stay in control.

But she was losing. Fuck, we both were.

As her hands explored my body, I kept my hands in place.

Go slow, Sam. Don't scare her away.

My toes curled when her hands were on my stomach, tracing my abs. Her head tilted to the side as her tongue moved against mine. Gently, she sucked on it, and instinctively my hips bucked.

"Jesus," I groaned, "where did you learn that?"

Sable sat up. Her chest heaved, and her long, brown hair was messy from my hands. Even with a small glow in the room, I could see the *come fuck me* look in her eyes.

It made me reach out and grip her hips. I tugged her closer, and her spread legs rubbed against my dick. She gasped but didn't resist.

"Where did you learn that?" I demanded.

Sable blinked rapidly as she stared down at me. "Nowhere. I just wanted to do it."

"Want to do it again?"

She paused for only a moment before she nodded and leaned back in. The action caused her to, once again, rub against my dick. When her lips touched mine, I swallowed her moan.

I didn't add that I only wanted her to do these things with me; Sable kissed with confidence and took with pleasure. I was certain that her kiss could mark me like a tattoo. The alarming part was that I'd gladly let her. I suddenly felt like a player and she was the coach, showing me a whole new way to play the game.

My hands drifted down her body before slipping under her shirt. When my fingers skimmed her ribs, she breathed in deeply through her nose but didn't pull away. I had no clue where this would stop, but I knew that one false move from me would be the reason this ended.

So I went slow and easy. Two words that I'd never used in my fucking life. It was torture, almost to the point where my hands were shaking, but it was worth it.

My thumbs brushed the underside of her bra. I didn't know what it looked like, what color it was, but I also didn't care because it was one more barrier that needed to go.

But my once dexterous hands couldn't open the back clasp for the life of me. I gave up and moved back to her chest, slipped under the bra and cupped her tits. I squeezed gently, before my thumbs brushed against her nipples.

I spent half my time during our tutoring sessions listening to her and the other half staring at the figure she hid behind her baggy flannel shirts. I'd guessed she had good tits and I was more than right. They filled my hands and were so soft.

Sable moaned and rubbed herself against me. She started out slowly, our lips maintaining contact, but when she moved faster, she broke away, her forehead resting against my shoulder.

Every thrust against my dick made me strain against my sweatpants. I was so hard, it was to the point of pain.

By Sable's moans, I knew she was close to losing control. I reached down and rubbed my thumb against her pussy. She still had her jeans on, but I imagined what it'd be like to unzip them and touch her. I knew she'd be wet.

At that moment, Sable pressed herself into my hand and cried out before she dropped onto me.

My arms wrapped around her, holding her to me. Against my chest, I could feel just how fast her heart was beating.

We laid like that for some time. In a daze, I tried to figure out what the fuck just happened.

The girl who was always so contained just lost control.

Sable sat up and from the kissing and frantic touching, her shirt was pulled up, exposing her stomach. "I-I...I should go," she stuttered.

The thought of her leaving so soon after *that* had me grabbing a hold of her wrist.

She looked down at me, eyes wide. "Your parents could wake up and hear us."

I felt like she said this more to herself, listing all the reasons why we needed to end this now.

"If they haven't come in before, they won't now," I countered.

Sable ducked her head as she fixed her clothes. I couldn't see her face, but I knew her well enough to know she was embarrassed about what had happened. When she was finished fixing her clothing, she blindly reached around the bed in search of the blanket. Sable looked everywhere but at me.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"Nothing," Sable answered a little too fast.

She secured the blanket around her shoulders like it was a cape.

"Are you embarrassed?"

"Who me? Of course not," she replied.

I sat up, discreetly adjusting myself. I watched as she sat on the opposite side of the bed. I shook my head. “Sable, there’s nothing wrong with what happened.”

“Do we have to talk about it?”

I held her gaze a long second. “We do if you regret it.”

Sable looked away then back at me. “Do you regret it?”

“Fuck no.”

The corner of her mouth tilted up. She tucked her hair behind her ear

At this point, it was probably best if I stayed where I was, but it felt ridiculous to allow this much space between us. Especially after what just occurred.

“I should get going,” she said.

I watched as she put her coat and hat back on. When she was done, she finally looked over at me.

I stood. “You’re not climbing out the window. I’ll take you to the back door.”

She opened her mouth, but a strong gust of wind hit the windows, making her think better of risking her neck. “Sounds good,” she replied.

I opened my bedroom door and looked both ways before I motioned for Sable to follow. She stepped out into the hall, her hand curling into mine. It was an unlike-Sable thing to do, but she was also in a dark house that she’d never been in before. We were as silent as we could be as we crept down the stairs. A lamp was left on in the hallway on the first floor. I expected Sable to let go, but she didn’t as we moved toward the kitchen.

I stopped at the back door and pushed back the curtain, watching the bare limbs bow to the wind. “I can drive you home,” I said.

“Sam, I only live a few blocks away,” Sable whispered.

“Yeah, but...it’s cold.”

True, the weather was part of my reasoning for taking her home. The other was the fact that it didn't sit well with me, picturing her walking down the street in the middle of the night. All by herself.

"I'll take you home," I said, my voice firm.

"You're shirtless," she pointed out.

I looked around the kitchen until I spotted my gym bag. It was unzipped with clothing spilling out. I went over to it and moved things around, until I found a t-shirt. I waved it at Sable. "For once my messiness has paid off."

Quickly, I pulled it on and slid into a pair of Nikes and grabbed my North Face, also in my gym bag. My keys were in the pocket."All set?"

"This is kind of ridiculous," Sable whispered as I opened the back door. The wind hit us at the same time and we both sucked in a sharp breath.

"What's ridiculous is this weather. It's fucking freezing," I replied as I, as quietly as possible, shut the door behind me.

The two of us ran toward my Jeep. Once I started it up, I blasted the heat, and as I pulled out onto the road, I shut my lights off so I didn't wake up my parents.

I glanced at the dashboard. It was three in the morning. "Is anyone going to notice that you've been gone?"

Sable shrugged. "Maybe one of my sisters, but probably not."

I nodded, but said nothing else. Once on the street, I turned on my lights. But it almost wasn't necessary because the drive to the trailer park was only a matter of seconds.

"Turn here," Sable said, pointing to the street on the right. She was sitting up straight, her arms wrapped around her midsection.

I took a right, and seconds later, Sable said, "You can stop here."

I looked over her shoulder at the trailer on the right. The driveway was barely visible, thanks to the amount of rusted-out trucks.

“This is your house?” I asked doubtfully.

“No. Mine is up ahead.” She gave me a false smile. “You didn’t have to drive me home. But thank you. I appreciate it... along with the book.”

I grinned. “So you’ve said.”

She opened the door and wind crept in within seconds, making me want to tell her to shut the door.

Sable hopped out and faced me, half leaning into the car. “Just so you know. I don’t regret anything about tonight.”

With a mischievous smile, she began to retreat. But there was no way I was letting her slip away after that remark. Leaning across the console, I reached out and grabbed her arm. “That’s it?” I asked.

She smiled. “For now, it is.”

And then she slid out of my grasp and ran down the uneven sidewalk, toward the last trailer on the dead-end road.

Before she opened the front door, she looked over her shoulder at me and gave me a small wave. I flashed my brights at her and waited for her to walk inside.

I sat in my idling Jeep, watching the trailer she disappeared into.

At this point, it was more than just tutoring. Whatever was happening between the two of us was different than anything I’d ever experienced. I knew the risk I ran by taking a chance on a Cole girl. But no one saw Sable the way I did. And maybe it was better that way. Because if they saw her the way I did, they’d want her too.

And there was no way in hell I was letting her go.



CHAPTER FOURTEEN

SABLE

NOW

“I HATE RAIN,” AUDREE MUTTERS.

She presses her forehead against the window and stares sadly out the window as a strong gust of wind slants the rain and makes the branches sway. To prove her sadness, she fogs up the glass and draws a sad face, but then she quickly wipes it away, hops down from the window and runs to the couch to watch *Nickelodeon*. Seconds later, she’s giggling at some silly character from a cartoon.

Apparently, for a six-year-old, the grieving process over the weather fades away pretty quickly.

As for me, I think the weather matches my mood perfectly. All the fun that happened last night was overshadowed when I came home, was forced to confront my mom and found me and my sisters’ bedroom trashed. Just thinking about the entire situation makes my blood boil.

I stand up and grab my book sitting on the end table out in the hallway. Before I walk back into the living room, I glance over my shoulder toward the staircase. I know Sam’s not here, yet I can’t help but sneak a peek. I keep waiting for him to show up out of nowhere. The craziest part? I want that to happen. I want my heart to soar. I want excitement and happiness to collide inside me. I want to prove Mom wrong.

I sit in the middle of the love seat, tucking my legs beneath me. For an hour, Audree’s attention moves between the TV and her Barbies in the corner. She has a wild imagination, acting out scenes with all her Barbies. Today, is a particularly dramatic day at the Dreamhouse. I watch as Audree tosses Ken onto the floor, puts Teresa in the driver’s seat of the pink Jeep and proceeds to run Ken over.

Poor Ken.

While Ken lies there, Barbie and Teresa continue to have a dramatic fight that ultimately leads to Barbie driving away in her Corvette and Teresa standing outside her Jeep.

“Why aren’t the ladies driving in the same Corvette?” I ask jokingly.

Audree stops and twists around, giving me a solemn look.

“They have a history.”

“Does it have anything to do with Ken?” I ask with a smile.

She tilts her head to the side and looks at me like I should know better than to ask a question like that. “Oh no. It goes much deeper than that.”

She quickly goes back to driving Barbie around. I don’t know which is crazier: two plastic dolls having drama or me dying to know what that drama is.

This is what my life has been reduced to.

After a while, she throws one of the dolls down and makes her way back to the sofa. She seems content to move back and forth between each activity. While I struggle to get through a single page of my book.

It’s all Sam’s fault.

My eyes have a mind of their own and keep going back to the front windows, waiting to see him drive by. I finally give up reading and set the book down. “I wonder if your brother will get off early today.”

“Why?” Audree asks, without removing her gaze from the TV.

“Because it’s raining.”

Audree whips her head around, lowers her chin until it practically touches her chest and gives me a sly smirk. “Do you like Sammie?”

“No.”

“Are you sure?”

Did I really just start a conversation with Audree about her brother? Dear God, I’ve sunken to an all-new low. Before she can say another word, I abruptly stand up and clap my hands.

“Hey, how about you play some dress-up?”

The change of subject works. All talk of Sam is out the window and now it’s nothing but Project Princess.

“Oh, it will be so much fun!” she shrieks.

“All right. Let’s go upstairs.”

Audree frowns at me. “But most of my dress-up clothes are in the shed.”

“Why?”

“Because last week Mom got mad and said I had too much junk and boxed up a lot of my Barbies and dress-up clothes. Sam said she was a mad woman that day.”

“So what have you been playing with since then?”

She gives me a look, as if I’m crazy and gestures toward the Barbies scattered around the living room. “With these.”

Shocking, considering Audree gets bored with something within five minutes and wants to move on.

“So will you go get them?” she asks with her brilliant smile.

“Ehh...sure.”

She acts like I just told her we’re going to Disneyland. But honestly, I don’t mind getting the clothes; it’ll keep my mind off certain people.

I walk to the mud room with Audree nipping at my feet like a dog. I would say Stanley, but he’s lying in the corner, giving Audree a look that says, *Kid, get a hold of yourself.*

The rain shows no signs of letting up anytime soon. It’s a torrential downpour out there. So I grab an umbrella leaning against the coatrack and slide my feet into my flip-flops. I go to open the door but quickly turn around. “Where is this box of clothing?”

“The shed?”

“Be specific.”

“What’s that mean?”

“Give me more details than that,” I explain. “Did your mom put it on a shelf?”

Audree purses her lips and taps a small index finger against them. “I think so.”

Translation: I have no idea where it is. But what you just said sounds *really good*, so I’m going to go with that.

With a heavy sigh, I grab the shed keys hanging on the key hook and open the door.

“Do not follow me,” I tell Audree, as I open the umbrella. “I’ll be right back.”

Audree nods obediently, staying rooted in place. I run out the back door. The grass is wet, making me slip a little. I reach the small shed within seconds, but the rain is so strong, it’s hitting my right side and I’m completely soaked. I unlock the bolt and hurry inside, where I’m assaulted by the smell of outdoors and mold. I make a face and wave a hand in front of my nose, trying to push the scent away. The doors slam behind me the same time I grab the string directly above me and pull. Weak light illuminates the small space. And it really is small.

There’s barely enough room for me. Plastic containers and boxes are stacked to my left. They’re labeled by holidays and Audree’s summer and winter clothes. To the right is the smallest of work spaces, although it doesn’t look like anyone’s worked out here in years. I scan the stacks of containers, but there’s nothing that’s marked: “dress-up clothes.”

I move to the right side. It’s clear no one has organized this area. The cardboard boxes are haphazardly stacked, with no labels on the sides. I sigh loudly because, knowing my luck, the dress-up clothes are way in the back, smashed at the bottom.

The minutes tick by as I move boxes around, opening them up and sifting through the belongings. The longer I’m stuck in here, the crankier I become. My emotions come out of nowhere. Maybe it’s the fact that this shed is almost half the size of the trailer I live in and it still feels nicer.

I stop rifling through the belongings and take a deep breath.

Most of the time, I don't get angry about our lot in life. I just focus on the future and tell myself not to think about it. But now it's all I want to do. I can't wait to get out of this podunk town, but I struggle every day with leaving my sisters here. I want to take them with me. I don't want them staying in the trailer where men come strolling in and out. Where our mom falls asleep in a drunken stupor on the couch. Where cigarette smoke trails out of the front door whenever it's open.

They deserve better.

We all deserve better.

In a fit of rage, I kick one of the boxes in front of me.

"I don't think you're supposed to kick the boxes. I think you're supposed to pick them up."

With a small gasp, I whip my body around and come face to face with Sam. For such a big guy, he moves so quietly. He ducks down as he walks into the shed. With him inside with me, the small space becomes even smaller.

He's just as drenched from the rain as I am. His old, football t-shirt, with the sleeves cut-off, is completely soaked. It'd be the same for his hair if it wasn't for his hat.

"Make some room, will ya?"

Rain trickles down his arm as his shoulder rubs against my arm, and even with my sweatshirt on, my skin breaks out in goosebumps.

Quickly, I take a step back. "Are you following me around now?" I ask.

Sam grunts. "Yes, that's exactly it. I spend my days and night tracking your every move."

I shrug. "You said it. Not me."

Sam takes off his baseball cap and shakes the water off of it.

He drags his fingers through his hair. I shouldn't watch him like a creep, but I can't help myself. The weeks out in the sun show; his skin is bronze, and his brown hair has streaks of blond in it. Sam catches me staring and grins before he puts his cap back on.

He leans against the door and crosses his legs at the ankles. "If you must know, I got off early. I pulled into the driveway when I saw you running out here."

"You're getting off early a lot lately," I comment.

"I get off a lot."

A deaf kitten could pick up on the innuendo. I roll my eyes, even though I know my cheeks are turning red. "Gross, Sam."

He just grins wickedly and then looks around. "What are you doing out here?"

"Audree wants to play dress-up," I explain. "She said all her dress-up clothes are out here somewhere."

"That's right. They were put out here during Mom's great summer purge. Any luck finding them?"

"Oh yeah. Found it within seconds. It's this invisible box next to my feet."

Sam rolls his eyes. I continue to search through the contents of the box in front of me. After a few minutes, he says, "I'll help you."

He stands beside me and starts to rummage through containers. We both make an effort of keeping a distance, but it's impossible. If I take a step back, I hit the wall. If I move forward, I run into him. The same goes for him. Our shoulders end up grazing more times than I can count. Worse yet, I keep smelling him. No one should ever smell that good after getting off of work. I can feel the heat coming off his body and continually have to stop myself from leaning into him.

We work in silence, but it's unnerving to me. I keep looking at Sam out of the corner of my eye. Even though he's

quiet, I know his mind is running. I hate it. I feel like I need to be ready for whatever he says next.

Abruptly, Sam straightens and looks around. “You know what doesn’t make sense?”

I stop and tilt my head to the side. “That a house as big as your parents’ doesn’t have an attic?”

“Oh, it does. My mom just doesn’t want to store anything in there.”

“Why?”

“Hates attics.”

“Did she have a *Flowers in the Attic* situation growing up?”

He snorts, but a reluctant smile tugs at his lips. “No, not that I’m aware of.”

“I don’t know. She might. I did find an old copy of *Flowers in the Attic*.” I pick up the book and wave it in the air.

Sam grins. “As I was saying...it doesn’t make sense that we’re out here looking for the clothes like chumps while Aud’s all nice and dry inside.”

“What do you have in mind?”

“Get her out here to help. Make her feel our misery.”

“It’s not that terrible.”

“Are you kidding me?”

I just shrug and continue to look around.

“What’s wrong with you today?” Sam asks.

“Nothing,” I rush out.

“Really? You seem pissed off.”

“I’m fine.” Even as I say those words, I know they’re a lie.

Sam knows it too. He stares at me thoughtfully, as if he sees something inside me that I don’t know exists. I quickly give him my back and grab the first box I see.

The whole time I can feel his eyes on me. I hold my breath, willing my body to calm down and relax. Outside, the rain continues to fall in a steady downpour. Thunder rumbles in the distance, and my head shoots up.

Sam quirks up a brow. “Scared?”

I shrug and continue rifling through the box. “No. It just caught me off guard.”

“I don’t know, Cole. You look a little scared.”

“Storms in the day don’t scare me,” I answer truthfully. “What about storms at night?”

“Totally different ball game.”

“Why?” Sam laughs.

“Because it’s night time. Obviously. You can’t look out the window and see the clouds rolling in, or the wind gusts. At night, everything just seems more vulnerable.”

Same mulls over my reply. “Eh, I guess you have a point.” He looks at me from the corner of his eye. “Can you answer something for me?”

No, I can’t. I’m afraid of what you’ll ask me and what my reply will be! My mind screams. But I remain quiet and slowly turn his way. “Sure,” I reply carefully.

He looks me straight in the eye and asks me, “Do you ever think about us?” If hearts could speak, mine would say: *Go on ahead. Tell him that we think about him every chance we get.*

I don’t say that though. A small part of me wants to; I think about so much and I say so little that sometimes it feels like I’m going to crumble under the weight of my thoughts.

It might feel good to speak the truth. I swallow loudly and nervously lick my lips. “I do,” I answer honestly.

Sam’s eyes widen in shock. He didn’t expect me to say it. His hands drop to his sides and he takes one step forward. That’s all it takes for him to be mere inches from me. “Don’t you want to know if I think about us?”

More than anything.

My hands curl around the edges of the box. Sam arches both brows and takes another step closer. The hard wall of his chest is flush against me. My breath starts to come out in little gasps.

He holds my face in between his hands. There's nowhere for me to look. I meet his gaze.

Sometimes the anticipation is the best part.

How will he kiss me?

Where will his hands be?

And how fast can we get each other to lose control?

There is no solid answer and I love every unpredictable moment.

"Sable?" Sam says my name gruffly.

Goosebumps break out across my skin.

"Hmm?" It comes out in a slight moan.

Sam brings his head closer and looks me in the eye. "Don't you want to know if I think about us?" he repeats.

"Yes."

"All the fucking time. Every second. Every day."

Then he kisses me.

Every single kiss Sam and I have shared has left a mark on me.

Short and sweet or long and sensual. My brain has each one filed away. Kissing Sam hasn't changed a bit. In fact, it's better than I remember. His lips are so warm that tiny goosebumps break out across my skin. I know that this kiss... this one will have a lasting effect. Twenty years from now and I'll still remember it.

The two of us consume each other. My tongue tangles with his.

And my hands have a mind of their own, skating down his lower back and grazing the edge of his boxers. He groans and the sound reverberates through me.

His hands slip beneath my sweatshirt the second our lips touched, playing with the bare skin around the hem of my shirt, but never going higher. It's torturous.

Then his hands finally move higher underneath my shirt. My heart stutters and stops in my chest as his fingers trail up my stomach before they stop at the bottom of my bra.

Briefly, his grip tightens, almost as though he's trying to slow himself down. I take a deep shuddering breath and stop myself from grabbing his hands and placing them where I want them.

A loud strike of thunder claps outside. As fast as our kiss started, it abruptly ends, ripping us away from each other.

I'm panting. I feel lost, as if I've just been plucked from one place and dropped in another. Sam stares at me, his eyes wild. He doesn't say a word.

"I gotta go," I finally say.

"No, you're not," Sam interjects, grabbing my arm.

I jerk it away. "Don't," I warn.

"What? Don't kiss you?"

My heart pounds in my chest as I try to turn the knob on the shed. It won't give. What the hell is wrong with this thing.

Suddenly, my body is whirled around. My back hits the wall and Sam looms over me. "God, Sable. Sometimes you make no fucking sense. Just a minute ago you were wrapped around me and kissing me back." He takes a deep breath. "You. Kissed. Me. Back."

He tilts his head and stares at me carefully. "Do you regret the kiss?"

I can lie to him and tell him yes. Knowing him, he would call my bluff. Or I can admit the truth. I do the latter.

"No," I confess.

"We create the rules in our friendship," he says, his voice akin to a caress. "No one else does."

It's hard to say what does me in: Sam's words or simply being this close to Sam, having him touch me. All I know is that I find myself leaning in. I can give into every desire I have, and at the end of the summer, not have to deal with any feelings or uncomfortable conversations.

Our little friendship seems to be changing by the hour, but that's the point. We create the rules.

The corner of Sam's mouth curls up, as though he can sense the direction of my thoughts.

"What we do stays between you and me."

"Between you and me," I repeat.

Sam leans in, as if to seal our conversation with a kiss. But then a bolt of lightning lights up the gray sky.

With a jolt, I jump back and stare out the small window. Well, I try to. It's fogged up from Sam and me. I wipe the glass with the sleeve of my hoodie and stare toward the house.

Audree.

Shit, shit, shit.

"I gotta go back inside. Your sister's in there."

Behind me the doorknob digs into my lower back. I blindly reach for it, and this time, it turns. For a second, I wait for Sam to stop me. But he doesn't.

Why am I slightly disappointed?

The feeling comes and goes, and within seconds, I'm running across the yard, the raining pelting my hot skin.

When I get inside, I slam the door and lean against it, taking deep breaths.

We flirted with each other in the pool. Bad, but not terrible. That is something that we can move past.

I'm not naïve though. I know I'm playing with fire with the friendship Sam and I are forming.

But I *need* him. I can't deny that urge any more than I can deny myself the right to breathe.

“Fuck,” I mutter as I run my hands down my face.
What have I gotten myself into?



CHAPTER FIFTEEN

SABLE

NOW: JULY

I CROSS OUT ANOTHER DAY ON MY CALENDAR, AND WITH A happy sigh, I put the lid back on the pen and step away from it. Some days I just stare at the date. It's kind of a rush to see the days marked off. It means I'm one more day closer to leaving this hellhole. There's two weeks left in July. After that, there's only thirty-one days until I leave for school. I've already begun to pack. I don't have near the amount of things that most college students go to school with. I'll probably pull out of the driveway with no more than four boxes. Yet I can't seem to stop myself from beginning the process. Right now, my books are packed up. After that I'll move onto my most treasured items and then to clothes. I know that will be the biggest battle because Alba, Maren and I share the majority of our clothes.

All I have to do is endure one more full month here. That is it. With that in the forefront of my mind, things don't sound so bad. I smile.

Across the hall, my mom wretches into the toilet. My smile disappears.

Alba and Maren aren't home, but Lennon is. She's in the living room, watching *The Maury Povich Show*. The minute she hears noise coming from the bathroom, I hear her get up and putter down the hall.

Lennon stops in the doorway, her eyes bouncing between the bathroom door and me. "Is she okay?"

"She's fine. I'll go check on her." I give Lennon a fake smile. A smile that makes it seem like I have everything in control. The smile is a farce, but I give her the same one every time.

Slipping into the hall, I almost gag; the smell of puke slowly wafts in the air and in a space so small, it feels like I'm being suffocated. Still, I knock on the bathroom door. Before I step inside, I hold my breath. True to form, Mom is ducking

her head in the toilet, still vomiting. How is this possible? She's been at it for a good fifteen minutes.

The conversation that I promised Maren and Lennon I would have with Mom a few weeks ago about our room never really happened. Honestly, because I didn't want to bring it up. I didn't even want to think about it. And even if I attempted to, it'd be futile; Mom's drinking was worse than ever. Seemed like she spent more time being drunk and passing out in her room, than being sober.

Right now, her brown hair hangs around her, a few pieces dipping into the toilet. I make a face and avert my eyes, staring at the old 70s wallpaper peeling at the sides. When she finishes vomiting, I finally look her way.

She takes a heaving breath as she wipes her mouth with the back of her hand. Her mouth hangs open, like she's a cod fish. Her eyes are red-rimmed with mascara smudged beneath them. She's as white as a ghost, but, then again, she always looks pale. That's what happens when you sleep all day and stay up all night.

She sits back and leans against the wall for support.

Mom knows I'm here. I saw her eyes flick over to me when she sat back. But I've been by her side so many times before that this routine is almost normal for us. Some families center memories around the dinner table and holidays. Mine center around liquor and the toilet.

"You okay?" I ask with no emotion.

"Water," she rasps.

I step out of the room, stomping down the hallway like a child throwing a fit. In times like this, I feel so much anger toward my mom. Anger that she continues to screw up, over and over and over. And anger at myself that I continue to help her, over and over and over.

Within seconds, I'm back with a glass of water. Greedily, she drinks it in its entirety before she drops her cheek onto the toilet seat.

An awkward silence stretches between us, making it feel like there are miles between us. My biggest fear in life is that if I stay in Antsett, this will be my future. I will become her, sleeping with nasty men and living for drugs and alcohol.

I refuse to allow that to happen. I will learn from her mistakes.

“Rough night?”

She grunts and ducks her head back into the toilet. I think she’s going to vomit again but all she does is gag. She sits back down. “It was nothing,” she rasps.

“This doesn’t look like nothing,” I murmur.

“Let it go, Sable.” She sighs.

“How’s work going?” I ask casually, although I’m afraid to ask the question. Mom’s car has been in the drive for the past four days and she only leaves to pick up more alcohol.

“Oh, I quit.”

“You quit,” I repeat numbly.

She shoots me a dirty look and tucks a greasy strand of her hair behind her ear. “Yes, I quit! That place was awful. But I gotta another job I can fall back on.”

“What kind of job?”

“Don’t worry about it!”

She flings an arm out, trying to stand up, but ends up lunging for the toilet where she vomits once again. Before she wipes her mouth, I see blood on the corner of her lip.

Mom doesn’t attempt to stand up on her own. She holds a hand out to me and I take it. When she’s standing, I glance between the shower and the hallway.

“Maybe a shower will make you feel better?” I offer.

“Just help me to my room, okay?” Her voice is deflated, as if our conversation, all two minutes of it, stole the energy right out of her.

We trek slowly back to her room and run into Lennon. Mom looks down at the carpet, refusing to meet Lennon's gaze.

"Are you okay, Mom?" Lennon stares between Mom and me with worry creeping into her eyes.

"She's not feeling well," I speak up. "Give her a few hours and she'll be back to new." My face brightens. "Hey, why don't you go over to Ms. Nova's? She mentioned that she needed help with canning her tomatoes."

Lennon frowns and looks at Mom's sagging figure. She finally nods and walks away.

It's a lie. For all I know Ms. Nova may be done with canning, but Ms. Nova will let Lennon in and go right along with my story. She's someone I can depend on.

A few minutes later, Mom and I make it to her room. She drops to her bed and curls onto her side, in the fetal position. I stare down at her and take her in. True to form, her bedroom is in the same sorry state as usual. But there's a heavier stench lingering in the air and it has nothing to do with sweat, left out food or sex. I walk around the room and spot a pile of vomit over on the other side of the bed.

I gag and quickly look away. How long has that been there? It's anyone's guess. All I know is that I'm not going to be the one cleaning that up.

"Are you good?" I ask between thin lips.

Mom weakly waves a hand in the air, seemingly immune to the smell. I'm out of the room within seconds. In the hall, I take a deep breath and greedily gulp in the fresh air.

Our life story isn't unique or special.

Alcoholic parents are a dime a dozen. But the saddest thing about our story is that I vividly remember happier times. Sometimes those memories feel so close, I can almost touch them. Alba and I don't talk about those times.

And definitely not to Maren and Lennon. Wouldn't that fall under the category of cruel?

Almost like dangling a crisp twenty-dollar bill in front of a homeless person and then yanking it away.

It isn't fair.

The front door slams loudly. My other two sisters walk through the door.

“Alba, please tell me you deposited your check!” Maren says, her voice rising with each word, a notepad and pen in her hands.

Alba tosses her keys onto the counter and looks into the fridge. As always, there's next to nothing in there. She slams the door and shoots Maren an irritated look. “Yeah.”

“Into our joint account?” Maren asks slowly.

“No. Into my own,” Alba replies just as slowly.

Maren throws her pen on the table. “You idiot!” she explodes.

Lennon walks past them and Alba stops her. “Where are you going?”

“To Ms. Nova's. She needs help canning tomatoes.”

Alba makes eye contact with me. I shrug my shoulders. She knows to go along with it. She drops her hand. “Cool. Have fun.”

Alba and Maren wait until Lennon shuts the door before they go back at it.

“How am I an idiot?” Alba challenges.

“Because I wrote a check to the electric company, thinking that your check would be there. And now my check is going to bounce.”

“Well, I didn't know that,” Alba replies defensively.

“You did too know. I told you we need your check this month. Sable!” Maren charges toward me. Her notepad flying in the air like a flag. “Tell Alba that it was her turn to pay the bill this month.”

I stare between the two of them. The truth is that I have no clue who is supposed to pay what and when. That's Maren's domain. Besides, my head is still spinning with putting Mom to bed.

"I don't know," I mutter as I brush past Maren, "I'm not your fucking mom."

"Yeah, well, my mom is probably incoherent right now so I can't exactly go to her," Maren tosses back.

I look at Alba. "Maren's right. It was your month to pay the electric."

"I didn't know!" Alba snaps. She swipes her sunglasses and cigarettes from the counter. "You know...I shouldn't even have to worry about this. None of us should."

"Well, we all have to. So get used to it!" I yell.

Alba stabs a finger at me, then Maren. "You and Maren need to chill out. The bills will be paid and the minute rice will find its way to the TV trays, all right?"

My temples start to pound. I can slowly feel the beginnings of a headache coming on. I have to stop myself from bursting into Mom's room and dragging her out of bed so she can do her job of being a mother.

The three of us stand there. All furious. All wanting to get the hell out of this house, but knowing that we can't. This problem is ours and we need to find a way out of it.

"I can see if the pool club has any extra hours," Maren murmurs quietly.

I lift my head. This is how it always is with us. One second, it's screaming and insults, and the next, it's solutions and calmness.

"And I'll ask Peter the Pervert for more shifts at the grocery store," Alba says, but there's still a stubborn tilt to her chin.

I smile gratefully at them, relieved that Part One of our Annual Bitch Fest is over with. "Thank you," I tell them.

Alba shrugs. "It's no big deal. But you know what is? The fact that I had to empty the bucket six times last night...six times." For good measure, Alba counts the numbers out on both hands like we're idiots.

"We can count, Alba," I say.

"I might as well slept outside last night," she grumbles.

For the past two years, the roof has had a small leak. But that leak has quickly jumped from small to large. And now, anytime it rains, water comes pouring in. I knew it should have been patched up like yesterday, but I also knew we had no money for it.

"We'll figure it out," I say with false confidence.

"So is that your nice way of saying I need to sleep in a raincoat the next time it storms?" Alba asks sarcastically.

"Yes," I reply dryly. "That's exactly what I mean."

"Does anyone have any money saved up?" Maren asks.

"I don't," I say.

Maren and I turn to Alba. She rubs her chin thoughtfully before she snaps her finger. "Oh! You know what? I do."

Maren brightens. "You do?"

"Yeah!" Alba says excitedly. "A few years ago, I planted this money tree in the backyard. It hasn't grown for the past few years, but thanks to all the rain it's really starting to bloom and now there's all these fifty-dollar bills blowing in the wind."

"God," Maren wads up a piece of paper and chucks it at Alba. "You're no use."

Alba's the only one out of all four of us that can dish it out and take it. But right then, she pales, looking slightly hurt before her face goes blank. "I'm getting out of here."

The door slams behind her.

The noise makes me feel like my head is going to crack in two.

Back and forth, Maren and I go through the bills, trying to see if there are any that we can absolutely put off paying. We check the balance in our checking and savings accounts. There's some money lying around, but definitely not enough to fix something as large as the roof.

I stand up, feeling the weight of the world pressing down on me. I just want to slip back into my room, crawl into bed and redo today. Hell, if it was possible, I'd redo my life and ask for a better mom.

"Hey, shouldn't you be at work?" Maren asks, her eyes still glued to her calculator.

At the mention of work, my eyes widen. "What time is it?"

She waved her hand toward the microwave. 9:40.

"Shit!" I jerk upright and rush toward the door. "I gotta go."

I slide my feet into the first pair of flip-flops I can find, bolt down the front steps and run the whole way to the McShane's. I know it's only a few blocks away, but by the time I run up the steps, I have to rest with my hands on my knees and take a few deep breaths.

It's sad how out of shape I am.

When I'm done panting, I hurry inside.

Audree, who's sitting in the living room and wearing a Princess costume, comes running toward the front room when she sees me. She hugs me and pulls back. "You are late, missy."

"I know. I'm sorry. I got—"

"Mom!" Audree shouts so loud I cringe. "Sable's here!"

As I ran to the McShane's, there was a small part of me that was scared that Elaine would be angry at me for being late. I can't blame her if she is. Hell, I'm angry at myself. Being punctual is my thing and now I just feel flustered and out of sorts. Elaine pokes her head from the kitchen doorway, and I expect to see annoyance etched across her features.

Instead, she smiles with relief. “There you are. I was getting worried.”

I know it’s strange, but it feels good to know that someone might be worried about me.

“I’m so sorry,” I rush out as I walk into the kitchen. “I was dealing with some stuff at home and I lost track of time and —”

“What’s going on?” Elaine cuts in.

She looks at me with true, motherly concern. She pours me a coffee and rests her elbows on the counter, as if she really wants to know. I find myself opening up.

“The roof’s been leaking for a while, but lately, it’s gotten pretty bad.”

Her head tilts to the side, a thoughtful look on her face. She doesn’t say sorry or ask me about money. She just reaches out and pats my hand. It’s such a simple gesture, but so strong. With each pat, she says, *You’ll get through this.*

Quickly, I look away because if I acknowledge Elaine’s support any further, I’ll break down. “Anyways, we’ll figure it out.”

Just then, Audree runs into the room (the child never walks anywhere) and wraps her arms around my waist. The side of her cheek presses against my stomach. I smile down at her and give her a small pat.

Elaine grabs her purse and a stack of files from the counter. “I know you will.” She looks over at Audree, giving her that ‘mom look.’ “Be good, all right?”

“I will,” Audree replies sweetly.

Before she leaves the kitchen, Elaine stops at my chair. “She’s been up since five this morning watching cartoons. She’ll pass out by noon.”

“Noted.”

“I also told her that if she was good that she could have one or two friends over today. I made some cookies for them if

they do come over.”

I nod.

As Elaine walks toward the door, Audree quickly grabs one of the chocolate chip cookies on the counter. She tries to take a bite and quickly makes a face. “Momma! The cookies are burnt! My friends can’t eat these!”

“Just tell them that they’re edible frisbees! Get creative, sis.” Elaine shouts back. “Love you!”

The door slams shut and I clap my hands together and paste a happy smile on my face, trying to push aside all the worries weighing on me. “So, what do you want to do today?”



CHAPTER SIXTEEN

SABLE

NOW

TO ENSURE THAT I NEVER WAKE UP LATE AGAIN, OR FIND myself distracted by my mom or sisters, I set my alarm for three different times.

But the next morning, it's not my alarm that wakes me up. No, it's a loud pounding sound that rips me out of my blissful sleep. I bury my face in the pillow and groan. Across the room, Lennon sits up, her hair in every direction. "What time is it?" She groans.

Sunlight blazes into our room, making me wince. I roll over and glance at the clock. "Eight o'clock."

"Too. Early." Lennon grunts and then falls back onto her bed. "What is that noise?"

"Hold on," I grumble as I rip off my sheets. "I'll go check."

Lennon drags her comforter up and over her head. Seconds later, she's fast asleep.

When I look around, I see that Alba and Maren's beds are empty. If Maren, the hater of all mornings, is up of her own free will, then something is going on. I stumble out into the hall, my eyes instantly drawing to Mom's room. Her door is shut, and the bathroom door's open.

The pounding starts back up. I hurry to the front door and find Maren and Alba standing at the end of the driveway. They form their own private circle as they talk amongst themselves. Ever so often, they both glance in the direction of our trailer.

When I step outside, Maren's eyes instantly snap to me. "Hi, Sable," she says coyly.

She and Alba smile, as if we always have small pow-wows in the early morning.

The screen door shuts behind me. "What's going on?" I ask.

“Come see for yourself,” Alba says and gestures me over. That mischievous grin doesn’t leave her face, which means my sisters are up to something.

I walk into the yard, ignoring how cold and wet my feet get from the fresh dew that clings to the blades of grass.

“Seriously. You guys, what’s going on...” I turn around and face the trailer and my words fade away.

Because standing on our roof is Sam with Nick and one of their friends from school. Eric is his name. I think.

The trio seems completely oblivious to Maren and Alba (and now me) blatantly staring at them.

I think my jaw drops.

After a moment, I clear my throat and ask, “What the hell are they doing?”

“I’m not a genius, but I’m thinking they’re fixing the roof? At least, that’s what I’m assuming,” Alba replies.

“But...but why?” I sputter.

Maren shrugs. “Ah, who the hell cares! The roof is getting fixed!”

“How long have they been here?”

“About an hour.” Maren replies before she takes a sip of her coffee.

“Best hour of my life,” Alba comments.

For a long moment, the three of us stare up at the guys, quietly moving across the roof with ease. If I was up there, I’d be wobbling around like a toddler taking its first steps.

Even though it’s eight a.m., the humidity is already unbearable. From where I’m standing, I can already see how the back of Sam’s shirt clings to his body and a line of sweat forms between his shoulder blades.

“Are you seeing the same thing I’m seeing?” Alba says into my ear.

“Yeah,” I say reluctantly.

Alba smiles wickedly. “Ladies, all together. It starts with a D and end with an—”

“amn,” Maren and I finish for her.

Granted, Maren’s ogling Nick. I’m staring at Sam. And Alba is blatantly staring at all of them, but even I have to admit that it’s too good of a view not to look at.

“I’m thinking I’ve never been so grateful for a heat warning in my life,” Alba says.

“Will you stop?” I mutter.

“I’m afraid I can’t. Not unless you tell me Sam is exclusively yours or something. Then I’ll back off.” She cocks a brow. “Is Sam yours?” she taunts.

My lips draw into a tight line. I’m not taking the bait. I’m not doing it. Even though white-hot jealousy seeps through me.

“Come on, Sable. You’re the only one out of the three of us that has seen *that*,” Alba jabs a finger toward Sam, “naked. So tell me: is that body a ten or is it a *ten*?”

I can feel my cheeks turning red. “We’ve had this discussion before, and it remains the same: I’m not telling you.”

It’s a ten.

Alba sighs. “Then I’m afraid you leave me no choice,” she murmurs then cups both hands around her mouth and shouts: “You’re looking a little hot there, Sammy! Take your shirt off.”

“You realize that this could count as sexual harassment, right?” Sam shouts back without turning around.

“It’s not sexual harassment when you’re genuinely concerned about the well-being of another person.”

He finally looks over his shoulder at Alba. He goes to answer, but his eyes instantly veer to me and a slow smile spreads across his face. In spite of myself, I smile back.

And then he grabs the hem of his shirt and pulls it up and over his head.

My lips slowly part.

“Whoa. He actually did it,” Alba marvels.

While he tucks his shirt into one of the back pockets of his jeans, I unabashedly look at him from head to toe.

Weeks of working outside has made his skin a burnish gold, highlighting each hard contour of muscle leading up to his perfect pecs.

Sam’s trying to get a reaction out of me. I know that. But still, my cheeks that are already red, probably look like tomatoes, yet I still don’t look away.

“Ten. I knew it,” Alba states confidently.

The four of us have a points system for male bodies. It’s ridiculous and more than juvenile. We started doing it in middle school and it’s been our secret since then.

I didn’t need Alba to confirm how perfect his body is; not so long ago, I owned that body with my hands and lips. I knew how to make him groan and lose control. I could do that. No one else.

As though he could sense my thoughts, Sam lifts a brow. Goosebumps break out across my skin. I still want him, probably more than I did a year ago.

Alba glances up at the sky and whispers dramatically, “Well done, God. Well done.”

Her words pull me from my thoughts. I nudge her none too gently in the ribs. “Cut it out.”

“Oh, we’re all thinking it. I just had the balls to say it.”

She does have a point.

“You can’t tell me that seeing him in all his muscled glory doesn’t change your mind about being with him.”

I swallow and stare at the ground. “It doesn’t.”

Alba sniffs and nudges me. “Wake up and smell the hormones, Sable. You want to grind on him like a fresh cup of coffee.”

I whip my head up, staring at her with wide eyes.

“Can you stop with all the sexual innuendos?” Maren pipes in.

I stand closer to Maren, who is suddenly my ally. “I agree with Maren here.”

“Oh, you two are prudes,” Alba scoffs. “I’ll take it down a notch, but that’s it.”

“That’s all we ask,” I say solemnly.

A moment passes and then I ask, “Who told him to do this?”

A faint crease appears between Alba’s brows. “I thought you did.”

“I didn’t.”

“Really?” Maren says.

“Do you guys think I would walk right up to him and say, ‘Hey, Sam, wanna know something crazy? We have a big ass leak on our roof. Please help!’” I glance at Maren and narrow my eyes. “Did you tell Nick?”

“I briefly mentioned it, but before they climbed up the ladder, I asked him about this and he said it was all Sam’s idea.”

“Hmm,” I say and then it occurs to me that I unloaded on Elaine everything that was happening with the roof. There’s a good chance she told Sam about it.

My sisters and I fall back into a long silence. Every so often, Sam looks over his shoulder and grins at me. He knows I’m staring and he’s getting a kick out of it.

“My feet are soaked, I’m sweating my ass off – I really want to go inside, but I know that women across the county would put a bounty on my head if they knew I walked away from this view,” Alba remarks.

While I agree the view is all kinds of amazing, it's what they're doing that means more. My sisters and I have only really had Ms. Nova to lean on for help. Just thinking about her causes me to look over my shoulder. Sure enough, she's standing on her porch, dressed in one of her many floral housecoats and white slippers with a cup of hot tea in her hands. She points to the guys on the roof and looks at me with confusion.

All I can do is shrug.

She motions for me to come over and I know that if I ignore her, she'll just holler my name until I cave.

"I'll be back," I say to Maren.

She shoos me away, completely oblivious to what I just said.

I hurry over to Ms. Nova's, taking her porch steps two at a time. She's resting her elbows on the rickety banister as she watches the guys, a small smile playing across her thin lips.

"Did you have something to do with that?"

She takes a sip of her tea and I'm sure she's enjoying making me wait. "Sable Cole, why would you ask that?"

"Because you're smiling like a Cheshire cat."

"I'm smiling because that damn leak in your roof is getting fixed."

"And nothing else?" I quiz.

"Nothing else," she confirms, yet she continues to smile.

I don't believe her. She knows something; yet, she's purposely being cryptic.

"You know what time they started working?" she asks.

"An hour ago?"

"Try two hours ago. Woke me and cat up. How you slept through all the hammering, I'll never know."

"For someone who's always so grumpy, you sure have a bright smile on your face," I tease.

She immediately scowls when she turns toward me, but I see the small blush creeping across her cheeks. “Honey, I’m old...not blind,” she murmurs.

Ms. Nova’s cat purrs and rubs against her leg. She sighs, almost regretfully, and turns toward her front door. “I guess I should be going inside now. Come visit soon, Sable Cole. I had a good talk with Lennon as we canned tomatoes.”

She gives me a meaningful look. If I think I’m going to get out of explaining why I sent Lennon over, I have another thing coming.

“Sounds good,” I say as I walk down the steps.

Alba and Maren are just where I left them and when I stand to Alba’s left, she does a double take. “Where did you come from?”

“I’ve been talking to Ms. Nova...for like fifteen minutes,” I say slowly.

Alba glances at Maren before she shrugs. She’s too busy gawking; she never noticed me leave. “Really? Didn’t notice.”

“You two need to get a hobby,” I reply.

“Says the girl standing right next to me and ogling a certain someone.” She peers at my face. “Hey, I think you have some drool right...there.” Her thumb brushes against the corner of my mouth. I slap her hand away, just as the hammering dies down.

The two of us stop bickering and look forward.

Sam climbs down the ladder, bypassing the last two steps, and lands on the ground like a panther. He walks toward me, that easy-going smile on his face. My eyes keep drifting down to his chest. Staring. Remembering.

He stops in front of me and I’m eye level with his pecs. Very slowly, I tilt my head back and meet his eyes. They glint wickedly, as if he knows everything that’s running through my mind. “Good morning, Cole.”

“McShane, what is this?”

He looks over at the roof. His friend Eric is getting a drink of water. Alba's standing by him and by the look on his face, I know my sister already has him wrapped around her pinky.

"I'm fixing a roof." He lifts a brow when I say nothing. "It needs to be fixed, right?"

I nod mutely and stare at the roof. "Do you know what you're doing?"

Sam follows my gaze and shrugs. "I'm not a professional roofer, but I know enough to patch up the hole. And it helps that I've been working with my uncle over the summer."

Sam's trying to downplay this whole scenario, acting like he's mowing our lawn, not fixing a major leak.

"Did you patch it up?"

He twists his body around and looks at the roof. "Pretty sure. We're not done. Probably have a good thirty minutes left. Sorry if I woke you guys up."

The fact that he's apologizing to me about something as trivial as noise is laughable, considering what he's doing.

"Don't worry about it. My alarm was about to go off anyways," I lie.

"Clearly, I didn't wake Alba or Maren. But what about Lennon and your mom?"

"They're both really deep sleepers."

Again, another lie.

Excitement courses through me. In my mind, all I can see is a house without buckets randomly placed through the house and a ceiling that doesn't drip water during a storm. Something so little, but it means everything.

But my excitement slightly dims as I realize that I can't let this kind gesture go unpaid. "I can pay you back for this," I quickly say. "It might be a while. I-I mean, probably a few months, but—"

"No," Sam replies sharply. The glimmers of humor from his eyes vanish. "You're not paying me."

“But—”

He holds up a hand. “Forget about it. Just think of it as a payment for all those tutoring sessions, okay?”

His words soften up the edges of my embarrassment and I find myself nodding. “Yeah. Okay.” I smile at him gratefully and fight the urge to hug him. “Thank you...this means a lot,” I say quietly.

Sam reaches out, his hand curling around my jaw. His touch is gentle as he tilts my head back. I meet his gaze when I want to look anywhere else but at him. I feel vulnerable, as though he’s seeing through me, at what truly rests inside my soul. His thumb brushes against my lower lip. That’s it. Yet my breath becomes caught in my throat.

“No problem,” he replies gently, his blue eyes never leaving mine.

His hand drops away, and my skin feels cold. My mouth opens, ready to tell him...tell him what? That I crave more of his touch? Reluctantly, I turn and walk back to the trailer, feeling his eyes on me the entire time. I’m almost to the front porch when he calls out, “Sable!”

I turn around and stare at him expectantly.

He crosses his arms over his chest and grins. “Let’s have dinner tonight.”

I lean against the rickety banister, my brows lifting in surprise. “What?”

“Let’s have dinner tonight,” he repeats even louder this time.

No, ‘Hey, are you busy tonight?’ or ‘Do you want to hang out?’ We both know that if he leaves any room for me to say no, I’ll take it.

“It’s dinner, Sable. Not a trip to the gallows.”

I quickly speak up. “Dinner where?”

“I don’t know.”

“Not at the diner,” I blurt.

Translation: nowhere in Antsett.

Sam grins. “So is that a yes?”

I shrug one shoulder. “I guess you could say that.”

“Good then I gotta get back to work.” He winks at me then turns around and walks away, but then he suddenly faces me again and walks backward. “By the way, you can wear that.” He looks me up and down. “I like that outfit. A lot.”

Quickly I look down and see that I’m still wearing my pajamas—an old pair of flannel shorts that have been rolled up three times and a thin, white tank top that leaves nothing to the imagination.

Completely mortified, I cross my arms over my chest, which just makes Sam chuckle. “The date’s off!” I tease. “I changed my mind!”

“See you tonight,” he calls out. “No back-outs!”

I find myself smiling and watching him walk away. Behind me, the screen door slams shut. Seconds later, Maren’s standing right beside me. “I’m sorry...what is Sam to you again?”

“Nothing...he’s just a friend that asked me to go have dinner with him tonight.”

“Sounds like a date.”

“It’s not a date,” I answer immediately.

“If there’s one thing I excel at, it’s dates and let me tell you, that’s a date.”

“It means nothing.”

Maren raises a brow and whistles. “His eyes follow you everywhere...he just got done fixing a leak on our roof. If that’s nothing, I’d love to see what something is.”

She walks away before I can reply. I stay in place, watching Sam talk to his friends. I should be thinking about how I can smoothly back out of said non-date, but all I can think about is our first date...



CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

SAMSON

THEN

“I’M SORRY. I’M SORRY. I’M LATE,” SABLE SAID AS SHE rushed into the room.

I slammed my chair back onto the ground. “It’s fine.”

But it didn’t look fine. Sable, who was always organized and on time, was completely out of sorts. The zipper to her book bag got jammed and she jerked it several times before it finally gave. She grabbed a selection of books from her book bag and one dropped to the ground. “Son of a bitch,” she muttered.

“What’s going on?”

As she stood back up, she tucked a lock of dark hair behind her ear. “It’s a long story....” She flung her hand into the air and dropped the book onto the table and sat down.

“Give me the short version.”

“Maren had to use the car and there were two flat tires,” she said casually, as though it was an everyday occurrence.

My brows lifted. “Now I want the long version.”

“Maren’s shift at the nursing home started right after school, but I guess there were two flat tires. Alba had the cell phone, so we couldn’t call anyone. So we walked around the parking lot like two weirdos until we finally found a student that would let us use their phone. Alba didn’t answer...”

Sable was too busy ranting to notice the deadly look in my eyes. What she was saying sounded less like a flat tire from a nail and more like deliberate intention.

She sighed and muttered underneath her breath, “No shocker there. She called Nick and he answered and picked Maren up a few minutes ago.”

“Can’t she just call-in and say she can’t make it?”

The look in Sable's eyes was indecipherable. "No, she can't call in. She's...saving up. For college."

Sable ducked her head and flipped through the book. I wanted to call her out. She was lying to me and we both knew it. But that didn't bother me as bad as the story itself.

"Where's the car now?"

"Still in the parking lot. God knows what happened to the spare our car used to have. Knowing my luck, the car probably never came with one. Nick had to go get two spares. He's putting them on now."

"And both tires were randomly flat?"

Sable dropped her pen and looked at me impatiently. "They were slashed, all right?"

I knew it. I fucking knew it. My hands curled into fists and fought to stay in control.

Shifting in my seat, I leaned forward. "But Nick fixed it?"

"As far as I know." Sable sighed.

Looks like I was going to talk with Nick tonight. Now that he'd settled into school, he finally knew what groups to hang out with and the people to stay away from. Even knowing that Maren and her sisters were on the list of people not to associate with didn't seem to stop him, though.

According to Sable, Maren and Nick were stronger than ever. She didn't like to bring them up and when anyone mentioned them, her lips went into a flatline. She was far from okay with her little sister dating someone older. Something told me that the dude could've been Maren's age and Sable still would've been pissed off.

After Sable got settled in, we went over the latest chapters of *The Bell Jar* and my question packet. School started back up a month ago, which meant there was a new book to read. I didn't know a thing about this Sylvia Plath lady, but Sable was obsessed with her and claimed *The Bell Jar* was one of her favorite books. While *The Bell Jar* wasn't my most favorite read, it was significantly better than *Anna Karenina*.

When I told Sable that she got this goofy grin on her face and said that's good. That it showed the type of books I liked. Again, she just couldn't seem to grasp that I liked no books.

During our session, I noticed Sable just wasn't focused. She kept staring at the clock, a frown marring her face.

"What's up with you?"

Her shoulders stiffened. "Nothing."

"You're always giddy to talk about this book, but today, you look like you can't wait to get out of here."

"I'm worried about Maren," she confessed.

"What about her?"

"Nothing. I—" Her voice faded as she looked me over carefully. "What do you know about Nick?"

I groaned loudly and sat back in my seat. "Ah, Sable. Come on."

"What?"

"Don't get me sucked into your sick, twisted stalker world."

"It's not sick. I want to know more about Nick."

"I play sports with the dude. That's it"

"And I want to know more about the dude. So tell me what you know about him."

I threw my hands in the air. "There's nothing to tell!"

For a normal person that reply would've been enough to drop the subject. But Sable wasn't a normal person. "Does he talk about Maren in the locker room?" she persisted.

"When you think of a guys' locker room, what do you think happens in there?"

For once, Sable's cheeks turned red. I leaned in because it was almost fascinating.

"I-I don't know."

I spoke up and put her out of her misery. “There’s a lot of sick jokes. Mentions of sports and pussies and —” When Sable’s eyes widened, I couldn’t help but lean forward and continue, “You know, we talk about tits and fucking. And-” Abruptly, I sat back in my chair and crossed my arms. “Sable, you all right? You’re really red.”

A deep flush had spread from her cheeks and disappeared down her shirt. Her chest rapidly rose and fell. I couldn’t tell if she wanted to slap me or ignore me. As for me, I wanted to kiss the hell out of her.

Ever since the kiss in my room and how she came just by dry-humping me, I haven’t been able to think about anything else but Sable. I want her back in my arms, and her lips on mine. When we came together like that, the world stopped. She was all I needed. But trying to get Sable alone was like trying to pin down a dream. She moved quietly and quickly. I wasn’t going to give up, though.

Sable cleared her throat, pulling me out of my thoughts. “I’m perfectly fine. I just want to know if Maren’s body is ever mentioned in any of those conversations?” I wouldn’t know. I was too busy keeping my ear to the ground, making sure Sable’s name was never brought up. One word. One single word and I was ready to pounce on whoever breathed her name. Not that she would ever know that.

“Are we seriously gonna have a conversation centering around your sister’s body?” I groaned.

“Answer quickly and then we can change the conversation to something else,” she hotly retorted.

I sighed loudly. “Honestly?”

She nodded anxiously.

“He hasn’t said a word about her.”

“Are you lying?”

“I’m telling the truth. Scout’s honor. I mean...have guys tried to get information from him? Yeah. But he won’t budge.”

That information seemed to put Sable at ease. But not enough to let the conversation go. Once this girl set her sights on something, she was like a rabid dog.

“Why is this firing you up so much? Normally, you’re... intense. But right now, you’re acting crazy.”

Sable groaned and dragged both hands through her hair. “Last week, on Valentine’s Day he came over to pick her up for their ‘date.’” She said the last word using air quotes.

“Okay...” I dragged out slowly.

“He took her out and when Maren came back, she said that he said the L word.”

She looked at me meaningfully, as if I should know what L word she was talking about.

Sable threw her hands up in the air. “Love. He said he loved her!”

The way Sable made it sound, you’d think the guy proposed to her sister.

“Oh,” I said dumbly.

At my lack of reaction, Sable’s eyes widened in shock. “Don’t you think that’s a big word to use? They don’t know what love is!” She paused, chewed on her lower lip and looked over at me doubtfully. “Do they?”

“Why are you asking me? I’ve never been in love,” I rushed out. “Now lust? Lust is an entirely different thing.”

She rolled her eyes.

“Look, I don’t think it’s anything to worry about. All right?”

Sable nodded but kept her gaze on the table. “I just...I just don’t want my sister to get hurt.”

Ah-ah. And there it was—proof that behind that tough, almost protective, exterior was a person that genuinely cared.

“It’ll be okay,” I said. Sure, I could’ve said something more reassuring, but I wasn’t good at this talking shit.

“Thanks,” she muttered. “For...you know...listening to me.”

I shrugged. “Ehh. It was no big deal.”

I went back to working on my worksheet while Sable skimmed through sections of *The Bell Jar*. Every few seconds, I couldn't help but notice that she would give furtive glances over the top of the book. Finally, I gave up and tossed my pencil on the table. “What now?” Before she could reply, I quickly said, “And I swear to God if you're going to ask me to talk to Nick about his feelings for your sister, the answer is a big fuck no.”

She opened her mouth several time before she spoke. “I wasn't going to ask that. But that's not a bad idea...”

“NO!”

“All right, all right. I was just going to ask what you did for Valentine's Day.”

The question instantly took me off guard. I frowned at her. “What I did?”

“Yeah.”

“I did nothing. Like always.” I narrowed my eyes. “What did you do?”

“Nothing.” She shrugged as if it was no big deal, but somehow it was.

Did I want to ask Sable out? Hell yeah. But asking someone to go on a date on Valentine's Day seemed cliché and the opposite of Sable. “Did you want me to ask you out or something?”

“What? No,” she said a little too quickly, all the while her gaze was averted.

If I let this chance slip through my fingers, it'd be the biggest fuck-up in history. Bracing my elbows on the table, I leaned in and tried to ignore my racing heart. “Let's do something this weekend.”

Slowly, she lifted her head. Her wide eyes meeting mine. “Like what?”

I flung a hand in the air as I sat back in my seat. “Go eat, go see a movie. It doesn’t matter.”

Sable tapped her pencil against her notebook, carefully studying me. “What exactly is this?”

“It’s a date. I’m asking you to go out to do something outside of school. Together,” I replied slowly. Hadn’t anyone ever asked her out?

“No. This,” she gestured between us, “what are we doing?”

If she didn’t know, did she expect me to? Nonetheless, I tried.

“We’re two people who...” I paused, attempting to find the right words to describe us, but nothing really fit. Sable lifted both brows. “Who enjoy each other’s company and want to see each other...outside of their tutoring sessions.”

The last part seemed to relax Sable. She smiled and looked back down at the table. Slowly, she traced the graffiti etched into the surface. “You have a way with words, McShane.”

“You got anything better?” I countered.

At that, she lifted her eyes back to me. “I really don’t.”

“Good. So we’ll go with what I said and go on a date.”

Sable chewed on her lower lip before she nodded. “But I have one stipulation.”

“And that is?”

“You don’t need to pick me up.”

I couldn’t help but shake my head. “You’re nuts. I’m picking you up.”

“It’s not medieval times, you know,” she remarked.

“Medieval? You’re thinking of the wrong era. If I told you, ‘Yo, woman. You’ll meet me at the restaurant and you’re paying the dinner,’ then you could be pissed.”

“Oh, you know what I mean,” Sable rushed out.

“You know,” I continued, “I hear that most people enjoy the process of being picked up.”

Sable shrugged. “Well, I don’t.”

“Okay. Let’s meet in the middle. I’ll just slow down to five miles an hour, roll down the passenger window and you can just jump in.”

Sable gives me a look. “You can pick me up. But honk the horn. You don’t have to come inside.”

“Good. I’ll pick you up tomorrow night.”



I WAS LATE TO BASKETBALL PRACTICE.

Not because my session with Sable went over. No, we finished at the same time we always did. But instead of going straight to the locker room, I paced out in the hall, feeling a rage boiling inside me that I didn’t think possible. Every few seconds, I would unclench my fists and go through all the reasons of why I shouldn’t beat the shit out of Drew. But then I’d think of all the reasons why I should beat the shit out of him.

“Sam, are you coming in?”

I stopped my pacing long enough to glance at one of my teammates. He was standing in the doorway of the locker room, holding the door open with his hand.

Taking a deep breath, I nodded. “I’m coming.”

The locker room had its normal environment: lockers slamming, lewd conversations, loud laughter and you couldn’t forget that undeniable smell - sweat mixed with a shitload of Axe body spray.

I walked to my locker, deliberately avoided looking in the direction of Drew’s locker. Dropping my gym bag, I turned the

dial of my lock. I yanked out a pair of basketball shorts and a t-shirt and started to change.

I was hanging my shirt on a hook in my locker when Drew slapped me on the shoulder. “Hey. Where have you been? You’re going to be late.”

I looked over my shoulder at him. “Can I talk to you for a second?”

Drew shrugged and leaned against the lockers. “Sure.”

It was taking all my self-control not to reach out, grab him by the neck and shove him against the lockers. To keep my hands busy, I grabbed my sneakers from my locker. “Me and you have a problem,” I finally said.

Drew snorted and gave me a pointed look. “Our center is fucking useless if that’s the problem.”

“Speak for yourself, Bledsoe!” A player one row down shouted.

“No, I’m not talking about the team. I’m talking about you and me. You made a big mistake.” I stood to my full height. “Huge mistake.”

Drew frowned. “What the hell are you talking about?”

Returning the favor, I slapped his shoulder as hard as I could, making him wince. “I just got done talking to Sable.”

He couldn’t help himself. He snorted. “Yeah?”

“Yeah. She told me a funny story.”

Drew cocked his head to the side and smirked. I had a strong suspicion, but it was then I knew he did it. That sly smirk was the same one he gave whenever he had done something fucked up and knew he was going to get away with it. “What’d she say?”

“She said that two of her tires were flat. It’s one thing to have a flat tire. But two?” I whistled. “Talk about unlucky.” I watched him closely. “Do you know anything about that?”

A short burst of laughter escaped him as he shrugged. “Dude. It was just a joke. She’s been taking up all your time

and so...”

He left his words open-ended, as if he had explained everything. But the thing was, Sable didn't stop to think that it was deliberately done by one of my so-called friends. She was oblivious to the truth. I may get hit on the field, but this girl got body checked by reality daily. Every time she got up. Every time she wiped the dirt off her pants and kept going. If I could protect her from the truth of Drew's intent, I would; she was trapped in a world that was light years ahead of ours. Petty pranks and jokes didn't belong there; she had bigger things to worry about.

“And so what? Finish your sentence,” I prodded.

“And so I thought I would play a little prank.”

“It wasn't a prank. Your prank's going to cost her over a hundred dollars.”

“Relax, man.”

“I won't relax. What you did was fucked.”

“Look, I don't know what to tell you. No one was murdered. It was all in good fun.”

It was anything but in good fun and we both knew it.

Drew turned around, as if the conversation was over, but I jumped in front of him, stopping him in his tracks. “Since it was all in good fun, are you going to pay to have her tires fixed?”

Drew laughed. “No.”

I didn't laugh back. “You're gonna pay her back,” I said in a clipped tone.

“What's gotten into you, man? She's just a fucking girl!”

I took a step back because if I spent one more second next to him, I was going to lose my cool. “Just leave her alone,” I tossed over my shoulder. “In fact, leave everyone in her family alone. Got that?”

“Why are you so angry?” Drew called out. “Are you fucking her or something?”

There was a millisecond where rationally I knew that I should walk away before I did something bad, but that was gone before I could even give it a second thought because my hands were wrapped around Drew's neck. I slammed him against the lockers. The locker room became deathly quiet. People started to gather around us.

"Stay the hell away from her! Are we clear?" I pressed deeper, watching the color drain from his face.

Hands tugged at my arms, but I didn't let up.

"McShane! Let him go. You're going to fucking kill him!"

Those words made me pull back. Two players from our team moved forward. I knew they were going to pull me back, so I turned to Drew one last time and punched him in the face.

There was nothing but adrenaline coursing through my veins as I was pulled back. I hit the lockers, my gaze never leaving Drew.

He lunged toward me, with blood trailing down his face, but was stopped by another team player. "Think of what you're doing, Sam!" he shouted as he wiped the blood away from his nose. "If the pussy is that fucking good, you should've told me!"

This time I didn't stop to take a breath. I ran toward him, and if we didn't have teammates between us, I would've had him underneath me, beating the shit out of him.

"Fuck you, Drew!" I yelled, as chaos swarmed around us, pulling on my arms and trying to push me back. People were telling me to take a breath and calm down. The whole time I just wanted to get my hands on him again.

"The hell is going on?" Coach roared.

He burst through the crowd that had come between Drew and me. His gaze flicked between the two of us, waiting to see which one of us would explain. Neither of us said a word.

Blood continued to drip from Drew's nose, causing him to continually wipe at it. He glanced at me and shrugged the hand off his shoulder. "Nothing."

Coach looked at me for an explanation. I didn't say a word. His lips went into a flatline. "So neither one of you is going to tell me what happened?"

More silence.

He shook his head and pointed to the exit. "Both of you just leave. Now."

Without a word, I grabbed my bag and began putting my clothes in my gym bag. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Drew gathering his things and heading toward the exit. I slammed the locker, with my car keys in hand. A few of my teammates tipped their heads at me, but no one said a word. When you broke the mold, you stopped caring. You didn't give a fuck.

Was I still on the team? Didn't know.

Did I lose a friend? Without a doubt.

But none of it mattered; this feeling coursing through me gave me a rush.

It felt good to finally stand up for what's right.

Rather than going straight to my Jeep, I decided to stop at my locker. There were chapters of *The Bell Jar* I needed to read and I left my book in my locker. As I walked toward the senior hallway, I passed by the junior hallway. Immediately, I stopped walking.

Did I just see Sable?

I backed up and stood in the doorway. Her locker was at the end of the hall, but I could make out her long dark hair. More than that, I saw a tall figure leaning against the locker beside hers. A figure with the number 51 on the back of their shirt.

Fucking Drew.

My steps were slow, but my heart was beating fast. Nothing good could come out of Drew speaking with her.

I kept my gaze fixed on the two of them, reminding myself to take a deep breath. But then I saw Drew lean in and smile.

But whatever he said had Sable's face twisting in disgust.

He reached out and dragged a thumb across her cheek.

Oh, fuck no.

Rage made my steps quicken and by the time Drew's thumb was down to Sable's neck, my hand curled around his shoulder and jerked him back. His back slammed into the lockers.

"What the hell?" I roared.

Drew turned as Sable's eyes widened. She didn't bother hiding her relief at seeing me.

Drew shoved away from me. "The fuck has gotten into you? We were just talking."

"The hell you were."

"We were," Drew insisted.

I turned to Sable. "That true?"

Sable clutched the books held between her arms tighter to her chest. She shook her head.

"What were you really doing?"

"What Sable and I talked about is between us." Drew finished his words with a cocky grin that only fueled my anger. But I already let him get the best of me today. I had to remain in control.

I turned to Sable, getting ready to ask if she was okay, when Drew said, "Since when did you become so concerned about a slut's reputation?"

Whirling around, my fist made contact with the side of Drew's jaw. The impact caused him to slam back into the lockers. I stepped to him and leaned in so only he could hear my words. "Don't ever fucking call her a slut again. Are we clear?"

Eyes narrowed, Drew rubbed his jaw before he dipped his head.

Hands shaking, I grabbed Sable's book bag from her locker and slammed it shut. I didn't give Drew another look and went straight to Sable, wrapping an arm around her shoulder.

"Let's go," I told her as I guided her body to mine.

She nodded and the two of us walked away.

"We're fucking done!" Drew shouted.

I kept my gaze fixed ahead of me, but tightened my grip on Sable's arm.

"You hear me? We're done!" Drew hollered.

Worried, Sable tried to look over my shoulder, but I shook my head.

"Don't give him the satisfaction," I said.

I forgot about going to my locker and headed straight to the parking lot. Sable, who normally had a sarcastic retort at the tip of her tongue, was abnormally quiet and didn't put up a fight when I opened the passenger door of my Jeep.

I threw my gym bag and her book bag in the back seat and slid in the driver's seat. Once inside, I took a deep breath and looked at Sable.

For her sisters, she'd fight anyone and anything. But for herself, she locked up. The protective instinct didn't kick in. It almost made me angry because she was worthy of being defended.

Sable was the first to break the long stretch of silence. "I'm sorry, Sam."

"What are you sorry for?"

"You and Drew are friends."

"Not anymore," I muttered as I put the Jeep into reverse.

Drew and I had been in fights before, but we always came around. And I'd seen him be an asshole to so many people, but I remained his friend because I was loyal. But this was different.

He was being an asshole to someone, that before tutoring, I would've turned and looked the other way. But now I knew that someone was far more than what everyone believed her to be. She wasn't trash and she was far more than the town druggie's daughter.

The more I discovered about Sable, the deeper I cared for her and wanted to protect her in a way no one ever had.

“What was he saying to you?”

Sable stared out of the window. “It's not important.”

“Of course it is. I know he wasn't there to have a friendly chat.”

A shaky breath escaped her and she turned to face me. “He said that you told him that once you were done with me, you would give me to him.” She swallowed. “He said he didn't mind your sloppy seconds and would treat me good.”

I dragged my hands through my hair and took a deep breath. I knew he was up to something, nothing quite like that though. I dropped my hands into my lap. “He's fucking lying. I didn't say a word to him about you.” I looked her in the eye. “I wouldn't do that.”

Sable nodded, but I saw doubt in her eyes. I reached out, my hand curling around the back of her neck.

“What is Drew going to say to everyone else?”

“I don't give a shit what he says,” I answered vehemently, before she could finish her words. “And I don't care what others say. Fuck anyone who has your name in their mouth.”

My hand moved up to cup the back of her head, drawing her closer until her nose brushed against mine.

“Are you going to follow me in the halls and make sure no one does?”

I smirked. “If that's what it takes then absolutely.”

“Sam, I-”

I cut her off, kissing her the way I'd thought about since that night in my room. Sable's hands moved to my chest.

When my tongue moved against hers, she moaned and curled against the material of my shirt, drawing me closer to her.

By the time we pulled apart, fog was beginning to appear on the windows. I swallowed and reminded myself we were still in the school parking lot, where anyone could see us.

My thumb dragged across her lower lip. “Follow me and I’ll protect you from everything.”

Sable opened her mouth, but I gave her another kiss, preventing her from protesting any further.



“SAM, I COULD GET IN BIG TROUBLE FOR THIS.”

“Then hope to God that we don’t get caught.”

Eric looked around nervously, as if someone was about to jump out of the bushes at any second. Not that I could really blame him. This part of town at night was eerie. It wasn’t the dogs barking, or the glow of cigarettes as people smoked outside. It was more than that, like an oppressive silence hung above this trailer park, daring anyone to try and leave.

“Did you have to park so far away?” I asked.

“I didn’t want anyone to recognize my car.”

“You realize that you’re not in the mob and we’re not robbing a bank. The worst that will happen is one of the girls will catch us.”

“I know. That’s what I’m afraid of.”

“They’re not that bad,” I found myself saying.

Even in the dark, I could see the shock on Eric’s face. He saw my blow up with Drew today in the locker room. And I had no doubt that by tomorrow, the whole school would know, but by then, it would be blown up to epic proportions. The story would be twisted so many times that I’m sure the new version had one of us ending up in the ER and the other suspended.

But, in reality, the two of us wouldn't be starting at Friday's game. At this point, my parents were more upset about it than I was.

Quietly, we shut our doors and crept to the back of his truck. "You don't think anyone will steal anything do you?" Eric asked.

"It's just a trailer park in a small town."

Eric looks around. "I don't know. What if someone jumps us?"

Months ago I would've laughed at that. Now I was just annoyed. "Come on, will you? Stop being such a pussy."

We hurried down the street and I had to say, it was creepy as hell. Not all the street lights worked and the ones that did flickered on and off. Regular noises seemed amplified here, just to creep underneath your skin and make you feel like you're being watched.

To my right was the sound of two trash cans falling to the ground. A cat hissed wildly before it darted around my legs and fled into the night.

I jumped back. "Fuck!"

Eric stopped walking and looked over his shoulder at me. "I'm sorry...who's the pussy now?"

"That cat came out of nowhere," I reminded him.

"But it's a cat."

"Yeah, well cats are creepy."

"What?" Eric asked as we continued on down the road.

"You can't trust 'em," I explained. "With their beady eyes. One minute they're fine and the next they're freaking the hell out. Much like the cat that just bolted out of the alley only minutes ago."

My rant over my mistrust of cats went on for minutes and the next thing I knew, we were almost to the end of the road. I held Eric back, pointing to the trailer on the right.

“Her house is there.”

“It’s a fucking dump,” he muttered.

Eric did have a point. It wasn’t in the best shape. A light was on inside, revealing the old sheets that were used as makeshift blinds. A gust of frigid wind slammed into me. I wondered if they had a heater keeping them warm.

Of course they do, I told myself.

I scanned the driveway. I found Sable’s car parked half on the drive and the yard. But, then again, it was hard to tell where the yard began. It was all dirt and tufts of grass.

“Her car is right there,” I said.

As we walked toward it, Eric continued to mutter beneath his breath, “This is a bad idea. This is a really, really bad idea...”

I elbowed him in the ribs. “Shut up. You’re making this a bigger deal than it is.”

It took only a matter of seconds for me to spot the spare tires. They were both the front tires.

I wasn’t a car expert, but I knew how to change a tire. And Eric’s dad owned the only repair shop in town and because of that, Eric could change a tire in his sleep. We quickly got to work. Removing the lug nuts with my gloves on was damn near impossible, so I took them off. Within minutes, my hands felt like ice.

Every time there was a noise, Eric jerked around like Freddy Kruger was standing behind us. Chickenshit or not, once he became focused, he moved fast. Between the two of us, we had one spare tire off and the new one on within ten minutes.

“You sure this is the right fit?” I asked.

“For the hundredth fucking time. Yes. It’s an R15. The brands are not gonna match up, considering the back tires haven’t been changed or rotated probably since 1991. Besides, these were the only tires my dad had in stock.”

I had to take his word on it. “Okay. Let’s move to the other side.”

“Is there something you boys need help with?”

Eric dropped the wrench the same time I let go of the tire. Slowly, I turned around and came face to face with a woman as old as my grandma. Her hair was in pink rollers. Her feet covered in ratty, gray slippers and she wore a pink robe. Her arms were crossed as she stared us down at the end of Sable’s driveway.

“What are you boys doing?” she asked.

With wide eyes, Eric glanced in my direction. He reminded me of a deer in headlights, seconds away from bolting. So much for having my back.

Slowly, I stood up, brushing the dirt from my jeans. “I’m Sam—”

“Samson McShane,” she cut in. “I know exactly who you are. Now why are you out here in the middle of the night?”

“We’re changing Sable’s tire,” I explained.

“Why?”

“Because she had two flats.”

“Why is that?”

Holy shit. This was beginning to feel like the Spanish Inquisition. I tugged on the collar of my shirt. “Because someone slashed them.”

“Were you that someone?”

“If I was, do you think I’d be coming out in the middle of the night and replacing them?” I retorted.

The woman’s lips pulled up into a small smile. “Little shit,” she muttered. “By the way, I’m her next-door neighbor. Ms. Nova.” She didn’t extend her hand or offer any kind of friendly greeting, not that I expected her to or anything, and walked back toward her trailer.

“She might be the scariest lady I’ve ever met,” Eric finally said.

I turned toward him. “What do you mean ‘you’ve ever met’? You looked like you were seconds away from running.”

“Can we get the next tire done?” he shot back.

I raised my hands in the air. “Sounds good to me.”

The tire was fixed just as quickly as the first one. When we were done, I dusted my fingers off and took a step back.

“So now that that’s done, can we go?” Eric begged.

“Sure. But I need you to do one last thing.”

“God. What now?”

“I need you to break into the car.”

“Are you fucking kidding me?” Eric hissed.

“I have to give her something.”

“Then give her that something at school...like a normal human being.”

“She can’t know about it,” I explained.

“You know who might know about it? That old woman across the street. She’s clearly watching us.”

“If the lady says anything, I’ll take the fall. Okay?”

Eric rubbed the back of his neck and looked around. “Fine,” he sighed, “but don’t ever come to me for something again.”

“You got it. I’ll ask for nothing.”

If I thought Eric’s tire changing skills were impressive, it had nothing on his ability to break into cars. He had the driver’s side door open within seconds. “It’s scary how fast you did that,” I muttered as I slid into the driver’s seat. Blindly, I groped for the middle console, searching for the cupholders. I finally found one and dropped one-hundred and fifty dollars into it.

Someone was bound to notice it.

When I was done, I locked the car back up and shut the door as quietly as possible.

“Seriously, let’s go. I think I saw someone circling my car,” Eric said in a panic.

“All right. Chill. We can go.” I helped Eric gather up the tools, while he stacked the spare tires next to the chain-link fence.

While we ran back to his car, I saw the older woman, Ms. Nova, peeking through her blinds.



I KNOW THAT I PROMISED SABLE I’D HONK THE HORN FOR OUR date, but I didn’t.

I walked up the front walkway. Well, what I thought was once the walkway. It was now a bunch of stubborn weeds and grass that sprouted in small patches. The trailer to the right was having a loud party, with people spilling out into the front yard. Country music was blaring. A glass broke somewhere inside the house and someone laughed loudly.

Because of all the noise, I knocked loudly on the door.

“I’ll get it!” Someone yelled from inside and seconds later, the door opened, revealing Maren. She took me in, looking shocked, but quickly smiled. “Well, hello.”

“Sable here?”

Maren crossed her arms. “Indeed, she is.”

“Can I come in?” I asked slowly.

Maren pursed her lips. “Well, Sable did make me promise that if you arrived not to let you in. I mean, she was really, really adamant about that, so...sure, come on in!”

She stepped aside and gestured to the open space.

I had all these theories when it came to the trailer Sable lived in. It didn’t look nice from the outside but maybe it was neat and decorated on the inside with all kinds of girly shit and

floral candles lit. Or maybe it was a fucking pigpen, like an episode of *Hoarders*.

Or maybe I was completely wrong because the inside was nothing like I expected. Probably because there was hardly any furniture. Sure, there was the standard kitchen table, couch and TV, but it all looked like it was left by past residents. There were very little personal belongings — a quilt folded on the back of the couch. Some magazines neatly stacked in a milk crate. There was a beat-up coffee table in front of the couch with coasters scattered across the surface and an ashtray that hadn't been emptied in forever, with a pack of cigarettes next to it.

In all, it looked like they could pack up and leave this place within minutes and no one would ever know that they were here.

Alba and Lennon, who were both sitting on the couch munching on a bag of potato chips placed between them, openly stared at me. Maren was leaning against the scuffed wall with a shit-eating grin on her face.

“So...” I rocked back on my heels, uncomfortable with all these eyes on me. “Is Sable ready to go?”

“Not sure,” Alba replied. “But let me check.” She dusted off her hands and sat forward, appearing like she was going to get up. Instead, she just sucked in a deep breath and belted out as loud as she could, “SABLE! Sam is here!”

“Coming!” Sable shouted back.

Then she sat back and grinned. “Sable’s coming,” she told me.

“Thanks for letting her know,” I said dryly.

Alba waved a hand in the air and dug back into the chips. “Oh, no problem.”

While I awkwardly stood there, the three girls talked over each other, acting like it was completely normal for me to be hanging out here.

“She’s such a moron,” Alba muttered.

“Who is?” I blurted out.

“Her!” Alba pointed an accusing finger at the TV screen, where a woman tearfully dabbed her eyes with a tissue as she talked about her husband. I think she was watching Dateline.

“Everyone knows that good-looking guys are bad news.” Alba looked over at me and raised a brow. “Am I right, Sammy boy?”

Was she really comparing me to the guy that had been accused of murdering his wife’s sister? I honestly had nothing to say to that.

Just then, a door down the hall opened. When I saw it was Sable, I stood up straight. My eyes fixed on her. Her head was bent as she adjusted her black shirt that I’d never seen her wear before. No, I’d definitely remember this shirt. For starters, it wasn’t flannel or baggy, concealing her figure. This one wasn’t molded-against-her-body tight, but enough to show that all my fantasies of what she looked like underneath her flannel shirts were surprisingly spot-on.

Discreetly, I crossed my leg in front of the other because the last thing I needed was Alba catching me with a boner while I stared at her sister. She wouldn’t be the type of person to let me forget about it.

“Guys, do you think this looks too whorish...” Sable’s words drifted away as she looked up and saw me standing there. “Oh, hey.”

I grinned. “Hey.”

She stepped forward, making sure to leave some space between us. “I told you I’d meet you outside,” she said in a quiet voice.

“Yeah, but Maren invited me in.”

Sable shot Maren a death glare. Maren whistled. “Ohh... you meant this Sam? I got confused. You know, that’s really a miscommunication on your part, Sabes.” She clapped her hands together, as if the subject was done and over with and looked at me. “Now that you’re here though, I have a question for you.”

Very slowly, I was starting to learn that when a Cole ‘asks you’ for something, it could range from something as little as ‘Hey, what’s your favorite color?’ to ‘Hey, how do you feel about helping me hide a dead body?’

I shifted from foot to foot. “Sure. Ask away,” I finally said.

Maren suddenly became shy. Her cheeks became pink. “So...if a guy says they love you...do they mean it?”

“Are you talking about Nick?”

Maren blinked slowly. “Did I say that?”

“Well, I’m assuming he said it, considering he’s your boyfriend.”

“Can you answer the question, please?”

Glancing over at Sable, I found her resting a hip against the kitchen table, staring at me and waiting for my reply. Depending on my answer, tonight could be really bad. Or really good. Yet, at the same time, I kind of liked Maren. If I was being honest, all of the Cole girls had this special spark that made them unique.

Alba cleared her throat loudly, pulling me out of my thoughts. “Have you replied because it’s really hard to hear from where I’m sitting and the commercial break is almost over.”

I ignored her and looked at Maren. “Here’s what you honestly need to know: *most* guys just want to get in your pants. So if they say, ‘You look great.’ That translates to: ‘But you’d look better if I could get in your pants.’ If he says, ‘I think I’m really falling for you,’ That means: ‘My hand really wants to fall into your pants.’ And if he says, ‘I love you.’ Then he really, really wants to fuck.”

Maren blinked at me. A look of shock was written across her face. A quick scan of the room and I realized that all of the Cole girls were staring at me. Sable with her mouth hanging open. Alba was grinning from ear to ear and Lennon’s face was the color of a tomato.

It was the truth, but Maren looked near tears. She fixed her shoulders and lifted her chin. “And Nick...is he most guys?”

And here was the truth again: “No, I don’t think he is.”

Maren’s face transformed. She smiled and turned around. She pointed at Sable. “I was right! You can suck it.” Then she pointed at Alba. “And you can suck it, too!”

She let out a whoop and ran down the hall. Seconds later, a door slammed.

Sable rushed forward. “What was that?” she hissed.

“I was being honest. I assumed that was the right thing to say.”

“It’s great you were honest. Blah, blah, blah. But now Maren’s probably drawing her and Nick’s name in a heart, planning their future together and about to pick out China patterns.”

I smiled. “Really? That sounds like something girls do in middle school.”

“Also, be realistic, Sable,” Alba calls out. “You know we can’t afford a dinnerware set.”

Sable turned to look at Alba. “I thought you couldn’t hear from where you’re sitting?”

Alba cupped a hand behind her ear. “Huh? I can’t hear you.”

Sable rolled her eyes and focused on me. “Ignore Alba. I’m being serious.”

“So am I. You need to relax. If they make it; they make it. If they break up; they break up. But if you get in the way of that, your sister is never going to forgive you.”

Crossing her arms, she gave me a suspicious glare. “When did you suddenly become wise?”

I grinned. “Sable, I have wisdom just pouring out of me. You don’t even know.”

The corner of her lips reluctantly pulled up into a small smile. Her hand curled around my bicep as she tried to drag me toward the door. “Come on, let’s go.”

“And who is this?” a raspy voice purred behind us.

I lifted my head and saw Annie Cole, Sable’s mom, standing just a few steps away. She was wearing jeans that I could only assume she stole from Lennon and a tight V-neck t-shirt. Her hair was so done up, it looked like she was entering a beauty pageant.

Sable tensed up beside me, and for the first time, it was warranted because the intensity of her mom’s stare was making me uncomfortable.

“This is Samson McShane,” Sable reluctantly replied.

All of her sisters’ attention was now directed to us. Alba was sitting on the edge of the couch, her shoulders ramrod straight. She looked like a soldier ready for battle, just waiting for the cue from her general. Lennon was tense, her eyes flicking between Sable and Alba. If I had any doubt who the leaders of the family were, I didn’t anymore.

“Samson McShane,” her mom repeated. She wavered as she walked into the room. It didn’t take a genius to realize that she was completely shitfaced. I quickly glanced at Sable to figure out what to do next, but she was staring straight ahead, her face as white as a ghost.

“Samson,” her mom continued, “aren’t you on the wrong side of the tracks? Your mansion is over there.” I think she meant to aim her finger at the door, yet she pointed to the TV.

“I know what you’re really here for.” She walked forward and it was a miracle that she didn’t fall and bust her ass. “You just want one thing from my Sable.”

“Mom...” Sable looked like she wanted to say more, but she didn’t.

“I’m just here to take Sable out. Nothing else.” I finished my words with a reassuring smile.

Annie didn't smile back. If possible, this lady was even crazier than I remembered. I couldn't wait to get the hell away from her.

"I bet you are," she said with a biting tone.

"We're going," Sable said seconds later.

This time, she grabbed my arm forcefully and half dragged me out of the trailer. Who knew someone so small could have such strength?

When the door slammed behind us, Sable let go of my arm, took a deep breath and stalked to the Jeep. I said nothing because the last thing I wanted was for our date to begin on such an awkward note. But what could I say? I'm sorry your mom is such a crazy bitch?

I pulled out of the driveway, my fingers drumming on the back of her seat. Sable stared straight ahead.

"Abigail," I randomly said.

Sable whipped her head in my direction. "Huh?"

"Abigail...is that your first name?"

Very slowly, the tension eased from her shoulders. She smiled faintly. "No...my name is not Abigail. But that's a good one."

"Well thank you. I have been researching."

Gradually, Sable began to relax into her seat. "Anymore guesses?"

"Ava."

"Nope."

"Amelia?"

"Wrong again."

"Am I even close to guessing?"

"Well, it is an A name so you are close."

"By the end of tonight, you're gonna tell me your first name."

Sable turned in her seat and even in the dark, I could tell she had one brow arched. “Oh really?”

“Really,” I said with a nod. “I can feel it.”

“We’ll see about that.”

I turned onto the main road. It was only eight, but by now, half of Antsett was shut down, making the town look dead.

On the outskirts of town, Sable looked out her window and then back at me. “Where are we going?”

“Just wait.”

“No.”

“Can’t you enjoy the element of surprise?”

“I think you know the answer to that question,” Sable remarked.

She had a point.

“Come on,” she prodded. “Tell me.”

“Tell me your name and I’ll tell you where we’re going.”

That got her to back down.

We made small talk as I drove. Nothing too heavy and definitely nothing centering around what just happened back at the trailer.

Fifteen minutes later, we reached the edge of Rochester. The city lights twinkled at us; they were almost brighter than the stars. The city of Rochester was the midway for surrounding small towns like Antsett. It had all the things that we didn’t have: multiple stores and restaurants. Everything you could think of.

More than anything, it had one thing that Antsett didn’t: it was beaming with life.

As we drove into the city, Sable sat up a little straighter in her seat, staring at the city the only way small town kids could. Some people could be a little nervous with the bustling city, but Sable took it in just like me.

I weaved in and out of traffic, passing multiple restaurants. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Sable's brows knit together. I knew she was trying to piece together where we were going.

Taking a right, I pulled into one of the smaller shopping districts in town and took another right. With the parking lot virtually empty, I chose a spot up front and put the car in park.

"We're here."

Sable looked out the window and her face lit up. She turned and looked at me, her smile so wide.

"A bookstore?"

I shrugged. "I know I said dinner, but this place does have a cafe inside...you like coffee, don't you?"

"Yeah." Sable laughed as she got out of the Jeep. This was the most excited I'd ever seen her.

"I can't believe you thought of a bookstore."

I shrugged with embarrassment. It didn't take a genius to figure out the way to Sable's heart was through books.

Hell, I'd write a book for her if that'd make her like me more.

Pathetic? Absolutely.

"Well, you do like reading," I said.

"Yeah, but you don't." Playfully, she nudged my shoulder.

"That's not true. I read magazines."

"That doesn't count."

"Oh, but in my world it does."

We were only twenty miles outside of Antsett, but it felt like a hundred. It was great not to feel everyone's eyes on us, dissecting our every move and then talking about us behind their hands. I knew Sable felt the same thing. Her eyes didn't move around frantically and her body wasn't stiff. More importantly, she was grinning from ear to ear.

"You've been here before, right?" I asked.

She gave me a look that had me wanting to backtrack. “Of course. I mean...if I had it my way, I’d be here every day, but when we do come into town, I always try to stop here. I don’t get anything, but it’s nice to look around.”

The second she stepped into the store, she took a dramatic pause and sighed. “Ah, the mothership was calling me home.”

Then, for the third time that night, she grabbed my hand and took off like a woman on a mission. We passed the self-help aisle, sci-fi, DIY and the children’s section without a backward glance. We took a quick walk through the young adult section, but ultimately, we ended up in the romance section. The shelves were packed to the hilt with books. I picked up a few, noting that most of the covers had couples with their lips almost touching or men with their shirts off and a woman holding onto their biceps for dear life.

The sad part was I recognized some of these covers because they were on my mom’s bookshelf. Hard to imagine my mom and Sable having the same taste in books.

“You really like this stuff?” I asked.

“Of course,” Sable replied, without lifting her head from the book in her hands.

“What about this one? The guy on the cover looks like he’s seconds away from abducting this chick.”

Sable peered over my shoulder and grinned. “I’ve read that book. It’s really good.”

I shook my head in disbelief and laughed.

“What’s so funny?” she asked.

“Nothing.”

“Tell me. And you better not diss my books. That’s justification for killing you.”

“See, you say that jokingly, but a part of me thinks that you’re serious.”

“You have nothing to worry about. I’m only eighty percent serious.”

“Not helping.”

She laughed. “Come on. Tell me what you’re thinking.”

I leaned against one of the bookshelves and crossed my arms. “It’s just crazy that right when I think I have you all figured out, you do or say something that completely throws me off.”

“Me being a romance junkie confuses you?”

“Well...yeah,” I admitted.

My confession didn’t tick her off like I thought it might. She just smiled widely. “So what do you think I like to read?”

“I don’t know. Classics. Books like *Anna Karenina*.”

“You’re right. I do like those. But I also love these.” She gestured to the shelves surrounding her. “They can be the perfect escape.”

I thought of her reasoning for a second. “That makes sense.”

She stayed in place, staring at me carefully, as if I was a math problem she couldn’t figure out.

“You don’t believe me?” I asked.

“No. I’m just waiting for the jokes to start.”

I held my hands up in front of me. “No jokes coming from me.”

Sable watched me for a second longer before she nodded and went back to perusing the shelves. “Good.”

For the next twenty minutes, Sable scanned the shelves, picking up books here and there. Sometimes she would flip it over and read the blurb and others she would promptly put back down. Then she picked it back up and began to flip through the pages.

“If you want it, I’ll get it.”

Sable’s head shot up. “You’re not getting me a book. Besides, you’ve already gotten me a book for Christmas.”

“You’ve already read *Anna Karenina* so that one doesn’t count.” I snatched the book from her hands and flipped it over. “You haven’t read this one so it’ll be a new experience.”

I looked at Sable from the corner of my eye. She chewed on her bottom lip, her eyes fully focused on the book. I smirked and then sighed. “But if you really don’t want to get it. That’s cool. I understand. We’ll just put it back up here on the shelf and—”

“Now let’s not be so hasty,” Sable cut in, grabbing the book out of my hands and clutching the book to her chest. “I mean, if you absolutely have to get me this book then I won’t stop you from that.”

“You’re right. You can’t. Technically, you’re doing me a favor by accepting this book.”

Sable cracked a small grin.

For almost nine at night, this place had more people around than I expected. We waited in the check-out line and when I paid for the book, I handed Sable the bag. She gingerly took it and looked inside, as if the bookstore employee might’ve forgotten to put the book in there. Satisfied, she held the bag with one hand.

“So...” I said as I slid my wallet into my back pocket. “Wanna get some coffee or something to eat? There’s a Mexican restaurant a mile down the road that’s really good.”

She considered me for a second. “No, coffee’s good. But I’m paying.”

I knew what she was doing, trying to make up for the book. But I wasn’t a dumbass. I knew money was tight for her family and she was not spending a single dime tonight.

“Umm...no, you’re not.” I rested my hand on her lower back and steered her toward the cafe. “Besides, this is a date. I’m paying.”

Surprisingly, Sable didn’t put up too much of a fight. She ordered a large chai tea frappe and a croissant that looked like it was bigger than her head. I ordered myself a coffee.

I placed her frappe on the table and she put her straw in and greedily sipped. I watched her wearily. “You know it’s strange to get a frappe during the heart of winter, right?”

“Why?”

“It’s winter. Most people prefer hot cocoa — something to warm them up.”

“Not me.” She shrugged and took a small bite out of her croissant.

I watched her eat and she glanced at me self-consciously. “What?”

“Nothing.” I grinned. “This is just nice.”

She smiled. “It really is. I don’t have to look over my shoulder every few seconds,” she confessed.

My brows furrowed together. “Is that how you feel in Antsett?”

Abruptly, she closed her mouth, as if she’d said too much.

“Tell me,” I urged. “I want to know.”

“That’s how I’ve always felt. We both know what’s said behind mine and my sisters’ backs.”

“I know, but you almost make it sound like you live in fear.”

“It’s not fear. More like distrust. I can never let my guard down. That’s why I can’t wait to leave.”

“For college,” I supplied.

“For college,” Sable confirmed. She took a sip of her frappe and looked at me from across the table. “Speaking of college, have you been accepted anywhere?”

I took a drink of my coffee. “Yup. U of I.”

University of Illinois was my dad’s alma mater. I wasn’t exactly forced to apply there, but it was hinted at numerous times. But once I toured the campus, I knew that it was the place I wanted to play football at.

“That’s nice,” Sable remarked quietly.

“So what about you?” I broached. “Do you have your eye set on any particular school?”

“Yep.”

“Why am I not surprised?” I murmured.

“It’s important to be prepared!” she defended.

I held my hands in the air, palms up. “Hey, I’m not making fun of you. I think I’d be more shocked if you told me that you didn’t know where you wanted to go.”

Her cheeks turned red. “I’ve had my mind set on either Purdue or Millikin. But lately I’ve been leaning toward Purdue.”

“Why?”

Resting her elbows on the table, she leaned in, a look of excitement on her face. “I toured it a week ago and I love it. Lafayette is big, but not too big, so I didn’t feel completely overwhelmed. And the campus was amazing.” She pulled a worn pamphlet from her purse and slid it across the table. On the second page was a Purdue Campus Map. Streets were listed and buildings were colored in black and gold. I quickly scanned the map before I handed it back over.

“Sounds good.”

She gave me a funny look. “Really? You say that, yet you looked pissed.”

Was I pissed? I had no reason to be. I had no say in what college Sable decided to go to. So why did my stomach twist at the thought of her being a state away?

“It just seems far,” I finally said.

“It’s only three hours away from Antsett. Believe me, I did the math. If my sisters need me, I can be here quickly.”

I frowned. “Why would your sisters need you?”

And just like that, Sable folded back into herself. She shrugged and kept her gaze on the table. “You know...for emergencies and stuff.”

‘Emergencies and stuff’ was a cop out, but I wasn’t going to push it. One day, though, I was determined to uncover the truths that Sable so readily tried to hide.

Until then, I had no choice but to change the subject. “So what happens after you graduate college?”

“Are you asking if I’ll come back to Antsett after college?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, would you?”

I mulled over my reply. “If I found a job close to Antsett, I guess so.”

Sable could barely contain her disgust. “Not me. I’m not coming back.”

“Not even for your sisters?” I prodded.

She stiffened at that. “I’ll keep coming back to Antsett until all my sisters leave. But I’ll never stay there. Just visits.”

From the stubborn set of her jaw, I knew that she fully intended to go through with her plans.

“You really hate Antsett that much?”

Sable looked me straight in the eye. “I can honestly tell you I’ve never hated anything as much as I hate that place.”

My mouth opened, another question on the tip of my tongue, but out of the corner of my eye, I saw a dude in the corner, with a laptop in front of him, giving Sable and I annoyed looks.

“We should be going,” I said in a low voice as I nudged my head in the direction of the pissed-off guy. Sable tracked him with her eyes and slightly grimaced.

“You’re right.” She sighed. “Let’s go.”

I didn’t want to leave. Being one on one with Sable, getting to know more about her was starting to become a dangerous fixation for me.

We gathered our stuff and threw it away before we braved the winter chill and hurried back to my Jeep.

The ride back to Antsett was far too quick for my liking. By the time we pulled up to her trailer, it was around eleven. “Did I get you back in time for curfew?” I teased.

Sable snorted as she unbuckled herself. “I haven’t had a curfew in...well, ever.”

“Lucky.”

“It’d be nice to have some boundaries. To have someone care,” she replied so quietly, I didn’t even think she realized she said the words aloud.

There was a long stretch of silence. The party that was going on when I first picked up Sable was still going strong. If anything, I think the crowd has gotten larger. If it wasn’t for the chain-link fence, half this crowd would be in Sable’s front yard.

“Does that happen a lot?” I gestured at the wild party. Just then a guy with his shirt off, hunched over and vomited all over the place.

Fucking nasty.

Sable saw the same thing and sighed as she opened up her door. “Unfortunately.”

She hopped out. I turned off my Jeep and met her near the hood. “How do you sleep?”

She looked at me from the corner of her eye. “I don’t.”

Something told me that she was telling me the truth. Her car was gone from the driveway. And I couldn’t help but wonder if she noticed the tires...or the money. She didn’t mention anything and I definitely didn’t want to flat-out ask. So I tentatively broached the subject.

“Who has the car tonight?”

“Probably Alba. She randomly takes the car out and does God knows what,” she replied as she furiously rubbed her glove-clad hands together.

“I have a question.”

“Oh, God.” Sable groaned. “Is this another question about my name?”

“No, but I’ll be bringing that back up later.”

“Goodie,” she murmured.

“With one car and so many of you, how do you get around?”

“It usually depends on who has to work and when.”

“Do you all have jobs?”

“Just me, Alba and Maren.”

“Where do you guys work?”

Sable gave me a funny look. “Why so many questions?”

I shrugged and shoved my hands in the pocket of my jeans. “I’m curious.”

“Because I had a good time tonight, I’ll answer,” she said teasingly, as she began to walk toward the front door. I followed because I wasn’t letting her slip away so easily. “Maren started working at Dairy Queen in Rochester, and hopefully, this summer, she’ll be a lifeguard at the pool. Alba works at the grocery store in town and the assisted living facility in Rochester. Both part-time.”

“She works with old people?” I asked as I walked up the porch steps.

“No. She works in the dining room, filling out orders and giving them their food. Assisted living isn’t as bad as you’re imagining it. Alba did say that the nursing home next door is really depressing.”

“I’d rather take her job over mine any day.”

Resting my elbows on the railing, I glanced over at her. “And what is it that you do?”

“I’m a spray tanner at one of the tanning salons in Rochester.”

I cocked a brow. “Spray tanner? Don’t they have machines for that stuff?”

Sable came to stand beside me. “They do, but when people want ‘definition,’ they go to a spray tanner.”

“So you’re like a painter.”

“I guess you can think of it like that.”

“Are people all...naked when you spray tan them?”

“They used to be,” she confessed.

My eyes widened. “Used to be? What changed?”

“The fact that I had to spray tan a dude naked and his junk was all in my face.”

“You’re kidding.”

Sable suppressed a shudder. “Wish I was. He was an older man going on a trip to the Bahamas with a lady friend and wanted to be tan all over. That included his saggy balls.”

Grinning, I nudged her. “Hey now. No need to be cruel.”

She laughed. “They were. And the second another job becomes available, I’m quitting.”

“Just quit now. I’m sure you could find a job fairly quick.”

“I would need a guaranteed job in order to quit.”

“Why?”

“Because we have bills to pay,” she explained patiently, but that was all she said.

She stood next to me, her eyes going to the spot where her car was last. Her mouth opened and closed a few times before her lips formed a flatline. She knew about the tires and probably the money and chances were, she wanted to ask me about it. But Sable was such a prideful person. I didn’t want to embarrass her by bringing it up.

“I should probably go inside.” She sighed. “It’s getting too cold out here.” She grabbed her keys from her purse, but before she could unlock the door, I gently grabbed her wrist. In spite of the blaring music just steps away from us, I felt myself being sucked into her gaze.

My thumb brushed against the inside of her wrist. I smirked at the way her pulse jumped. “I wanna do this again,” I said.

“Stand on my front porch?” Sable asked with a shaky smile.

I arched a brow. “No. I want to see you again.”

Her eyes never left my face. “I’d like that,” she said softly. “But I need to know what we’re doing.”

Feelings and emotions weren’t my forte. Normally, I avoided them at all cost. Even now I was tempted to crack a lame joke. Yet the sincerity in Sable’s eyes stopped me dead. I approached her slowly. Sable took a step back and then another until her back was pressed against the door. I placed my hands beside her shoulders, trapping her in. “What we’re doing is taking things slow and hanging out.”

“Hanging out as buddies?” she asked with a challenging gleam.

At that, I smirked. “Sable, I have ‘buddies’ and let me tell you, I don’t think of them the way I think of you. At all.”

She crossed her arms. “And how do you think of me?”

“I could easily ask you the same thing,” I countered.

Sable raised both brows and hesitated. “We’re veering away from the original question.”

I smirked because I knew that I wasn’t the only one who wanted to avoid the feelings’ department.

“And us ‘hanging out’...what do you see happening?”

“Me and you getting to know each other better.”

Sable tilted her head back to look at me. “Your plan doesn’t work for me.”

I leaned in. “Why’s that?”

“Once you’re done getting to know me, am I going to be like every other girl that’s been before me? Will you forget about me?”

Without realizing it, my body shifted closer until her breasts grazed my chest. “Sable, there’s not a single thing about you I can forget.” My hands found their way to her waist. Above the waistband of her jeans, my hands slipped underneath her shirt. The soft, smooth skin of her lower back was so warm, I nearly groaned. “I think about you every day,” I murmured against her ear. “I’ve never had to work to get the attention of a girl. But I love this chase you’re giving me.”

“I’m not giving you a chase.”

“Aren’t you?” I rasped.

Sable swallowed loudly.

“It only makes me want you more. Makes me want to know everything there is about you. So when you ask if you’ll end up like the girls before you, the answer is no. It’s impossible.”

Several seconds went by before Sable replied, “Oh, that’s good to know.” Nervously, she licked her lips.

My eyes followed the action. I wanted to kiss her. Really fucking bad. But the rave going on next door was a major buzz kill. I looked over at the drunken crowd and muttered, “Fuck it.” There were no more second thoughts. I ducked my head and pressed my lips against Sable’s. I thought she’d be shocked, but she moaned with relief and linked her fingers around my neck, pulling me closer until there was no space between us. Dimly I heard the sound of her purse and shopping bag hitting the ground.

Her tongue met mine boldly, and when I tried to draw back, she gently sucked on it. Where the hell did she learn that?

Didn’t know, and honestly, didn’t fucking care. Just wanted more of Sable.

My hands moved down her body to cup her ass. I pressed her against my dick and moved my head to a different angle.

We could spar with our words just fine. But we matched each other kiss for kiss with an ease that couldn’t be duplicated.

Her hands moved down my neck and traveled down my chest. Her fingers slipped beneath my shirt. Her hands splayed against my stomach, nails digging into my skin as I intensified the kiss.

Every touch of her fed my desire. With ease, I lifted her and pressed her against the side of the trailer. Instinctively, Sable's legs wrapped around my waist. My dick was cradled between her legs and like she did in my room, Sable moved against me until I almost came right then and there.

All I could think about was getting her naked and fucking her.

I could do it. Fuck her right here. I needed her so damn bad, I couldn't think straight.

A loud crash from the party next door pulled me from my lust-filled haze.

With a violent jerk, I pulled back. The two of us stared at one another, our breaths choppy and uneven.

Sable pressed her palms against the trailer siding but never took her eyes off me. With her chest heaving, her breasts pressed against her shirt, showing her nipples.

Fucking A. She didn't even know what she was doing to me.

Blindly, I pointed to where I thought my Jeep was. "I-I need to go."

Sable nodded but didn't move.

I still smelled her on me. My hands craved nothing else but her body and she was right there. Why walk away?

I came back to her for a second taste because I couldn't help myself and Sable didn't stop me. Whatever there was between us, it was different from anything else I'd ever experienced.

Nothing felt like enough. I wanted more and more to sate my desire for her. I was fucking obsessed.

When I pulled back for the second time, our breaths were even more labored than before. If I didn't stop now, I wouldn't stop at all. The next steps I made toward the porch steps felt like my feet were wading through quicksand.

At the top of the stairs, I almost stopped, but I needed to keep going. There needed to be a healthy distance between us, so I could get my thoughts together.

"I'll see you later," I called out as I headed toward my Jeep. With my hand on the door, I finally looked at her. She was still standing there. It was a relief that she looked just as dazed as I was. Good. She felt this between us. It wasn't just me.

Maybe, just maybe, Sable needed me just as much as I needed her.



CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

SABLE

NOW

“HOW DO I LOOK?”

Alba glances my way for a millisecond before she goes back to the magazine spread in front of her. “Good. But that’s a given, considering you’re wearing my dress.”

I shoot her a dirty look. “This isn’t your dress.”

“Yes, it is. You probably don’t remember because you stole it so long ago.”

“Stealing is such a harsh word. I prefer the term ‘borrowed.’”

“Well, you’ve been ‘borrowing’ that for a good two years.”

“Can I point out to you that we share the same closet?”

I glance back at my reflection in the mirror. “But come on. Be serious.”

“You look ready to eat someone’s heart out.”

I look at Alba with surprise. “Wow, is that an actual compliment?”

Alba shrugs. “I’d give you a sarcastic comment but I’m too tired.”

“Does that mean you’re not doing anything tonight?”

She sighs and turns another page. “Nope. No plans. No date,” she confirms. “Although I’m going out with Joe tomorrow.”

“Why?” I whine. “Do I need to remind you of the Coldplay phase? I still get a small twitch in my left eye whenever I hear Chris Martin.”

Alba rolls her eyes. “You worry too much. Besides, you know my motto, Sable: Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice, shame on you again because I’m too prideful to admit when I’ve screwed up.”

“So you don’t want to get back together?”

Alba sits up on the bed and crosses her legs. “Eh. Not really. I’m just bored. This summer went to the crapper a long time ago. I can’t believe I’m saying this, but I’m actually ready for school to start. It’ll give me something to do besides go to work.”

Ironically, I feel completely different. For me, this summer is flying by in a blink of an eye. My excitement for college is still there, but it’s slowly fading. Replacing the excitement I once felt is fear. Fear for what will be.

“Even if I did want to go out, I couldn’t go anywhere,” Alba continues, “I’m going over to Ms. Nova’s with Lennon.”

Alba and Ms. Nova don’t have the most stellar relationship. They’re too alike and end up sniping at each other the whole time. Yet Alba still continues to regularly visit her.

“Well, sounds like you’re in for an eventful night,” I say as I put on my sandals.

“It beats hanging around here.”

“I couldn’t agree more.” Before I leave the room, I glance in the mirror one more time. I don’t know why I’m so nervous. Sam has seen me look like shit multiple times. Why should I care about how I look tonight?

“Oh, will you stop staring at yourself!” Alba groans. “You’re beautiful. He’ll be on his knees singing your praises and the two of you will ride off into the night.”

I roll my eyes and ignore the butterflies in my stomach. Seriously. What’s wrong with me right now? Maybe it’s because I feel like a great weight has been lifted from my shoulders. Thanks to Sam and Nick fixing the roof, Maren and I were able to pull enough money together to pay the electric bill. I know that it’s temporary bliss because, in a month, we’ll probably be right back in the same situation, frantically trying to figure out how we can pay every bill. But for now, it feels good.

I walk out of the room with Alba trailing behind me. “So where are you guys going?”

“I don’t know.”

“You don’t know?”

“I said, I don’t know.”

“I’m just shocked that you, the control freak, didn’t demand to know where you’re going.”

“I’m not a control freak.”

Just then Alba toys with a strand of my hair. I swat her hand away and she raises both brows.

“You’re making this more than it actually is.”

“Surreeeee,” she draws out dramatically.

We bicker back and forth, walking into the living room, but stop dead in our tracks when we see Mom dancing around. There’s no music playing. Just the TV on, where a sitcom plays. Lennon sits on the couch, her gaze veering between the TV and Mom.

Mom’s dressed in a blue jean skirt that looks two sizes too small and a black halter top. Her hair is hair sprayed within an inch of its life. She’s wearing enough blush and eye shadow for ten women. In one of her hands is a drink that’s probably ten-percent Pepsi and ninety-percent Svedka.

She turns, and when she sees us, she stops dancing, causing her to spill some of her drink.

“Girls!” she half-shouts. “I didn’t see you there.” She walks forward, her arms outstretched for a hug. When she sees me though, her arms drop and she smiles widely. “Sable, honey, you look so be-au-ti-ful!

“Thanks,” I mutter.

She takes another drink. From where I’m standing, I can smell the strong scent of alcohol. “Where are you going?” she slurs.

“Out.”

Her eyes narrow. “Out where?”

I sigh as I make my way to the kitchen. “I’m going to have dinner with a friend.”

She’s hot on my heels. “Who’s the lucky friend?”

I pause before I answer her. “Sam McShane.”

“I’ve already told you that he only wants to get in your pants!” she yells way too loudly.

Slowly, I start to inch my way toward the door. I remember the first time she met Sam and that was a nightmare in itself. I don’t need a repeat of that night ever again.

“It’s nothing, okay?” I reply coldly. “Just dinner.”

She snorts and takes another drink. “Just dinner?”

“Mom...leave it alone,” Alba says quietly.

“What?” Mom whirls around and glares at her. “I’m just concerned for my daughter!”

“The McShanes are good people,” she mutters.

“How do you know?” She stumbles over to Alba. “You spend time with them?”

Alba crosses her arms and leans against the wall. “No, but —”

“Hah!” She stabs a finger in Alba’s face. “So you don’t know them. They’re just typical rich assholes.”

For a second I think Mom’s done, but then she turns her attention to me. “I met your dad in high school...”

Don’t do this. Not now.

This is a tale as old as time. One that Mom never gets tired of telling. She first regaled the story to me when I was seven and I asked why other kids had Dads and I didn’t. She proceeded to tell me the truth. Every last bit of it. From her perspective at least.

“He promised he was going to take care of me. Give me a beautiful home with a white picket fence.” Mom snorts and

briefly looks down at the floor. “I was the dumb bitch that believed him.”

The story goes that Mom and Dad met in high school and got pregnant with me after she graduated. He promised he was going to marry her and they were going to settle down. Mom held onto every word he said and had me. Dad went on to get a job as a welder. He was making a decent income; he was taking care of me and Mom. She continued to believe a proposal was on the horizon, and then they got pregnant again. Soon after, Alba arrived, and there were a couple months of peace. Then Dad hurt himself on the job.

After workman’s compensation ended, he was calling in so much he eventually lost his job. And then he started spending time outside of the home. Mom thought he was trying to find a new job. What he found was a new woman and he saw a fresh start in her.

In the middle of the night, he packed up and we never saw him again.

Mom always refers to Dad as him and he. But my grandma once told me my dad’s name is David. She gave me a picture of him because Mom destroyed any pictures she had of him. In the photo, my dad was standing next to Mom on a porch balcony, their elbows resting on the handrail, shoulders slightly hunched. The two of them were wearing mutual expressions of surprise as they looked in the direction of the camera.

Alba’s blonde hair is from him. And it’s hard to tell, but I think he had blue eyes like Alba, too. Mom’s always had thin, almost delicate brows. But Dad’s were dark and thick. Just like me and Alba have. While I resemble Mom, it was nice to see the photo and know there’s proof that Dad existed and he wasn’t just the villain from Mom’s life story. I sometimes wonder if he was, and if he thought about us. But I would quickly push those thoughts aside. I didn’t need to feed myself with hope, only to be given more disappointment.

The story of Maren and Lennon’s dad isn’t filled with as much promise as the one my mom and dad had. She met their

dad, Kevin, at a bar and got pregnant with Maren after a one-night stand. Their dad, a truck driver, wanted to do right by mom and married her shortly after. But a man constantly on the road and a woman left at home with three young kids, trying to make a go out of life but finding happiness from the bottom of a bottle, didn't stand a chance. Shortly after Mom had Lennon, their dad left. I have vague memories of him. There was a lot of yelling and fighting during that time. We went to stay with Grandma for a brief period before Mom found this trailer.

“Mom...stop.”

“Shut the fuck up, Alba, I'm not talking to you!”

“This isn't fair.”

“This isn't fair? This isn't fair?” Mom advances on Alba until their faces are inches apart. “He left without saying goodbye. To me and to you girls. He left his family for some little slut he met at work, and I was left to take care of two young kids. That's not fair.”

Alba doesn't say anything. Just stares, stone-faced, at Mom. But that's not good enough for Mom. She wants a fight. She wants to scream and yell and hurt someone so she can feel just a bit better about herself.

“I'm simply trying to warn Sable that you can't trust the guys that seem nice and keep sniffing around. Eventually, they'll leave you high and dry. And then she'll have my life.” She turns to me. “Do you want my life?”

When I don't answer, she turns her bloodshot eyes to Alba. “Do you want my fucking life?”

Alba swallows, but like me, doesn't answer. After a long pause, Mom snorts loudly and shoves past Alba. “Don't know why I fucking bother.”

Seconds later, her bedroom door slams shut.

Alba and I stare at the stain on the floor where her drink spilled. Alba steps forward first. “I'll get this cleaned up. Go have fun.”

I stand there and watch as she grabs a towel from the kitchen. She wets a small section with water and gets to work scrubbing the carpet. “Alba, you don’t have to—”

Her head snaps up and she stares at me sternly, looking more like a mom than the one we actually have. “Go. Have. Fun.”

“Thank you,” I say quietly and leave the house before Alba can say another word.

The minute I step outside, I take a deep breath, expecting the night sky and soft breeze to calm me down, but it’s damn near impossible for that to happen when the neighbor’s dog is barking like a maniac and the couple two doors down are screaming at each other on their front yard. The guys telling her she’s a whore and he knows that she’s been sleeping around. She’s pleading with him to understand that she loves him and only him.

I close my eyes, take a deep breath and rub my temples. I can’t stay in this place. It’s halitosis for the soul. Rotting away from the inside, before it spreads outward.

Just then, headlights flash across our front yard. I look up just as Sam puts his Jeep into park. Seeing him is like a small beacon of hope that I still have a chance to get away from all this chaos.

Within seconds, I’m flying down the front steps and opening up the passenger door. Sam looks momentarily shocked at my arrival.

“I was going to get out and come knock on the door.”

“No need,” I say slightly breathless, as I buckle myself in. “I was already outside waiting.” I give him a bright smile. “Ready to go?”

No matter how many times he comes to my run-down trailer, I can’t get over my embarrassment. It’s impossible to ignore the disparities between our two families. At times, I can ignore it, almost accept my surroundings and then I step into his home and see the love and comfort his family has.

And I want that. I want that life to be a possibility for me.

When I come back to my small, rundown trailer, it seems so small and pathetic that I can barely stand to look at it. I'm always afraid if Sam comes here enough, he'll see just how miserable this place is and stop coming around.

Sam narrows his eyes for a fraction of a second, before he slowly looks me up and down. "Nice dress."

"Thanks." My body nearly hums from his appreciative gaze. Nervously, my fingers curve around the hem, smoothing it down around my thighs, trying to stretch the material to my knees like I'm a Puritan woman, but the action simply causes the material to reveal more cleavage.

This is what I get for borrowing a dress from Alba. The navy blue summer dress looked good in the closet, but it's a bit short. Before I left, Alba said it was perfect for a date. "Boys love some tits and ass. You're definitely getting a free meal tonight, Sable."

I gave her the middle finger in reply, but she's right, Sam's gaze zeros in on my breasts. My body always seems to betray me when it comes to him. He's not touching me, yet his gaze feels like a caress, causing my skin to break out in goosebumps.

"So where are we going?" I ask in a near squeak.

Sam smirks as though he knows the effect he has on me, and begins to back out of the driveway. "Have you learned nothing from the past? Sit back and relax."

For once, I don't question his words and actually relax in my seat with a smile on my face. It feels nice not knowing where I'm going. Can I do this all the time? Probably not. As the oldest, the controlling, responsible trait is a necessity. It comes to me as naturally as breathing.

Tonight Sam has the top down. I tilt my head back and look at the black sky. There's not a cloud in sight, allowing the stars and moon to shine brightly. I rest my elbow on the windowsill and lazily extend my hand, letting the wind thread through my outstretched fingers.

Family problems? What family problems. The longer my eyes remain closed, the further I feel from all the fucked-up issues in my life.

And you know what? It feels amazing.

We drive through Antsett, and rather than turning toward the city, Sam turns onto a country road. I turn toward him, a single brow raised.

“Just trust me,” he replies.

As we pick up speed, my hair whips around my face. I gather the errant strands in one hand and hold them at the base of my neck as I sneak furtive glances at Sam from the corner of my eye.

My heart seizes at the sight of him. He has one hand draped over the steering wheel, the other resting on the console. The wind rustles his lightened hair and causes his shirt to pull taut against his toned stomach.

His brows are slanted low in concentration. But that’s not what draws my attention. His profile is nothing but sharp plains and angles. High cheekbones, chiseled jawline, and sculpted lips. God, he’s too handsome for his own good.

As if he can sense me staring, he takes his eyes away from the road and lifts a questioning brow. Quickly, I look away and try to calm my racing heart. As I look forward, I see the Mound come into sight.

“So we’re not going to have dinner?”

“Oh, we’re having dinner,” he finishes his words by pointing in the back seat.

Twisting in my seat, I see the picnic basket. My eyes widen. “Oh, you made us a picnic?”

“Hell no. You don’t want to consume anything I’ve cooked. I ordered out, and *then* put it in the basket.”

Reaching back, I lift the lid of the basket. Immediately the scent of fried chicken greets me.

I let the lid drop with a thud and look at Sam. “Be still my heart.”

“Thought you might like KFC.”

“Is it original recipe?”

“Would I pick anything else?”

My stomach grumbles at the thought of eating all the delicious chicken.

Like all the times before, we park a good distance away from the park entrance. It closed hours ago, and there’s a gate barring entry. But that doesn’t stop us from coming out here.

As we get out, I grab the picnic basket, while Sam picks up a football from the back seat and tucks it near his armpit. I lift a brow. “Really? You brought a football?”

“Technically, I didn’t bring a football. I already had a football in here.”

I shake my head as I shut the door, but there’s a ghost of a smile on my face. “What are you going to do with it? It’s dark out.”

Sam walks around the Jeep and tosses the football in the air a few times before he looks at the sky. “There’s still some light out.”

Rather than take the entrance, we enter the park through the back, trudging through thick weeds. The grass scrapes against my calves. Cicadas buzz in the distance. As the thicket of trees loom ahead of us, the terrain becomes uneven.

Sam holds his hand out and I instinctively take it. Without a thought. Without question. When his hand holds mine, the lingering anxiety I felt from Mom’s outburst begins to ease, but it doesn’t entirely disappear. We walk up an incline, weaving through the trees. Sam moves with ease, but it doesn’t take long for sweat to break out along the nape of my neck and for me to fall a bit behind.

Sam looks over his shoulder at me. “Doing okay?”

“Never better,” I nearly huff.

Eventually, we make our way to the top of the Mound. From here, you can see the empty parking lot, Antsett, the country roads. From here, everything feels within reach. I look down at the stretch of grass before me. They always keep a portion mowed in the summer time. I remember being a kid and reaching the top of this very mound, only so I could roll down it with my sisters. We would giggle the entire time, reach the bottom and then repeat the process. When it snowed in the winter time, kids took their sleds here and had the time of their lives.

It didn't seem that long ago, but now those are memories firmly tucked away. Sam walks up beside me and looks out across the vast farmland. We stand there silently for a moment, lost in our own thoughts.

“You know this is a glacial kame?”

“What is?”

“The Mound. That were standing on.”

I can feel his eyes on me. “Hmm. Still have no fucking idea what a kame is. But interesting.”

Excitedly, I turn to him. “A kame begins to form as a glacier melts. This very kame has been here for seventy-five-thousand years.”

Sam shakes his head in disbelief. “How do you know this?”

“We took a field trip to the Mound in fourth grade and a park ranger told us.”

“So you've always been smart? Good to know.”

I nudge him before I go quiet. “You're smart, too, you know.”

Sam gives me a smile that doesn't quite reach his eyes. “At least one of us thinks so.”

Before I can reply, he slaps the football. “Come on. Throw this around with me.”

I gesture to the picnic basket. “But the food.”

“It’s not going anywhere. I promise. What is going away is the light.”

I give the basket a longing look and walk over to Sam. He looks to where I’m standing and the space behind us. “Well, back up. Let me throw it to you.”

“Oh, hell no. I’ve seen you throw a football. I can’t catch that, and if I tried, I might get knocked out. I’m not going long as you call it.”

Sam grins down at me. “I’ll go long then.”

“I don’t play football. Just take a few steps back and I’ll toss it to you.”

“Or I can teach you how to properly throw a football. How about that?”

“Deal. But this isn’t going to be pretty. I’m warning you now.”

The corner of Sam’s mouth lifts into that self-assured half-smile of his. “By the time I’m done with you, you’ll be able to throw better than half the quarterbacks in Central Illinois.”

“Does that include you?” I counter.

“Don’t get ahead of yourself.”

I wait for his instructions, but instead, Sam stands behind me. At once heat spreads throughout me. His arms and hands cover mine as he gives me the football.

“In order to control the release, hold your index finger near the top. And never grip the ball too tightly.”

I stare between the football and his hand swallowing mine and try to focus on his directions.

“Now see how your hand naturally forms a V?”

I nod and take a deep breath but immediately regret it because I’m instantly engulfed in the scent of Sam. The earthy aroma of sandalwood isn’t overbearing, yet I find myself leaning against the wall of Sam’s chest, just so I can breathe him in.

Sam's body freezes, then, "Did you hear what I said?"

"Yeah, of course," I lie.

"Perfect," he says, his lips grazing my ear. "Let's move onto your stance."

"I don't think I need to--"

"Feet need to be wider than your hips," he continues as if I never spoke. His hands drop from mine, only to land on my waist. "And your knees need to be slightly bent."

Following his directions, he presses my ass against his dick. My chest tightens as Sam's fingers dig into my skin against my hips.

"When you make your pass, your arm needs to be at a ninety-degree angle. Almost like your arm is making an L-shape." Sam adjusts my arm into the correct position.

Honestly, he could adjust my body into the shape of a pretzel. That's how pliant and breathless I feel right now.

"Think you got it?" he asks.

"Totally."

I don't got it. Not in the slightest.

Sam takes a step back and the absence of his body makes me want to reach out and pull him back to me. But Sam's already running down the Mound. When he's a good distance away, he claps his hands. "Ready, Cole. Show me what you got."

Heavily, I sigh. "This is going to be bad," I mutter.

Keeping in mind everything he said is impossible, but I try. When I release the ball, Sam springs into action, his eyes never leaving the ball. But I didn't give him much to work with. My throw doesn't fly through the air with a beautiful spiral like Sam's. Instead, it crashes like a kite on a windless day and veers far left. So far left, it almost gets lost in the trees.

I watch as Sam picks it up and hustles toward me until he's standing in front of me with a small smirk playing on his lips.

When it comes to football, we both know Sam has full license to dissect my awful attempt to throw a ball.

“Well...you tried,” is all he says.

I arch a brow. He’s being generous. “I suck. I’ll stick to reading.”

“I think that’s best.” He grins, and as I lose myself in that beautiful smile and begin to smile back, I hear the shrill sound of my mom’s voice, *Eventually, they’ll leave you high and dry. And then she’ll have my life. Do you want my life?*

Those words are like a bucket of cold water being dumped over my head. My smile fades and I take a step back, tucking my hair behind my ear. “Can we eat now?”

I can feel Sam’s searching gaze, trying to understand what caused the abrupt shift in my demeanor. I stare back, refusing to give anything away, and eventually, he takes a step back, gesturing toward the picnic basket. “After you.”

I can’t let my mom ruin this evening. If I do, she wins. Silently, I watch as Sam opens the basket and pulls out a blanket. I know my mom has preconceived notions of Sam. The same way people judge me based on my mom and her lifestyle. She doesn’t know him the way I do. Doesn’t know how thoughtful, kind and funny he is. And I could tell her all about the true Samson, but it wouldn’t change the fact that there are similarities between me and my mom. She fell for my dad in high school and I fell for Sam the same way.

Do you want my life?

I visibly shudder at her words. I refuse to stay in this small town. There’s more in this life out there for me. I won’t be deterred or anything else.

He isn’t like your dad, my heart screams. He isn’t like the men your mom brings home.

As though he can sense the direction of my thoughts, his head lifts.

He’s Sam.

My thoughts swirl in every direction as I walk toward him and quietly sit down on the blanket. By now, it's completely dark out, illuminating the stars in the sky.

“What’s on your mind, Cole?”

As I begin to help Sam unload the picnic basket, I let the truth free. “I’m thinking of how wonderful it will be to get the hell out of Antsett.”

Sam, who’s in the process of opening the bucket of chicken, lifts his head. “Why’s that?”

I shrug and continue to place food on the blanket. “Because then I won’t be labeled as Annie Cole’s daughter.”

“You think that’s your label?”

“Sam, if I stay here, I know that will always be my label.”

He’s quiet for a moment. “Has *it* been bad since I’ve been gone?”

I know what *it* is. He doesn’t need to elaborate. *It* extends to the people of Antsett, the whispers and dirty looks they have for me and my sisters. Under the cloak of Sam’s protection, people weren’t as bold or brazen as they once were; I’m now labeled as Sam’s girl.

I’d accept that label and assumptions as to how I became his girl, so long as they left my sisters alone. “Sable?” Sam prods.

“It hasn’t been too bad.” I lift my eyes, my gaze clashing with his. He’s staring at me stoically, “Just a few whispers here and there.”

“You know they’re assholes, right?”

A small laugh escapes me. “You don’t even know what they said.”

“Don’t have to. They’re already assholes in my eyes.”

His unfailing protection of me and my sisters is like a band-aid over the fresh wounds my mom made on my heart.

I look down at the blanket. “We both knew you couldn’t protect me forever,” I say quietly.

“If you let me, I would.”

I swallow; the urge to give into those words is so tempting, yet I have to stay rooted in reality. He’s leaving at the end of the summer. So am I. And although we’re creating the rules to our “friendship,” that doesn’t mean he’ll remain in my life forever.

I sigh, my hands landing on my knees. “Are we going to eat or let the food spoil?”

Sam doesn’t reply; he just hands me a plate and then the two of us begin to fill our plates. Mashed potatoes, cole slaw, biscuits, chicken. I grab it all. I don’t care that it’s cold. I’m ravenous and barely come up for air.

Once my plate is empty and I go for seconds. “Aren’t you full yet?” Sam asks, his voice coated in amazement.

“Almost,” I reply around a mouthful of chicken.

The only time I receive meals so filling are with Ms. Nova. Who knows when I’ll have this opportunity again. So I eat until my stomach begins to ache.

When I’m finished, I wipe my hands on a napkin and push my plate to the side. “Now I’m done.”

Sam hands me a water bottle. “We have a few pieces of chicken left if you want them,” he offers.

I gulp down the water and shake my head. “Ask me in a few minutes.”

“I’ve seen three-hundred-pound lineman eat less than you.”

I shrug. “Hidden talents. What can I say?”

“What other talents do you have?”

“Hmm...what talents do I have...” I ponder for a second before I snap my fingers. “Oh, I have one! My talent is I find fictional characters better than real-life people.”

“That’s not a talent and I already knew that. Tell me something I don’t know about you.”

“You said a talent and now you want to know something about me? Which one is it?” I tease.

“The latter because my mom has told you so many stories of me growing up, yet I never get to hear a single thing about you.”

“Oh, yes. I love a good Sam story. I think my favorite is when you cried watching *Babe: Pig in the City*.”

“I was six when my mom showed me that movie and you vowed you’d never tell.”

“I won’t,” I say as my body shakes with laughter.

Sam moves toward me, and before I can roll out of the way, he tackles me on the blanket. His fingers find the spot where I’m most ticklish: my stomach.

My laughter grows louder as I try squirm out of his grasp. “Okay, okay. I’m done laughing!”

When the amusement fades, I realize he’s on top of me, arms bracketed around my head. With him this close, his breath mingles with mine. My breasts graze the hard wall of his chest. All it would take for our lips to meet is for me to lean forward a fraction of an inch. That easy. My fingers clutch the blanket at my sides, as I fight every instinct telling me to reach out and touch Sam. I know he feels that tug of attraction by the pounding of his heart. I lie there, my body almost shaking as I wait for him to make the next move, when he abruptly rolls onto his side.

I don’t know whether to be relieved or disappointed.

His body is still pressed against mine, but I take a deep breath and stare up at the sky, trying to clear my head.

“Come on,” Sam says after a long stretch of silence. “Tell me something I don’t know about you.”

“Fine,” I say. I link my fingers together and rest them on my stomach as I try to think of a story that isn’t completely

humiliating. “One time Alba tried to wax my legs by melting crayons,” I blurt.

“You’re kidding.”

“Nope. I have a scar on my leg to prove it.”

Sam turns on the flashlight on his phone, immediately illuminating the area. “Show me.

I point to my left calf and sit back and watch as he bends over me, inspecting the scar. “What the hell?” he mutters before he lifts his head. “What were you thinking?”

“We were eleven and twelve, and we saw a Nair commercial on TV. We didn’t have the product so we had to get creative.”

“Let me guess, Alba thought of it.”

“Bingo.”

He relaxes against me, his crossed arms resting on my right leg. He props his chin on his bicep and looks my way. “But why did you go along with it?”

“Because even though I’m the older sister, I was the guinea pig to all her dumb ideas.”

Even in the dark, I can feel his smile. And maybe it’s that smile of his, or the darkness of the night. Perhaps it’s the combination of the two, but I find myself embracing the idea of opening up more to him. He’s been away at college for a year, and although we texted each other here and there and I saw him on social media, it was nothing compared to talking to him in real-life, in-person.

This is what I craved.

“I tutored another football player my senior year.”

Sam’s body stiffens. “Yeah? Who was it?” he says casually.

“Troy Jones?”

“Oh, I remember him. He’s a fucking tool.”

I jerk my knee. “He wasn’t that bad.”

“I remember him on the football team and he was as perverted as Drew. If not more so.”

“Well, he wasn’t perverted with me.”

“Because he was trying to get in your pants,” Sam counters.

“He didn’t get in my pants!” I say impatiently.

“Good,” he grunts. There’s a small pause. “What else did I miss?”

“You missed Alba dramatically breaking up with a guy who she thought was the one. She cried about that guy for a while then when the tears dried, she took everything he got her and burned it.”

“Sounds healing,” he says dryly.

“It’s Alba’s way of healing.”

So it continues. I tell him more about my last year of high school and the comings and goings of my sisters. The antics of Ms. Nova across the street. I tell him everything I wanted to message him about, but didn’t have the courage to write.

Well, not everything. I don’t tell him how badly I missed him. Some things I will always keep close to my heart.

But as I talk, Sam listens to every word, inserting a remark here and there. He’s genuinely interested in my life, and I can feel the length of time that we spent apart becoming smaller and smaller with each word until there’s no words left for me to say.

“How was your first year at U of I?” I ask.

Sam heavily sighs. “Intense.”

“How so?”

“Well, it’s certainly not Antsett, I can tell you that. The campus is massive. People are everywhere and there’s always something to do.”

“I guess that’s good,” I reply. “Did you need a tutor for your classes?”

“I did.”

“How was she?” I keep my voice indifferent as I ask the question, but my entire body is on edge as I wait for him to answer.

“*He* was great. His name is Tyler and he’s a junior, who doesn’t have a sense of humor, but he knows his shit like you do.”

I shouldn’t feel relief that he had a male tutor. I shouldn’t even care. But I do. “Well, I’m glad to hear it. Have you decided what your major will be?”

“Only you ask these questions.”

“They’re important.”

“Do you still have you’re major picked out?” he asks.

“Yep. Still social work. Once I get my bachelor’s, I hope to get my master’s.”

Sam whistles. “I should’ve known better than to ask. Of course you have it figured out.”

I knew what I wanted to do in life when I was little. I never wanted a child to go through what me and my sisters went through. When I told my counselor last year, I was still just as determined. “Are you positive, Sable?” he asked. “Social work can be difficult, and highly emotional. You’ll work with vulnerable people and often times, when you try to help, your efforts go nowhere.”

I knew the counselor was trying to warn me, but my mind was made up. I wanted to try and do good. Try and make an impact.

“You’ll make a good social worker,” Sam says. He reaches out and squeezes my lower thigh. A reassuring touch that everything else may be against me, but he believes in me.

“Thanks.” I stare at his large frame draped across my legs and feel my heart squeeze tightly. Quickly, I look away and stare at the twinkling lights of Antsett. “You never answered my question. Have you picked a major?”

“Sports medicine.”

“And do what?”

“Either a physical therapist or an athletic trainer.”

I think about it for a second before I nod. “I can see that.”

I feel Sam shrug. “But right now, I only care about football.”

Of course he did. His entire world is football. “How did you do this year?”

Another shrug. “Not as much playing time as I wanted.”

I followed him on social media. It gave me a window into his life, but given that Sam rarely posted, that window was small. So I did what every girl does, I Googled his ass.

I knew the truth. Sam played nearly every game, and was starting to amass the same cult-like following he had in Antsett. I think when people recognize talent, no matter the arena, they’re immediately drawn into the person’s orbit. They see the potential and power that will eventually come to fruition.

That’s Sam’s first year of college football. I went over to Ms. Nova’s trailer more than once to watch one of his games and even I was dazzled. His power and skill were undeniable. When he came onto the field, the cheers were overwhelming. He didn’t start at the beginning of the season, but by the end he was.

In one editorial, there was a picture of him standing on a sideline during a practice. He was gripping the face mask of his helmet, his massive biceps flexed as he intently stared out onto the field. His hair was every which way, and sweat traveled down his temples.

I stared at every part of that picture until my eyes crossed and Maren walked up behind me. “You’ve been staring at the screen for ten minutes. Just call the guy,” she said.

I never did.

But I continued to quietly follow Sam's football season, knowing he deserved all the hype and praise he was receiving.

"You played almost every game," I find myself saying.

"Did you watch me?" Sam counters.

"I think there might have been a game or two on a few times. That was it."

"And what did you think?"

I answer him truthfully. "I think you're amazing on the field."

He lifts his head and I can feel his gaze on me. All I can hear is the sound of the cicadas in the distance as he slowly rises over me. "You watched me play and never said a word. What else did you do that I don't know about?"

"That's it."

My skin begins to tingle and feel hot all over. The dress clings to my breasts. I want to pluck the material away from my skin and fan myself. Take a breath and slide out from under Sam, but he'll only follow.

Even in the dark, I can sense the heat of his gaze.

"That's it?" he repeats.

I nod because if I say a word, I'm afraid it'll come out as a moan.

Sam slowly dips his head. "I think you're lying." His voice is rough as it trails against my skin. Goosebumps break out across my body, and my nipples pucker. I'm hyperaware of every shift of his body and that he's moving closer. The hard wall of his chest brushes against my breast, and I nearly gasp.

"Sable?"

"Hmm?"

"You didn't answer."

Blinking rapidly, I try to put him into focus. But my attention is on his body, not what he's saying. "I...uh..." My

mind scrambles as I think of what he said. “Why would I lie,” I rush.

“Because you want to appear like you don’t care, but we both know the truth.”

Sam dips his lower body and his dick brushes against me. My body aches so badly for him that I can’t help but arch into him.

“Push me away, Sable. Tell me you don’t need this.”

My chest rapidly rises and falls. I can’t think, breathing is starting to become nearly impossible. I have one thought running through my head: *take him. Take him right now.*

With a moan, I lift my head. My hands curl around Sam’s neck as my lips crash against his. I fall onto the ground, pulling him with me.

My body feels as though it’s on fire as his lips slant over mine. As his tongue sweeps into my mouth, his hips rock against me. I hold him tighter; my world feels off balance. I need something to hold onto.

My tongue moves against his and we find a steady rhythm, but gradually our hands seek more. We seek bare skin. Our kisses become messy and almost desperate.

Sam’s body shifts, one of his thighs is shoved against my legs. His lips travel down my neck. He tugs on one strap of my dress, taking my bra strap with it, until the material hangs down my arm. The swell of my breast is exposed and as his lips touch the bare skin, I arch into him.

He doesn’t linger long as he continues his exploration. As his body moves down mine, his hands curl around the hem of my dress, tugging it higher and higher as he moves lower and lower.

And I don’t stop him. My legs willingly fall apart because I want this so much. The anticipation makes me clutch the material of the dress tightly against my stomach.

A shaky breath escapes me when his head moves between my legs. As he hooks his fingers on the waistband of my

underwear, I lift my hips, anxious to get rid of the extra barrier. I need his hands on me right now.

A finger brushes against my sex once, then twice. “Jesus, you’re wet, Cole.”

Restlessly, I shift beneath him. But he places a large palm against my lower stomach, holding me in place. And then his mouth replaces his fingers.

My mouth opens, but no sound comes out.

God, I forgot how good this felt. My hips rock against him as his tongue flicks against my clit.

My body jerks, my fingers clutch his hair, holding him tightly against my sex.

With a chuckle, he resists and pulls back. “You taste just how you look: forbidden and sweet.”

His words vibrate through me, making my eyes roll back.

Just when I think it can’t get any better, Sam slides a finger inside me. Instinctively, my legs curl around him.

Sam groans and continues to feast on me. His finger moving rapidly, and my chest begins to heave as I fight for control. But I’m trying to win a losing battle. I gave up control the moment my lips touched Sam’s.

So I give in.

My hips lift, searching for the release I desperately need. No matter how I move, Sam’s mouth stays in place, his fingers working in tandem with his mouth. The tension inside continuing to build.

“That’s it. Come for me, baby.”

His words only heighten my desire. My back arches as the tension inside builds and builds until ripples of pleasure rock through me.

“Oh, God,” I cry.

As my body spasms, I tightly hold onto Sam, too afraid to let go of him.

My body becomes lax as I stare up at the starry sky. Panting, Sam crawls up from between my legs. And before I have the chance to pull my dress down, Sam beats me to it. He slumps beside me, his chest heaving as he watches the sky.

All that can be heard is the sound of our heavy breathing. Eventually, the two of us gather our composure. I feel Sam's hand move around my neck. He adjusts our positions, until my head is on his chest, and his arm is wrapped around my shoulder.

My eyes close and a feeling of contentment fills me. Eventually, Sam's hand moves my hair, his fingers gently combing through the strands. I haven't been this relaxed in so long. I place a hand on his chest, soothed by the strong beating of his heart.

“Should I take you back?” he asks.

The mere mention of ending the night has my fingers curling around the material of his shirt. “No, let's stay a bit longer,” I say against his chest.

I feel him nod, and thankfully, he continues to stroke his fingers through my hair.

My eyes want to shut so badly, but I refuse to fall asleep and forget this moment. “Sam?”

“Yeah?”

I hesitate before I ask the question lingering on my mind. “What do you feel when we're together?”

The hand stroking my hair pauses for a second before it resumes. “There's nothing like it.”

My eyes close. I feel my heart breaking apart. Nevertheless, I tilt my head back to look at him. “And when we're not?”

He meets my gaze. “I wouldn't know. I've never been with another girl after you. You're the only name written on my heart.”



CHAPTER NINETEEN

SABLE

NOW

I'VE BARELY LAID MY HEAD ON THE PILLOW AFTER SAM DROPS me off sometime around midnight when the door knob to our room starts to rattle loudly.

Within seconds, my grogginess disappears. I sit up in bed and look around the room. My sisters are sleeping quietly.

The knob rattles again. This time, more persistently.

My heart is beating like a drum. Very slowly, I get out of my bed, making sure not to step on Alba, and as quietly as possible, I open the nightstand drawer. My hand blindly moves things around, but I quickly find the gun and pull it out.

It's not loaded. In fact, I don't think it's ever been loaded. Sometimes it seems ridiculous to even have this, but it's necessary; when you've had multiple men throughout the years — that your own mom has brought home — try to get into your room, you need to defend yourself.

If it actually was loaded, could I pull the trigger? Doubtful. Just holding the gun makes my heart pound. But deep down I know, that if it came down to protecting myself and my sisters, I would.

Not including tonight, I've aimed it at three different men.

I move toward the door. The rattling stops, almost as though the person on the other side knows I'm ready and waiting.

A second goes by. By this point, I'm positive the person on the other side can hear my irregular heartbeat.

The rattling starts back up again, and before I lose my courage, I swiftly unlock the door and open it wide enough for me to stick my arm out and point the barrel against his throat. Most of the time, staring into the barrel of a gun is enough to make them balk, to tuck tail and run. I'm hoping this guy will do the same.

His black hair's slicked back. And his dark eyes are blood shot. He looks stoned out of his mind. His shirt is off with his belly hanging over his jeans.

Disgusting.

He looks between me and the gun, surprise creeping into his eyes.

"Go away," I whisper firmly.

"Hey, hey, hey." He holds his hands up in the air and gives me a charming smile. I have no doubt that it's the same one he gave my mom. "There's no need for that."

I don't lower the gun. "Go."

"I was just looking for the bathroom."

I nudge my head toward the open door, not two steps away from him. "Right there."

Instead of leaving, he leans against the door and smiles. "Darlin', why do you have a gun? Aren't you a little too young to be holding something like that?"

"Aren't you a little too old to be sniffing around a minor's room?"

His smile fades. "There's no need to be all huffy, all right?"

"Go," I say once again.

I'm scared out of my mind, but I'm frantically scrambling for what I should do next. Maren's the last to have the cell phone, spending half the night texting Nick. Maybe if I close the door quick enough and re-lock it, I can grab it from her and call 911.

As I'm thinking of ways to protect my sisters and me, the man tries to grab my hand.

There is no thinking. My reaction is instinctive; my knee lifts up and hits him between the legs.

At once, he lets go of my hand and drops like a rag doll, whimpering worse than a wounded animal.

There's not a single part of me that feels bad for him. I stare down at him as he writhes on the ground, cupping his balls.

With him down for the count, I feel brave and open the door wide enough so I can peek my head out the door. "If you ever come into this house again, if you ever try to get into this room again, I will cut your dick off and shove it so far up your ass, you'll have to have it surgically removed." My gaze never wavers. "Are we clear?"

He's still writhing on the ground, acting as if I actually shot him. I give him one last glance and then shut the door, quickly turning the lock. That won't be enough though. So I push the dresser across the room and place it in front of the door.

This process started when I was eleven. Before we started to spend the night with Ms. Nova. Back then, the visits from the strange men were weekly. We had no gun then, so Alba and I would push my twin bed up against the door. We would take turns staying awake, but neither one of us ever slept.

None of my sisters wake up, which is just proof that they can sleep through pretty much anything. Tonight, I'm grateful for that.

I hurry to Maren's bed, prying the phone away from her hands.

I sit on the floor, my back resting against the dresser. I strain to hear what's going on in the hallway. It's quiet for what feels like forever and then finally, I hear the floor groan as the man stands up, and mutters loud enough for me to hear, "Fucking bitch."

Time seems to trudge by before I hear the front door slam. A truck with an obnoxious exhaust cuts through the silence, making me jump. Headlights flash inside our room. Seconds later, he peels out and drives away.

He's gone. We are all okay and yet I sit there, my back resting against the door. The gun clutched in one hand, the

phone in the other. I hold my breath and press the numbers 911 on the keypad. My finger hovers over the call button.

The neighbor's dog barks loudly. I hate that damn dog so much, but tonight, his obnoxious barking is soothing. Even though the room is pitch black, the street light outside still manages to peek some light in through the sheet acting as a make-shift curtain. I can see the outline of the note cards tacked to the wall across from me. I'm too far to make out the words, but I can recite them in my sleep. Yet there's no amount of motivating, uplifting quotes in the world to lift my spirits right now.

After a while, my heartbeat becomes slow and steady. But my adrenaline makes sleep impossible. Eventually, I delete 911 and stare at the keypad. Sam's probably asleep in his bed. If I call, I know he'll answer, but I don't want to bother him. So I settle against the dresser and stare up at the ceiling.

I don't believe in hoping because hope is for the rich. But sometimes I do like to wonder, to dream of what my life could've been if my sisters and I had a different family. One like Samson's.

I remember when I first came over to his family's house. I was so nervous. So scared they were going to be just like everyone else in Antsett and judge me.

But they were the exact opposite and readily accepted me into their world...



CHAPTER TWENTY

SAMSON

THEN

THE SECOND BELL RANG, WARNING STUDENTS THAT IF THEY didn't hurry, they'd be late to class.

I leaned against a set of dark blue lockers in no rush at all. I made good on my word and saw Sable as much as I could. In and out of school. Frequently, I'd meet her between classes and after school, whenever I had the chance.

Rumors were running rampant about the two of us and every time we were seen together just added fuel to the fire.

I didn't give a shit.

Let them talk and while they were talking, I'd be spending time with one of the most fascinating girls I'd ever met.

Finally, she walked down the hallway. Her head was down and on top of the stack of books in her hands was her planner. She had to be the only person in school that still used one.

As if Sable could feel my eyes on her, she lifted her head. When she saw me, she jolted, causing the stack of books in her hands to tip over and crash to the floor. She quickly bent down to pick them up. I went over and helped her. When I handed her the last book, she muttered, "Thanks."

We both stood up at the same time and she rushed to her locker.

"You're going to be late, Ms. Cole," I teased as I leaned against the locker next to hers.

Just then, the bell rang loudly enough to make my ear drums ring. Sable looked over at me and arched a brow. "I could say the same to you."

"This hour is study hall for me. So I'm ditching." I curled my fingers around the lip of her locker and leaned in. "Shocking to see you're not in a rush to get to your next class."

Sable knelt down and carefully put away her books. Her locker was neat and organized. Everything had a place, unlike mine that was chaos. Sable helped me clean mine a few weeks ago, but it was already back to its original state. “Yeah, but around this time is when I do some more tutoring. Today I don’t, so I’m leaving early. If you’re ditching this hour, why are you still here?”

“Because I was waiting for you.”

Sable slammed her locker and looked me in the eye. They danced mischievously. It was a rarity for her to ever let her guard down during school. We were together every chance we could get. During school, though, she watched everyone with a tense expression, almost like she was waiting for someone to ask why we were together.

It didn’t matter how much time went by, Sable couldn’t ignore the whispers. She couldn’t seem to let their words brush off her shoulders and always took them to heart.

Outside of school though, all those words seemed to disappear into the air. We sometimes had study sessions at the only restaurant in Antsett, but most of the time, we met at the Mound. For the first time, I wasn’t letting my dick guide the way. I took my time with Sable, finding that the more I knew about her, the more fascinating she became.

We walked toward the parking lot, our hands linked, fingers intertwined with a natural ease.

A student late to class rushed down the hall. I think she was a fellow senior. When she spotted me, she slowed her steps and smiled. But that smile faded as she saw the hand connected to mine. Pure disdain filled her gaze as she took in Sable.

Beside me, I felt Sable stiffen.

Letting go of Sable’s hand, I placed a protective hand around her waist. The girl tilted her chin and looked away in disgust.

“Ignore her,” I murmured against her hair.

“Easy for you to say,” she replied.

As my anger faded, my hand moved up Sable's back, and draped around her shoulder. "It's easy for me because I have nothing to hide and I know how fucking amazing you are."

Sable lifted her head and gave me a smile that I felt all the way to my toes. Every secret smile she gave, or when our eyes met from across the room, the same sensation hit me. Gradually, Sable Cole was sinking her claws into me, but I didn't want to shake her off. She could plunge them further, just as long as her smile was for me and me alone.

We walked out of the school and across the parking lot in companionable silence. Spring was in full bloom and with that came that inevitable itch to break free from the confines of school. It was my last year and I felt that itch more than ever.

Two more months and you're done with high school. Forever.

With that reassurance came the reality check that Sable wasn't. She still had one more year.

I wasn't going to think about that. Not right then when I had her with me, and everything was just as I wanted it. Distracting myself, I grabbed my keys from my pocket. If I didn't have practice, more often than not, I took Sable home.

"Before I forget, I can't make our session today," I said as I held open Sable's door.

The small glimmer of private Sable came out as she glanced at me from the corner of her eye. "Why not?"

"Early baseball practice. But I was wondering if we could study at my house?"

Sable, who was in the middle of buckling up, abruptly stopped. She stared at me as if I'd lost my mind. "Your house?"

"Yeah."

"Oh, your house," she stated. Her nails tapped against her thigh as she stared straight ahead. "Where you live?"

"One and the same."

Silence.

“Is something wrong with that?” I asked slowly. Sable chewed on her bottom lip, not answering.

“Sable?”

At the sound of her name, she jolted slightly and turned to me. A long stretch of silence passed between us before she took a deep breath. “What time?”

There was no way in hell I was going to push it and ask what she was thinking about. Deep down I knew that I just won some unknown battle — Sable was meeting my family.

I smiled. “Six is perfect.”



“IS SHE HERE YET?”

“Does it look like she’s here?”

Audree stopped skipping around the coffee table and grinned. “Maybe Thable could be invisible!”

Audree’s lisp had gotten better, but Sable’s name was a glutton for punishment. Coming from Audree’s mouth, her name was pronounced, *Th-able*.

“She’s real. I promise you, Audball.”

I told my parents that she would be over tonight, and unfortunately, Audree was in the room at the time. Since then, she’d been my shadow, following me around and constantly asking when she would show up.

“Is Sable okay with meatloaf?” Mom hollered from the kitchen.

I walked down the hall with Audree trailing behind me. “I don’t know,” I said as I entered.

Mom blew her bangs out of her eyes and peeked into the oven. She gave me a distracted look from over her shoulder. “Did you ask?”

“No.”

She shut the oven door and turned back around, peeling off the oven gloves. “You should’ve asked.”

“I didn’t know that was a requirement. You know we’re just studying, right?”

“She’s a guest,” Mom said, completely ignoring my question. She said the word guest as if Sable was something more.

“She’s not a guest,” I rushed.

Mom raised both brows, suddenly interested. I replied far too quickly and she knew I was hiding something. Curling her hands around the edges of the counter, Mom tilted her head to the side. “What is she?”

Audee stood beside Mom mimicking her body language. “Is she your girlfriend?” she chimed in and broke out into a fit of giggles.

“No, she’s...she’s...” I tried to find the right word as I looked between the two of them. And then the doorbell rang. I grinned. “Here.” I pointed to the two of them. “Stay here.”

Within seconds, I was out of the room, trying to outrun Audree, but the girl was quick, skirting past me and flinging the door open.

Sable looked between Audree and me. A nervous smile on her face.

“Hellllooooo,” Audree said.

Sable gave Audree a mega-watt smile. One so bright and beautiful that I felt like I’d been punched in the gut. Audree looked unfazed, completely oblivious to the fact that what she just experienced was a rarity. Kind of like a total eclipse.

“Hey,” I said.

Sable’s head snapped up. The smile transferred into a secretive one. One just for me. “Hey,” she replied.

I was seconds away from pushing my baby sister out of the way, grabbing Sable’s hand and taking her up to my room so I

could have her all to myself. But then Audree began to slowly walk a circle around Sable. She stopped in front of Sable and craned her neck back. “Are you okay?”

Sable frowned in confusion. I had no idea where Audree was going with her questioning, and I didn’t want to know. Before Sable could reply, I put a hand over Audree’s mouth. “Okay,” I said as I guided her away, “that’s enough talking.”

Not to be outdone, Audree narrowed her eyes and sucked in a deep breath. “Mom!” she yelled. “The tutor is here!”

For a second, alarm flashed through Sable’s eyes. Audree giggled and skipped down the hall. Any chance I had of avoiding introductions went down the drain.

I rubbed her shoulder and said into her ear. “It’s all good. They just want to say hi.”

She nodded mutely and in an un-Sable-like move, she followed closely behind me, almost clinging to my shirt. I wasn’t going to pull away.

“This isn’t going to be like the Spanish Inquisition, is it?” Sable whispered, her worry written across her face.

“We can only hope not,” I deadpanned.

She shoved at my back, and I laughed.

Right then, Stanley came out of the kitchen. The wheels of his dog cart squeaked. He gave me his signature uninterested look, barely glanced at Sable and rolled on down the hall.

If a robber ever broke into our house, we were all fucking screwed.

Sable twisted her head to watch him walk away. “Who was that?”

“Stanley.”

“What happened to him?”

“I’m not entirely sure; we got him from the rescue shelter. I think he was run over and he had to have his back legs removed. That was years ago and he still looked pissed off that

Audree was one of his owners and he had to endure her squeals.”

Sable grinned. “Barely five minutes in your house and how I expected this night to go has gone out the window.”

“What did you expect, *The Brady Bunch*?”

“Actually, yes.”

“Sorry to disappoint you,” I said as we walked into the kitchen.

Audree quickly tugged at Mom’s shirt and rudely pointed at Sable. “See. The tutor,” she said, none too quietly.

Mom shooed Audree’s hand away and smiled at Sable. “It’s good to see you again, Sable.”

She wiped her hands off with a rag and walked around the kitchen island. As Mom came closer, Sable stiffened slightly. It was barely noticeable, but I saw it.

Mom reached out to shake her hand. I think Sable’s hand was in hers for approximately two seconds before she snatched it behind her back.

Mom acted like she didn’t notice and smiled. I gave Sable a questioning look, but she was looking around the room with open curiosity and a little bit of fear, like a little kid who was lost.

This shy, timid girl standing next to me was someone I’d never met. I almost felt like I was privy to a side of her that no one else had ever seen. I didn’t know what to think of it.

“I know my son was rude and forgot to tell you that we’re having dinner. Have you eaten?”

Sable shook her head, that same slightly-glazed over look on her face. What was wrong with her?

“Excellent. Why don’t you sit down? Dinner is almost ready.” Mom gave her one last smile and gestured to the kitchen table a few steps away before she rushed back to the oven.

Sable stayed perfectly still. It was like she was frozen in place.

“Are you okay?” I whispered into her ear.

She jolted slightly and nodded before she quickly moved toward the table. She looked at each chair, unsure of where to sit.

“There’s no assigned seating,” I said with a smile. “Choose any seat.”

Tight-lipped and slightly pale, Sable walked around the table, choosing a seat that would give her a perfect view of the entire kitchen. I smiled because that was the Sable I knew.

“So you’re tutoring Samson...you must be an extraordinarily patient person,” Mom teased.

“That I am,” Sable said with a nervous smile. Her gaze flicked to mine questionably, almost like she was seeking prompts from me.

Stanley loudly arrived in the kitchen. He promptly went to his empty food bowl. Glanced at Mom with a look that said: *Where the fuck is my food?*

“I’m sure you’ve already met Stanley,” Mom said.

Sable smiled. “I have.”

“He was happy when we got him and then he realized that he had to live with Audree’s constant smothering and now he’s a grumpy old pup,” Mom joked.

“The only reason we got him was because Audree killed her hamster,” I chimed in.

“It was an accident!” Audree said, her eyes welling up with tears.

“Of course,” Mom said gently as she grabbed the meatloaf from the oven. She kicked the door shut with her foot. “Audee, go tell your dad it’s time for dinner.”

“Daddddy!” Audree yelled so loud that I cringed. “It’s time to eat!”

Mom just stared at her. “Did you get the words tell and yell confused with each other?”

Audree just shrugged and walked over to the table. Instead of sitting at her usual spot, which was to Mom’s right, she sat in the seat right next to Sable and grinned. “I want to sit next to you,” she boldly said.

Sable smiled at her. “That’s perfect because I was just going to ask if I could sit next to you.”

“Really?”

“Absolutely.”

Not even ten minutes in my house and Sable already had my little sister wrapped around her finger.

“You didn’t take her coat or bag?” Mom muttered in my ear.

My mouth opened, ready to tell Mom she was wrong. But I stopped short when I saw Sable’s book bag and coat hanging from the back of her chair.

“I forgot,” I said defensively.

“I could’ve sworn I raised you with manners. Instead, you’re staring at the poor girl like you’ve never seen the opposite sex.” She narrowed her eyes at me. “Everything platonic between the two of you?”

At her question, my entire body stiffened. I looked over my shoulder at the table. Sable was leaning toward Audree, intently listening to one of her stories. I turned back to my mom. “Everything is fine between us. She’s just my tutor. Which by the way you should thank her for that. Without her, I wouldn’t have known what platonic meant.”

“Oh, Samson,” she sighed with an all-knowing look.

Before she could say anything else, I walked back over to the table and took a seat to Sable’s right.

“Everything good?” she asked with a heavy intensity that took me aback.

“Yeah. It’s cool. Why?”

Sable glanced at my mom, an indecipherable look in her eyes. “Just asking.”

“I hope you like meatloaf. I know Samson didn’t ask you” — Mom gave me a pointed glare — “So I can make you something else.”

“No, no,” Sable quickly spoke. “Meatloaf is perfect.”

That earned another smile from Mom. If Sable was trying to get brownie points, she was succeeding.

“Is that meatloaf I smell?” Dad asked as he walked out of his back office.

Sable stiffened, staring at my dad as if he had three fucking heads.

“Sable, is it?” Dad smiled at Sable.

Sable nodded.

Dad was completely oblivious and reached across the table, holding out his hand. “Nice to meet you.”

Sable looked at it for a few seconds before she hesitantly reached out. It was a limp-wristed handshake, much like the one she gave my mom.

Dad slightly frowned and glanced over at me with confusion. I shrugged a shoulder.

“All right,” Dad said as he sat down. “Let’s eat!”

Steaming hot food was passed around the table. Drinks were filled. It was a normal dinner for our family, but it wasn’t for Sable. She stared at everything avidly, as though she’d never seen food before.

Grabbing the ketchup, I squirted some next to my meatloaf. I put the bottle back down and saw Sable gawking at me.

“What? You’ve never had ketchup with meatloaf?”

“No, I have. I’ve just never had meatloaf with my ketchup,” she volleyed back.

“It’s not that much,” I argued, but when I looked at the amount, I had to admit she had a point.

Sable shrugged and smiled mischievously. “Sure. Whatever you say.”

I went to answer her when I caught my mom watching the two of us. It was the same look she gave Audree when she did something ‘cute.’

I tried to catch her eye, but she pointedly looked at Sable and cleared her throat. “So Sable...how is it tutoring Samson?”

Internally, I groaned. Considering Sable’s strange reaction from the minute she stepped into my house, I expected her to clam up, but she just put her fork down and smiled at my mom. “It’s been...interesting.”

Both of my parents leaned in.

“How so?” my mom asked.

Before Sable answered, she looked me in the eye. My parents know of my struggles, but the last thing I wanted to talk about tonight was that. Arching a brow, I waited for her answer. Sable turned back to my mom. “I don’t think it’s a secret that Sam doesn’t enjoy reading, but he tries.” My mom’s eyes flicked in my direction. “And he actually has very insightful thoughts.”

“He does?” Dad asked the same time I said, “I do?”

Sable turned my way. “You do. Who could forget your in-depth opinions on Kitty from *Anna Karenina*?”

The title of that book alone made me groan loudly. “Longest book I’ve ever read.”

“It wasn’t that bad!”

“You are—” I stopped abruptly when I saw my parents glancing between the two of us. Mom looked at me, thousands of questions dancing in her eyes, all of them centering around Sable.

“All right,” I said abruptly “Let’s talk about something else.”

“Oh, I know something we can talk about!” Audree piped up.

“God. Yes. Anything,” I muttered.

Audree twisted in her seat, with ketchup smeared across her cheek. “Sthable, do you have siblings?”

“Yes, I have three sisters.”

“Three!”

“Mmhmm.”

It was fascinating — watching how Sable’s demeanor completely changed around Audree. She talked sweetly to my sister, but not in a humoring kind of way that most people typically did.

“Are you the youngest?”

“Nope. The oldest.”

“You’re like Sammy!”

Sable looked over at me. “I guess I am,” she replied.

“No one is like me,” Audree bragged.

I leaned forward, looking past Sable at Audree. “What are you getting at?”

“Well, you’re the oldest. And then there are youngest and middle kids. But I’m a margarita baby!”

Mom choked on her food. Dad spit out his drink and Sable had the biggest grin on her face.

“Margarita baby?” my mom coughed out.

“Yeah,” Audree looked around the table curiously. “Sammy told me that one night you had too many margaritas and that’s how I was born into the world.”

All eyes slowly turned to me, my parents accusingly. Sable’s were dancing with mischief.

“Samson!” my mom admonished. “Why would you say that?”

“She asked for a scary story a few nights ago and I gave her one. Besides, I didn’t think she’d remember!”

“Clearly she did.” Mom looked Audree’s way and gave her a smile. “You’re not a margarita baby. You were a surprise, but we love you so much.”

“But I want to be a margarita baby!” Audree protested. I swear her eyes started to well up with tears.

“No, you don’t,” Dad said.

Audree seemed to mull over Mom’s words. Then she asked, “What’s a margarita?”

“It’s a special kind of drink, sweetie,” Mom said.

“Can I have a drink of it?”

In unison, my parents said, “No!”

Dad dropped his fork onto his plate and rubbed his temples. “Now I need a margarita,” he muttered.

“Can we all stop saying the word margarita?” Mom snapped. Her eyes scanned the table before they veered back to Sable. “We have a guest.”

“You guys are fine,” Sable quickly reassured her. “Trust me.”

“Your family is loud like ours?” my mom asked.

“My sisters and I are always loud,” Sable replied.

Her answer may have gone unnoticed by my parents, but not by me. Sable was sure to say, ‘my sisters and I,’ leaving out her mom.

I knew her mom drank and did drugs. I knew she was hardly Mom of the Fucking Year, but what I didn’t know was whether she was ever there for her daughters. Or were they left to fend for themselves? Who was I kidding? I knew the answer. It was Sable and her sisters against the world.

I looked at Sable from the corner of my eye, right when Audree was telling her a joke. She tilted her head back and laughed. And not a fake one either. It was one so genuine. Yet how could someone this kind and pure come from something so dark and sordid? How did she have the strength to rise above it all?

After the awkward margarita talk, dinner went much smoother. The tension in Sable's shoulders slowly faded, and at one point, she started to talk to my dad.

Overall, Sable fit in with my family better than I could've imagined.

A few minutes later, most of our plates were empty.

"I better start cleaning up," Mom said.

"I'll help," Sable quickly said.

Mom looked momentarily shocked; it wasn't like the rest of us were jumping up to help. "That'd be wonderful."

As they got up, I downed the rest of my soda. Before I could put the drink onto the table, Audree's face was inches from mine.

"Shit!" I jumped back.

She leaned closer and smiled, revealing her top two missing teeth. "Do you likkke her?"

"Audree, shut up."

"I like her. She's nice to me," she bragged as though we were in some sort of competition.

"Think so?"

"I know so," she stated confidently. "You should marry her and have babies with her and then you'll be like Ken and Barbie."

What the hell?

My dad and I made eye contact. "Audree," my dad cleared his throat, "there's no need to talk about marriage or babies yet. Sable and Sam aren't together."

“That’s why they should be. They could be happy like Ken and Barbie.”

Dad awkwardly hemmed and hawed his way through telling Audree that babies and marriage were for when you’re adults.

I stopped listening when Audree asked why you had to wait until then. Instead, my attention was focused on Sable. Thankfully she and Mom were clear across the room, completely oblivious that Audree was talking about marriage and babies. They were happily chatting and I tried to imagine what it’d be like with Sable regularly coming over for dinners, becoming someone that my family got to know...

Forget Audree’s marriage talk. What the hell was I doing?

But if I was honest, I’d admit that the thought wasn’t all that bad. I did want them to know Sable and see her for the wonderful person she was.

Finally, after the awkward marriage talk was over, the three of us got up and cleaned off the table. Well, Dad and I did. Audree just stared at Sable, looking at her from front to back as if she was some kind of specimen she’d never seen. There was a deep look of concentration on Audree’s face, too. Sable noticed, every so often giving Audree a curious, but kind smile.

Ten minutes passed and Audree was still staring. I stopped cleaning the counter and crossed my arms. “Audree, what are you doing?”

She turned her big, blue eyes to me. “I’m worried about, Thable.”

“Why?”

“Because she doesn’t look hurt.”

Audree said quirky stuff that came out of nowhere most of the time. But this was so random that everyone looked at each other confused.

“What are you talking about?” I asked.

“You said that Thable was coming over because she finally got that stick removed from her butt.”

Sable turned toward me, both brows raised. “You said what?”

Oh, shit.

“The conversation didn’t go exactly like that,” I quickly said.

“So how did it go?” Sable asked.

I shot Audree a look. She blinked at me, her eyes innocent.

Rubbing the back of my neck, I groaned. “I was just kidding around you know...since you’ve...”

My voice trailed off as I looked at my parents. I didn’t want to say any of this in front of them but they weren’t going anywhere. In fact, they were blatantly staring.

“Since you’ve changed so much from when you first started tutoring me,” I explained. Sable looked unconvinced, so I looked over at Mom. “Help me out? You were the one I said this to.”

She held up her hands. “Leave me out of this. You’re on your own.”

I glared at Audree. “Thank you for that,” I said.

My sarcasm flew right over her head. She frowned at me before she looked back at Sable.

“So are you better now?”

“Oh, yeah,” Sable replied breezily. “Never better.”

“Okay. We’re going to go study now.” I picked up Sable’s book bag, grabbed Sable’s arm, intent on dragging her out of this room if I had to, but stopped dead in my tracks when I saw my mom staring between the two of us before her gaze locked on mine. I saw the message in her eyes loud and clear: *Keep your hands to yourself.*

Normally I’d say she was overreacting, but tonight, she was spot on.

“Oh God,” I muttered as we walked down the hallway. “That was a fucking nightmare.”

Sable just smirked before her gaze swung to the stairs. “Your parents are okay with us studying alone?”

“Of course,” I lied. “I’m not going to jump your bones with my parents just steps away,” I said, my voice lowered.

Sable arched a brow but turned and walked up the stairs. She took her time, staring at each and every picture that was hanging on the wall. As luck would have it, most of them were of me growing up and family pictures.

A faint smile appeared on her lips as she stopped in front of my first-grade photo. “Aww. It’s little Samson.”

I peered closely at the photo. Like Audree, I’m missing my two front teeth. The right side of my collar on my red dress shirt was sticking straight up. Back then I had a high-fade haircut which gave me a ridiculous cowlick.

“I look terrible,” I commented.

Sable playfully punched my shoulder. “No, you don’t.”

“Let’s not lie. We both know I do.”

She quickly scanned the photos and pointed to one at the top. “What about that one?”

I followed her gaze. Shit. Eighth grade school picture. If I thought the first-grade photo was bad, this was on a whole new fucking level. Zits. Braces. And half my hair in my eyes because I thought it was ‘cool.’

“I don’t remember you looking that way,” Sable said.

My mouth remained shut because I didn’t remember what Sable looked like at all during middle school.

“You know, payback is a bitch,” I said teasingly. “I need to look at all your school photos now.”

“I don’t have a lot of school photos so you’ll have to plot your revenge in a different way,” Sable replied. Her tone was light and breezy, but her smile had slightly faded.

Quickly, I tried to think of a way to dig myself out of my comment, but couldn't think of one. Tonight just seemed to be going from bad to worse and I had no fucking idea how to make this better.

We walked up the rest of the steps in silence. As we walked into my room, I looked over my shoulder, half-expecting Audree or my mom to be coming up the stairs, but there was no one.

I shut the door behind me and quickly grabbed a pair of dirty boxers and socks lying on the ground, stuffing them into the laundry basket before Sable turned around. That might be the first time I'd used that damn thing.

Sable was oblivious, looking at the small amount of pictures on my wall and the calendar tacked above my desk. It had some picture of a blonde with her tits practically showing.

Sable subtly rolled her eyes. I smirked.

"This isn't the first time you've been in here, you know," I pointed out.

"No, I know," she said as she continued to peruse my room. "But the last time, it was in the middle of the night, with only a TV on. Now I can see everything in all its glory."

"I bet the view was better in the dark," I replied dryly, before I pushed away from the door. "Take a seat."

She stopped walking and turned to face me, a mischievous gleam in her eyes. "I would, but you see I had this surgery and sitting down can be difficult for me now."

I openly cringed. "Again, I didn't think she would hear that."

"I think that Audree proved tonight that she hears and remembers everything."

"Most dinners aren't always that eventful, by the way."

"So tonight is my lucky night," Sable remarked as she walked around my room. She looked over her shoulder at me.

She didn't realize the effect that look had on me. Innocence mixed with an invitation. If my family wasn't downstairs, I'd have her pinned to the bed and my hands on her tits.

Loudly, I cleared my throat. "I guess it is," I said.

Sable sat down on my bed and I nearly groaned. It was taking all my self-control not to launch myself at her. "You know, your sister told me to call her Audee."

I whistled. "She gave you permission to call her by her nickname? That's pretty fucking exclusive."

She smiled as she pulled out her copy of *The Bell Jar*. "She's adorable."

"We're talking about Audree, right?"

"I'm serious," Sable laughed.

"So am I. She may have looked all cute and sweet tonight, but she has a nasty little streak that can be unleashed," I said as I grabbed my copy of the book and sat down next to her.

I should've kept space between us, but I sat close enough so our legs were pressed against the other. Sable didn't tense up or move away, like I knew she would in public. Instead, she leaned against me. I lived for these moments, collecting them like trophies.

"You know who your sister reminds me of?"

"Who?"

Sable gave me a dubious look before she frowned down at *The Bell Jar*. "Oh, never mind. Forget I said anything."

"You can't say something like that and then be all, 'Oh never mind,'" I said, mimicking her voice.

She smiled.

"Tell me," I urged.

With a sigh, she said, "You might not like this but she reminds me of Alba when she was younger."

Even knowing the Sable I know now, I couldn't stop my face from twisting into slight disgust.

Wrong move.

Sable looked away; her jaw clenched.

"Sable, I —"

"She's a good person," she cut in. I went completely quiet. "You see the person she is now. But I know who she really is and that's someone who is a closet dreamer. Who secretly loves happily ever afters and roots for the underdog."

I leaned in closer, but Sable didn't notice. She had a faraway look in her eyes.

"Are you the closest to Alba?"

"I guess you could say that," Sable said quietly. "We're so close in age that she almost feels like my twin. The same goes for Lennon and Maren. I get along just fine with them, but sometimes, it feels like they're a decade younger than me, even though it's just a few years."

I smiled faintly. I couldn't help it. I'd seen the dynamic between all the sisters. The way they interacted was fascinating to say the least.

Sable leaned back slightly. "What's that look for?"

"You and your sisters are unique," I replied and I meant every single word.

Sable tapped her fingernails against the book cover. "Can we change the subject, please?" she asked abruptly and then waved the book in her hands in the air. "Or possibly work on your homework?"

Her eyes were pleading for me not to press this subject. So I nodded. "Let's get started."



ABOUT AN HOUR LATER, I OFFERED TO TAKE HER HOME.

As we walked out the front door, my mom lifted her head from my dad's chest. They were sitting in the living room, watching TV. Audree was sprawled on the other side of the couch sleeping.

"Are you leaving, Sable?"

Sable walked over to the living room doorway. "Yep."

Mom smiled. "It was nice getting to know you."

"Thank you for having me. I had a great time."

"You're always welcome here, sweetie. Have a good night."

"You too," Sable said, almost faintly.

We hurried out the front door. Well, I did; I was worried that Audree might wake up and say something else that would embarrass the shit out of me. The night had ended on a good note; I wanted to leave it at that. The last thing I need was for Sable to be even more pissed off at me.

I pressed the unlock button on the key fob. The headlights flashed once in the darkness. I walked around the Jeep as Sable hopped into the passenger seat.

She shut the door and dropped her book bag between her legs. Placing my arm on the back of her seat, I twisted around and backed out of the driveway.

Before I could put the Jeep in drive, she said, "I don't want to go home."

I turned her way. She was staring out the window, her face blank. "Where do you want to go?"

"I don't know. Let's go anywhere." I was dying to know what was running through that brain of hers but said nothing.

"Maybe the Mound?" I suggested.

The Jeep idled in the middle of the road, yet I didn't put it in drive. Not until I knew where Sable wanted to go.

She nodded once and said, "Sounds good."

I quickly drove forward, one hand draped over the top of the steering wheel and the other on the gear shift. Unsurprisingly, the drive was completely silent. Every so often, I would look over at Sable, but she continued to stare out the window.

The Mound was a mile ahead, but I couldn't take the silence much longer. I jerked the Jeep left and parked on a gravel road, connecting one country road to the next. Most of the time, these roads — and I use that word lightly — were used by farmers to easily pull into fields.

I put the Jeep into park and turned off the engine.

Sable looked around in confusion. “What are we doing out here?”

Ignoring her question, I said: “Sable, I'm sorry if I've pissed you off.”

She looked taken aback and gave me a funny look before she sighed. “You didn't piss me off.”

“Then why are you so quiet?”

“I'm just thinking.”

“About what?”

She gave me a sideways glance. “Why does it matter?”

“Because *you* matter and you're so fucking quiet all the time, I can never tell what you're thinking, and it's starting to drive me crazy.”

Sable slouched low in her seat, until her legs were touching the glove compartment. “I was just thinking about how different our families are.”

My shoulders relaxed somewhat; it was a relief to finally have a glimpse into her mind, no matter how small that glimpse was, it was still something.

“Are they really that different?” I asked tentatively.

Dumbass question. I knew that, but I said the first thing I could think of, just to keep the conversation going.

“I think we both know they are,” Sable replied.

Silence.

Then, she said so quietly I barely heard her, “You’re very lucky to have them.” There was a sad quality to her words. I had no idea how to respond to that. “We were at the same dinner, right?” I asked jokingly.

Sable smirked. “I stand by my words. They were great. But I have a question.”

“Ask away.”

“Did you tell them to be nice to me?”

That was the last thing I expected her to ask. I cocked my head to the side. “What?”

Awkwardly, Sable fidgeted in her seat before she sat up. “Did you tell them to be nice to me before I arrived?”

“Hell no. My family is polite. But they’re not that polite.”

The smile on Sable’s face was strained. She looked away and picked at her frayed shorts.

I sighed and drummed my fingers against the steering wheel. “Why did you ask that?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know...I’m just not used to that kind of friendly response.”

“I didn’t have to tell them anything. They have eyes. They can see who you really are.”

Sable shifted in her seat, facing me fully. A shaft of silver moonlight spread across half of her face. “Who am I, Samson?”

Nervously, I bounced my leg up and down. Half the damn night I’d wanted Sable’s attention, wanted her alone, wanted her not to clam up on me. And here she was. She was so fucking beautiful, I didn’t know what to do with myself. My tongue felt three sizes too big for my mouth. I swallowed before I carefully spoke. “You’re a special person with a special heart and you deserve a special kind of love.”

Sable stared at me with fascination, almost as though she was trying to decode my words but couldn't find the real message.

I dropped my hands from the steering wheel and dragged them through my hair. Sable was still looking at me and it was starting to make me nervous. I gave her a half-smirk. "I can say that about you, right?"

She nodded.

"Good. Because I kinda like you, Cole."

She swallowed and leaned across the console. "I kinda like you too, McShane," she whispered.

Then, in a rare act, Sable moved even closer and kissed me. Every other kiss before this was initiated by me, and honestly, I didn't care because I was fucking crazy about Sable and I'd walk over hot coals, if I had to, for a single kiss. But having her take the reins made my dick hard within seconds.

Her tongue slipped into my mouth and a strangled groan escaped my mouth. Sable crawled over the console and straddled me. I sucked in a sharp breath. My reaction didn't stop her for a second. Her hands slipped under my shirt and drifted up my chest. Her fingers were shaking, nails digging into my skin, and fuck if it didn't make me want her more.

She kissed me so hard, I couldn't see straight. I closed my eyes and curled a hand around the back of her neck. I became restless though, because I wanted to touch her everywhere. My hands moved down her body and curled around the hem of her shirt. I tugged it up an inch or two, but stopped. I wasn't going to push Sable. The next move was hers.

And she took it. Gripping the hem of her shirt and lifting it over her head. She tossed it into the passenger seat. I could finally put to bed all the fantasies I'd had of seeing Sable like this. My imagination hadn't done her justice.

I'm usually not one for details. In fact, unless something had a flashing light blinking above it, I'd barely notice. And when it came to bras, the only thing I knew about them was how to quickly remove one. But right now, I took in

everything about Sable. It just seemed wrong not to. I noticed the white lace lining the edges of her bra and how the left strap was threadbare and worn, looking like it'd snap at any second.

Most importantly, I noticed how her tits were practically spilling out.

Sable didn't cover up like I thought she would. This girl was a little wild. Uninhibited — the complete opposite of how she was in public.

I loved it.

My hands flexed convulsively at my sides. It was taking all my power not to touch her. "Shit," I muttered.

Sable smiled and it was the same inviting smile that she normally gave me privately. That smile gripped me so tight, it felt like thousands of tiny nails digging into my flesh. For a second, I wanted to pull back, wanted to move as far away as possible from this foreign feeling. But that second came and went and I found myself sinking into that smile. Sable gripped my face between her hands and tilted my head back and continued our kiss.

My hands curved around her breasts and squeezed. Sable shifted, causing my dick to rub against her pussy.

I tried to match her move for move, but she was too fast.

This made me hold her a little tighter, kiss her deeper.

This fiery game we were playing was driving me crazy in the best way possible. But I knew...I knew that if this went any further, there was no way in hell that I would stop.

"Wait...wait," I panted.

Sable pulled back a little and blinked rapidly. "What's wrong?" she asked, her brows furrowed together.

I wanted to tell her that she had no idea how fucking bad I wanted her, but that she deserved more than making out and groping in a Jeep.

Yet the words didn't come out and my hands refused to move from her body. I swallowed loudly and forced the words

out.

“What are we doing?”

She swallowed and I watched the slender line of her throat. “I don’t know,” she whispered. “But why did you stop?”

“Because I didn’t take you here to do this,” I said, my voice low.

She leaned back slightly, until her back was resting against the steering wheel. “How long have we been tog- hanging out?” she rushed out, trying to cover up the word she meant to say.

I looked at her pointedly, and even in the dark, I saw her cheeks go red.

“We’ve been together for months,” I replied.

“Right,” she said slowly. “And in those months, you’ve never tried anything.” She sat straight up and curled her hands around the headrest behind me. “I trust you, Samson.”

My mouth opened, but then my eyes veered south and all words left me.

Her tits were in my face and I did...nothing.

Absolutely fucking nothing.

My mind had shut down on me. My mouth parted and my hands inched their way up her stomach before they stopped. That view was slowly destroying any resistance I had. Which, let’s be honest, was hardly nothing.

I needed to say something right now or I never would.

“Sable...” My grip around her hips involuntary tightened.

There was no explanation, no reason for the war raging inside my mind.

I had no fucking idea what I was doing. Which was ridiculous because there had been multiple girls before Sable.

But none like her, my conscience whispered to me.

I gulped down my doubts and traced the swell of her breasts before I reached both hands around her and unhooked

her bra. The straps slid down her arms before the bra fell all the way off. Sable tossed it on top of her shirt.

Her skin slowly became covered in goosebumps, and her nipples puckered. Sable started to cover herself, but I held her hands to her side.

“God, you’re beautiful,” I croaked.

My hands slowly trailed up her arms to her full breasts. They filled my hands and then some. “Jesus,” I muttered.

My thumbs brushed across her nipples, before I dipped my head and placed my mouth over one. Her hands curled around my shoulder as she moaned. The sound made me suck harder.

I pulled back, my mouth making a loud pop. All that could be heard was the sounds of our panting mingling together.

I wanted her so badly, my entire body was shaking. Minutes before I had rational thoughts and control. Now I couldn’t tell you my full name if you paid me to do so.

It was too fucking hot in here. And I wasn’t close enough to Sable. Nothing would get me close to her smooth skin.

As my lips moved between her breasts, Sable’s fingers sank into my hair, holding me tightly.

When I lifted my head, I was ready to kiss her. But she had a different idea and was already dragging my shirt up my stomach.

“Anxious, are we?” I said as I pulled my shirt up and over my head.

Sable’s palms landed on my bare shoulders, and gently massaging. “You can touch and I can’t?”

I leaned back in my seat, taking Sable with me. “You can do whatever you want to me. I’m all yours.”

I kept my hands at my sides as Sable’s fingers drifted down my chest, leaving a trail down my stomach. She was slow in her exploration, treating my body like a map. Right when I thought she was done, her fingers traced the hem of my shorts, and then moved back up my stomach.

She was slowly driving me insane.

I gripped the arm rests so tightly I'm surprised they didn't break off the seat.

She splayed her hands across my chest and then stopped. "Your heart is pounding."

"Because you're killing me," I panted.

"We can stop if you want," she said, far too innocently.

"God no."

I brought her mouth back to mine and kissed her with a hunger that took my breath away.

Her fingers brushed across my chest, and when her finger brushed across my nipple, my hips jerked. Repeatedly, she flicked a finger against the tip. My body shook so hard, it was a wonder the Jeep wasn't shaking.

This need for Sable Cole was uncontrollable and all-consuming. I could take deep breaths and try to get a hold of my sanity. I could get control of this situation and pump the brakes but then what am I back to? Fantasies of Sable.

This was the real-life thing. Right here in the flesh and blood, and far better than my imagination could conjure up.

As though she could sense my thoughts, Sable looked at me from beneath her lashes. The corner of her mouth tilted up.

My hands moved to the button on her shorts. Sable exhaled a shaky breath, but she didn't stop me. Not when the button slipped free or when I pulled the zipper down. Her shorts sagged and neither of us moved.

Once again, I waited for Sable. It had to be her choice.

When she slid her shorts down her legs and kicked them off, I didn't move a muscle, too afraid any action would change her mind.

I wanted her underwear following suit, but if this was what I got, I would gladly take.

Her head dipped down as we met for another kiss. Her tongue moved against mine, before she gently sucked on it. Breathing deeply through her nose, she pulled back before she came back. It was as though she was gathering the courage through each kiss.

But there was nothing to be collected or built. She was safe with me.

My hands moved to her face, and I slowed the kiss until I pulled away and brushed my thumb across her lower lip. “We go at your pace. Okay?”

Even in the dark, I could feel Sable’s assessing gaze. She nodded and caressed my cheek. “What if I told you I wanted more?” she whispered.

I swallowed.

Go slow, go slow, go slow.

“Just tell me what you want,” I replied, my voice ragged.

One of her hands curled around my wrist. Slowly, she lowered my hand between the two of us and placed it on her pussy. “I want you to touch me here.”

Fuck me. She was soaked through her panties.

I pressed my lips together to stop myself from groaning, and pushed her underwear to the side. The moment I rubbed a finger against her lips, she jumped. My opposite hand wrapped around her waist, holding her in place.

Gently, I stroked Sable. As my finger became drenched in the scent of her, Sable’s thighs began to shake. Slowly, I sank a finger into her pussy, and I heard the harsh intake of breath from Sable. Her hands wrapped around my neck for balance as my finger moved in and out.

“Jesus you’re wet.”

“I need you,” Sable whimpered.

After those three words, everything became a blur.

Taking my time just wasn’t possible. I felt like a live wire with every part of me alert and tingling. A second finger

joined the first and Sable was rocking her hips against my hand. Her breath was shallow and I knew she was on the brink of losing control. I tilted my fingers at an angle and moved faster. It didn't take long until Sable was gripping my neck. "Oh, God. Oh, God," she panted.

She jerked once, then twice and her body sagged against mine. "That was...that was amazing," she panted.

"Yeah?" I bit out.

I wanted her so badly it hurt to speak.

She lifted her head, her breath mingling with mine. "Can we keep going?"

"Sable, you never have to ask me that. The answer is always going to be fuck yes."

Very quickly our clothes created a pile in the passenger seat until all that was left were Sable's underwear and my boxers.

"Are you sure?" I asked gruffly, praying that she said yes.

Sable was panting and rapidly nodded. "I'm sure," she replied.

Before she could finish her sentence, I pulled her underwear down. It was taking far too long, so I tore the seam of her underwear near her hip.

"Sam!"

"I'll buy you another pair," I said as I pressed open-mouthed kisses against her neck.

My boxers came off next, nearly becoming stuck at my knees. Once I was free, I gathered Sable to me, relishing in her soft, smooth skin. Before things could go any further, I reached for the glove compartment. Sable bent her head and kissed a path down my jaw. If I didn't hurry, I was going to get off on just that. It took me five tries to open the compartment, and once I did, everything spilled out. I blindly rifled around until I grabbed a small, square film wrapper. I ripped it open with my teeth, which made Sable laugh lightly.

My hands fumbled as I put on the condom. This wasn't my first time, but from the way my hands were shaking and the way my heart was beating like a fucking drum, you'd think it was.

When the condom was finally on, I practically breathed a sigh of relief. My hands went back to gripping her hips. Sable met my eyes.

She flipped her hair over her shoulder and squeezed my shoulders.

“Are you sure about this?” I panted out one last time.

“Yes,” she breathed. “Why do you keep asking me?”

“Because...”

Because what? My mind was on the fritz. I couldn't give her a complete answer even if I tried.

She looked at me with clarity in her eyes and asked, “Are you going to regret this?”

“Not a chance in hell.” I curled a hand around the back of her neck and guided her lips to mine at the same time I slowly slid into her.

Sable whimpered. She was so tight, it almost hurt to move. I paused for one torturous second.

My hands moved to cup her ass, holding her to me. “Are you a virgin?” I asked tightly.

“Well, I was. Not anymore.” She paused. “Are you?”

“No, but I'm going to come like one.”

She shifted back and forth. She was trying to get comfortable, but she only pushed me deeper into her. A choppy breath escaped me. My hands clamped around her waist. “You can't do that.”

“It felt good, right?” she asked a little too innocently.

“More than good,” I said through gritted teeth. “You just have to move slowly. Cause if you don't, then neither will I.”

Sable nodded once and slowly moved up and down.

Her legs were shaking, but, then again, so were mine. I'd been thinking about this for months and I had to make this last longer than two minutes. I tried to find a rhythm that would match hers. Sometimes I did, but I'd slip up and ruin our pacing.

You'd think this my first time. In a way, it was. This was my first time with Sable and I knew this moment wouldn't be leaving me anytime soon.

If ever.

While I watched her move, her head kicked back and eyes closed, I couldn't help but wonder who had the control right now. Me or her?

The answer scared me, so I surged deeper into her. Sable moaned and clutched my shoulders for balance, moaning my name. The feel of her was indescribable. I couldn't see straight.

"Oh God, Sam," Sable panted.

Above me, her body shook. She cried out as her pussy convulsed around my dick so tight, I hissed in a sharp breath.

My hands cupped her ass as I slid in and out. "Keep moving, baby." I tilted my hips and moved until my entire body locked up. "Fuckkk," I said, drawing out the word. A steady string of expletives escaped my mouth and moments later, my body collapsed back into the seat.

Sable was draped over me like a limp ragdoll. I held her damp body securely against mine as we tried to catch our breath.

Neither one of us moved. Or said a word.

What was there to say? I wanted to be everything for Sable. Protect her so she never felt hurt in life again.

I loved her and she was mine.



CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

SABLE

NOW: LATE JULY

THE NEXT MORNING WHEN I WAKE UP, MY BACK IS STILL against the door. My neck at an awkward angle, leaning against the wall. Very slowly, I sit up, my muscles aching. I rub the sleep out of my eyes and look around.

The beds are empty. Judging from the sun shining into the room, I can tell it's early morning. The gun that I fell asleep with is gone. I look around, thinking I might have dropped it sometime this morning and kicked it aside, but it's nowhere to be seen. On shaky legs, I stand up, ignoring the pain in my neck, and walk toward the nightstand.

"I put it up already."

I whip my head to the left and hiss out a sharp breath. I don't know who I'm expecting, but seeing Alba leaning against the doorway fills me with relief. I'm still tense and wound up from last night.

"Thanks," I mutter.

Alba nods and begins to comb her damp hair. Her trademark smirk and witty comebacks are nowhere to be found this morning. I always worry that Alba's too much of the wild, carefree sister but seeing her so somber throws me off. I don't know what to say.

Quietly, she gets ready for work. I glance at the clock. In thirty minutes, I should be at the McShane's. But I sit there, frozen in place. I should feel relieved that last night is done and over with, but I still feel the weight of the gun in my hand. The man's eyes roving all over my body. And the feeling of fear that seized my heart is still faintly there, making my hands shake.

Awkwardly, I clear my throat. "One of Mom's friends was trying to get in our room last night."

Alba doesn't spare me a glance as she looks through the closet. "I know. I heard you talking to him."

I walk over to the closet and grab the first shirt I see, not caring what I look like today. Alba quickly gets dressed, gathers her hair together at the top of her head and puts it in a messy bun. She slides on her old Converse and walks out the door.

To me, it seems wrong to leave the conversation like this. I speak up. “Alba.”

With her hand poised above the door knob, she turns and looks over her shoulder at me.

“Is this ever going to end?” I ask, making no attempt to hide the sadness laced through my words.

Alba looks down at the floor. Her hand drops down to her side.

Silence.

“For years,” she starts out slowly. “I’ve asked myself that same question every single day. I still don’t have an answer.”

More silence. I want to speak, but I’m so used to keeping everything locked up tight inside me that it seems wrong to spill the truth.

“What will you do if this happens while I’m at college?” I ask, my voice quiet.

Alba leans against the wall and stares down at her shoes. “Me and Maren will take care of it.” She says her words casually, as if I’m asking what she wants to eat for lunch.

Outside our room, I can hear Maren and Lennon bickering over the cereal. I smile humorlessly. Alba hears their arguing, too.

“Why are they even up?” I ask.

“Maren’s going to spend the day on the lake with Nick. He’s picking her up soon.”

“What about Lennon?”

“Lennon is going over to Ms. Nova’s.” Alba hesitates. “I heard Mom talking to that asshole from last night. I’m thinking he might be over today...”

Her voice trails off, but I can fill the rest in: she doesn't want Lennon to be here alone. My eyes flutter shut and I have to remind myself to take a deep breath.

Alba has my back by making sure Lennon's safe. But all I think is: what if one day she isn't? What if none of us are there to protect the other?

I can't think about that right now.

Instead, I focus on the fact that I now have to deal with Mom. "Did you tell Mom about last night?"

"No, I handed her some money and told her to go have a night on the town with our future stepfather. Of course I talked to her!" Alba huffs.

"What did she say?"

"Nothing that's worth repeating. But she is pissed off at you."

"Because I scared off the asshole?"

"Ding, ding. We have a winner!" Alba goes back to picking at her nails. "I'm sure she'd be in here right now picking a fight with you, but she's passed out in her room. Soo..."

"So I'm in the clear," I finish for her.

"Two for two. You're on a roll today, Sable."

Alba's words aren't as cutting as they normally are. They're dull and flat. Kind of like her eyes.

After a few minutes, Alba pushes away from the wall. "I gotta go or I'm gonna be late."

This time, when Alba leaves the room, I don't stop her.

I take my time as I finish getting dressed, not caring whether I am late or early for Audree. I put my hair up in a sloppy bun as I walk out the door, but I stop short when I read the quote Maren has taped above the light switch: "You have to learn the rules of the game. And then you have to play better than anyone." Albert Einstein.

I shut the door and lock it, but all I can think is: how many more rules do I have to learn until I play my life right?



SURPRISINGLY, MY TIME WITH AUDREE FLIES BY.

She isn't her typically crazy, hyper self. I think she picked up on my tension and ended up spending most of the day alternating between watching cartoons and quietly playing with her Barbies in her room.

When Elaine comes home, I find myself stalling and it has nothing to do with seeing Sam. All I can picture is that creepy dude. Will he be back again? The thought is enough to send chills up and down my spine.

But after a few minutes of chatter, I know I have to go home. My steps are slow as I walk back to our trailer. I'm hoping that when I step through the front door that my mom isn't there.

Hang in there, my mind says. Soon you're outta this place.

But my countdown to college doesn't have the same effect it normally has on me.

Our trailer comes into sight and I sigh heavily. There are no cars in the driveway and knowing that I won't have to cross paths with my mom or creepy guy marginally lifts my spirits.

The neighbor's dog barks obnoxiously. He strains against his collar, ready to lunge for me, only to be pulled back by the chain looped around a tree trunk. He gets back up and instead of giving up and walking under the tree, he continues to jump forward and fall back. Over and over and over.

There's a wild look in the dog's eyes, as if he's dying to get out of this place just as much as me. You know you're at rock bottom when you find yourself sympathizing with a fucking dog.

I take my time walking up the driveway and stop short when I walk through the front door. The trailer is completely

silent — it's almost eerie. "Mom?"

When I peek in her room, I see that it's all picked up. The sheets are straightened, but the comforter is still at the end of the bed, as if the person making it lost patience or time. Liquor bottles and beer cans are gone. Clothes are folded and put away. The smoke still lingers heavily in the air, but for once, this space looks like an actual bedroom and not like a drug lord's den.

I would be tempted to see this as a victory — a step in the right direction — if I didn't know with an almost certainty that right now Mom's with some man, at some bar, getting wasted. By tomorrow morning, the room will be trashed once again.

I walk down the hallway, lock our door and hurry out, only to run straight into someone else.

My body instantly tenses up, but when I see who's standing there, I relax. "Matty," I say with a sigh of relief.

He quirks a brow. "You okay there?"

"Yeah. You just scared the shit out of me. What's up?"

"Nothing." He leans against the railing and crosses his arms over his chest. "Just wanted to see what you were up to. You know, since I haven't seen you all summer."

"You've seen me," I reply somewhat defensively.

"I saw you once at a party at the beginning of the summer. I don't think that counts."

"I've been busy working," I mutter, but my reply sounds weak even to my ears.

"Funny. You've been 'busy' before, yet we always manage to hang out."

Matty's frustrated. I get that, but angry? That I don't understand.

"I'm sorry, okay? Don't be mad."

He sighs and rubs the back of his neck. "I'm not mad. I've been worried about you." Now that I'm getting a better look at

him, I see that he's skinner, his skin a clammy gray. Perhaps I should be the one doing the worrying.

"There's nothing to be worried about. I'm good." To back up my words, I give him the cheesiest grin possible.

The corners of his mouth quirk up into a small smirk, but that's it. His arms rest at his sides and I can't help but notice that his eyes are blood shot.

"Matty, are you okay?"

He stiffens because he knows what I'm really asking: *are you on something?*

He kicks at a piece of dirt with his shoe. "I'm fine," he mutters.

"You don't look fine at all. You look like you're on death's door."

Matty eyes meet mine, they're unfocused and slightly glazed over. "Can you drop it?"

"No, I can't. You're my friend and now that I'm seeing you, I realize something's up."

Matty laughs ruefully. "You're my friend?"

"Yeah."

"I don't know your definition of friendship but to me it's not a one-sided deal, where one person has to do all the work to keep the friendship going."

It's funny to me that he can accuse me of being shady, yet when I ask if he's okay, he quickly deflects. "Other than this one visit, how have you 'kept this friendship going'?"

"I've stopped by dozens of times and guess where you're at? At the McShane's."

"Working," I quickly point out. "I'm working."

He continues talking, as if I'd never spoken. "I call and you're never around."

"You mean the phone that I share with my three sisters? Alba and Maren hold that phone hostage ninety-nine percent

of the time. There's no way you would've gotten a hold of me."

To my ears, my excuses are solid. Valid, even. But it's not enough for Matty. We don't fight too much, if ever. So it's strange to see him so angry at me and I'll say just about anything to smooth everything over.

"Matty, I'm really sorry. You're my friend and I don't want to hurt you."

"You're getting sucked back in," he cuts in.

I freeze in place. "What are you talking about?"

He steps forward. "Sam. That's who I'm talking about. You're getting sucked back into his world."

"That's not true!" I vehemently deny.

"Of course it's true!" He throws his hand up in the air. "Everyone around you can see it, but you!"

"Matty—"

"I thought last year would be the wake-up call you needed to show you that there's two sides in this fucking town. The good and the bad. You're precious Sam is on the good. And we've always been on the bad. Nothing can really change that."

"I know that!" I snap, not caring if I'm raising my voice and causing a scene. "You know I know that."

"Then act like it! Use your fucking brain and remember all the times that they — the good side — have treated us like complete shit. Don't forget where you come from."

His words have perfect aim, hitting me square in the heart. On so many levels, he's right. We've always had this easy-going camaraderie, where it was us against this cruel world. We understand each other better than anyone else and to think that I've left him high and dry makes me feel sick to my stomach.

What else can I say to him that will make things better? Nothing. I know it and Matty knows it. He shakes his head in

disappointment and walks down the stairs. He's halfway down the drive when he turns back to me.

"There's a party tonight...I know you hate 'em and they're not your scene. But it'd be great to see you before you leave."

His offer is twofold, serving as a reminder that I only have three more weeks until I leave for college. And it's a peace treaty, revealing that he might be angry but we can move past this. But from the challenging look in Matty's eyes, I know he's expecting me to say no. It's my first instinct, but to prove that I still value our friendship, I swallow loudly and say, "I'll be there."

He dips his head in acknowledgment, turns the corner and walks down the street.

His words echo in my mind. Of course people change. It's a part of life. But have I really changed? It doesn't seem possible that someone can do an about-face within a couple of weeks. And what Matty's accusing me of - forgetting about where I come from - is absolutely wrong.

Right?

"Sable Cole! Sable Cole!"

I look across the road, where Ms. Nova is standing on her porch, waving a dishrag in the air wildly as if miles are between us, instead of a road.

"What?" I call out.

She plants her hands on her hips. "Don't say what, get over here!"

As I run across the street, I can't help but wonder if she knew what happened last night. It's impossible. She can't know. But Ms. Nova's always had this uncanny ability to step into our lives during the darkest moments.

I stop right in front of the porch steps.

"Honestly, don't holler Sable Cole, it's unladylike." She says sternly, as if she just didn't scream out my name. "I made too much casserole again. Come in and have some dinner. Lennon is inside."

My stomach grumbles and my mouth salivates. I cast a lingering glance at our trailer. “I would but—”

“Oh, don’t use the ‘But I’m not hungry’ card,” Ms. Nova cuts in. “I didn’t buy it the last twenty times you used it and I won’t now.”

Good meals are hard to come by at our house. But delicious meals? They’re next to never and there is *nothing* better than Ms. Nova’s casserole.

“Casserole sounds great,” I finally admit, pushing my pride aside.

From the outside, Ms. Nova’s trailer is identical to ours. But the inside is completely different. Sure, the blue shag carpet is worn down. The old linoleum floors have seen better days, but they’re so spotless, you can eat off of them. The living room walls are covered in wood paneling. Flanking the floral couch are two corner cabinets. The shelves are lined with pictures and an alarming amount of figurines: angels, carousels, Fabergé eggs. It’s like she went to a flea market, couldn’t decide on one thing, so she bought it all.

A quilt stand piled high with blankets leans against the wall. And even though it’s just Ms. Nova living here, she has, for some unknown reason, four seats angled toward an old console TV.

One’s a hideous green suede chair. The other is an old rocking chair. Third one is a black lazy boy. And they’re all lined up next to each other, as though Ms. Nova is expecting a large group of people to show up. Besides her monthly ‘Bible study’ visitors, it’s rare.

The volume on the TV is so loud, I grab the remote to turn it down. The fact this TV still works is a miracle. I walk past the TV just as Vanna White touches the puzzle board, making the letter S appear.

Separating the living room and kitchen area is a small half-wall. The surface is lined with Mason jars that she has left over from gardening. All of them are filled with candy: butterscotch, mints, tootsie rolls and jelly beans.

As a kid, it was almost impossible not to grab a few pieces of the candy. Even now, I'm tempted to reach out and take a tootsie roll, but I can smell the casserole baking and it pulls me into the kitchen. On the wall right next to the table are photos of my sisters and me from throughout the years. There are school pictures from the one-time Mom decided to pay for them. One photo of all four of us, dressed in these Daisy Kingdom dresses that Ms. Nova made for us. She took us to Christmas service that year and I felt like a princess. But she also matched me and Alba in the same pattern and even though we didn't look too much alike, we looked like the two girls from *The Shining*.

Lennon is setting the table while Ms. Nova begins to take the casserole out of the oven. She plunks it down in the middle of the table. Without a word, I go to the fridge and take out the iced tea and put it on the table. Ms. Nova rubs her hands together as she takes her seat. Lennon and I following her lead.

"Dear Lord," Ms. Nova takes what I think is a dramatic pause. "Thank you for this blessed day. Thank you for the food that you provide us tonight and the lovely company that has joined me. Lord, please be with George Lewis on Main Street and his cheatin' ways. Please forgive Deloris Jean for trying to steal my chili recipe so she could win the cook-off, even though she has no chance of winning because she puts too much salt in everything she cooks. Please forgive me for stealing the pen at the bank today. But let's be honest, they're not going to notice it's gone."

Lennon and I exchange glances.

"Heads down, girls, I'm praisin' my God," she snaps.

Quickly, we lower our heads and she continues on.

"I also pray that you shut up that damn dog three doors down from yappin' so damn much. Last time I checked, this was a trailer park and not a kennel. In Jesus' name I pray, Amen."

"Amen," Lennon and I say in unison.

While Lennon and I are trying to process everything that Ms. Nova just ‘prayed’ for, Ms. Nova takes a big scoop of casserole and hands the dish over to Lennon and then me.

“Dig in, girls,” she says.

Lennon’s already scooping the food onto her plate before she can finish her words. For a while, there’s no talking. Just eating. I should probably slow down and come up for air a bit, but I’m ravenous and I know I’ll be taking seconds and then probably thirds.

After my second helping, I wipe my mouth and lift my eyes, only to find Ms. Nova carefully looking me over. “How are you doing?” she asks.

Right now, the last thing I want to do is talk about myself. So I evasively shrug. “Good.”

“Just good?”

“Being good is a good thing, right?”

“Oh, absolutely, but you know what’s not a good thing? Lying to me.”

“I’m not lying,” I reply and then choose that moment to take a long drink of water.

Ms. Nova saw me talking to Matty. I can see it from the knowing look in her eyes, but thankfully, she drops it. For the moment at least.

Sighing, she dabs at the corner of her lips with her napkin demurely as if she was a character from *Downton Abbey*. “So, how is Maren?” she asks.

“Good,” Lennon pipes in. “Spending a lot of time with Nick.”

Ms. Nova sighs and shakes her head. “I don’t know about those two.”

“You don’t like Nick?” I ask.

“How can I know if I like him when she’s never brought the boy over?”

Everyone knows at this table that Ms. Nova knows plenty about him. I'm willing to bet that Ms. Nova knows more about him than Maren does. I swear, she was in the CIA once upon a time.

"They're taking it too fast," Ms. Nova remarks. "And I told Maren just that. Yes, I did."

I lean in; this is brand-new info. "What did she say?"

"That he makes her happy and she loves him. And you know what I said?" Ms. Nova doesn't give me a chance to reply. "I said, 'Maren, if you're going to jump into love, make sure there's water in the bowl. Otherwise, you're just going to get hurt.'"

I've lost count of the amount of pearls of wisdom Ms. Nova has said over the years.

"How is it babysitting for that little McShane girl?"

"She has a name, Ms. Nova."

Ms. Nova looks up at the ceiling in thought. "Is it Aubrey?"

I sigh. "Audree."

She waves her hand in front of her. "Close enough. So. Is that family treatin' you good?"

"They're really nice. I think you would like them."

"Perhaps." She takes a big gulp of her tea. "And what about their son, I saw he was back..."

Something I'll never understand is why Ms. Nova asks questions that she already has the answers to. It's like she needs to hear the words come from your mouth for final confirmation.

"He's back for the summer," I reply evasively.

"I see, I see...I like that boy," she declares.

I almost choke on my food. "Sam McShane? You like him?" I ask in disbelief.

“Samson McShane? Of course I do. He’s an upstanding boy.”

I lift a brow. “How do you know?”

She takes a sip of her sweet tea and points a finger at me. “I have an instinct for these things. But as for the rest of his family...well, that remains to be seen.”

Ms. Nova continues on eating as if nothing’s wrong. “And you, Lennon?”

“I’m good.”

“What are you doing this summer?”

“Reading.”

“What are you reading?”

Lennon looks down at her plate, moving things around with her fork. “Books.”

“She reads romance novels,” I pipe in.

Lennon’s head shoots up in shock. “Sable!”

Ms. Nova gives a rare smile. “Is that true, honey?”

My sweet, lovely little sister looks like she wants to jump across the table and strangle me. Instead, she turns to Ms. Nova, her face beet red. “Maybe a few books.”

“Let’s be honest. You read at least three a week.”

“Sable, they’re your books. You let me borrow them!” Lennon hisses. By the second, she’s starting to look more and more like a tomato.

I shrug and hold my hands out, palms up. “Let’s not pretend that any of us hasn’t cracked open a romance novel. I love them.”

“Well, I have never...” Ms. Nova huffs.

Is she kidding me right now? “Oh, come on. I’ve seen your bookshelves, you know.”

“And what about them?” Ms. Nova asks a bit shrilly.

“What about them is that if you move the first row back, you’ll find stacks of hidden romance novels.”

For the first time in probably forever, Ms. Nova looks embarrassed. Within seconds, the shock is gone. She tilts her head and puts her chin up, like she’s the Queen and this conversation is beneath her.

“I’m uncomfortable with this subject.” She chugs down half of her tea. “Are you ready for college?”

My whole plan to slowly pack up my things faded fast. There’s one lone box shoved in the closet for space, just waiting for fellow boxes. And when I have an opportunity to, I seem to balk at the idea and end up doing something else. I’m avoiding it and I have no idea why.

“Pretty good. Right now, it’s just a waiting game.”

“When do you leave?”

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Lennon stiffen. Me leaving for college isn’t something that Lennon and I talk much about. If at all. I think both of us want to skim over the fact that I’m leaving because we don’t want to have to say goodbye.

“August 24th.”

“Who’s taking you?”

“I don’t know. I’ll probably have Alba take me.”

“Sure about that?” Ms. Nova asks. “I saw that girl pull out of the driveway a few days ago like a bat outta hell.”

Her remark makes me grin. “I’m aware of Alba’s driving skills. But it’ll be a fun trip,” I say, trying to put a happy spin on the situation. The look in Lennon’s eyes says she’s not buying it. In fact, she’s near tears. All I can think is: if talking about leaving is bad, what’s it going to be like the day I leave?

The thought makes the food settle in my stomach like a rock.

Ms. Nova glances over at Lennon. Sympathy seeps into her expression. She clears her throat. “Lennon and I are going

to watch a movie tonight. What did you pick?"

"My Fair Lady."

"Ah, yes. A classic. Do you want to watch with us?"

"I can't. Have plans."

"Doing what?" she asks.

I hesitate to tell her because Ms. Nova's been the closest to a parental figure in my life and I don't want her to judge me.

"Going to a party," I finally admit.

"That's very unlike you."

I shrug. "Matty invited me to go. And we haven't seen each other a lot this summer so I said I'd go."

"That's probably a good thing," she mutters underneath her breath.

"What's a good thing?"

She shrugs as she stands from the table. Instinctively, I stand up, with my plate in my hands, and trail behind her. "Ms. Nova, what do you know that I don't?"

She starts to fill the sink, as if she didn't hear me. But I know she did.

"Tell me what you know," I urge.

Finally, she stops and looks over at me. "I've heard that he's been up to no good this summer."

My heart sinks because I think I know what she's about to say, but I want to be wrong. God, I want to be wrong. "What is he doing?"

Ms. Nova tilts her head to the side and gives me a small, sad smile. "Drugs. What else could he be doing?"

His decisions shouldn't bother me, but they do. Maybe because I know that it can be so easy for Matty to slide down the path that his father has taken. The same way I can easily follow after Mom. Yet I know Matty has so much waiting for him out in the world.

There's so much at risk and he has no one to turn to.

Matty's right. I have been a terrible friend to him.

"Don't look so upset," she says gently. "His decisions are his own. You can't save everybody, Sable Cole."



CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

SABLE

NOW

“YOU CAN’T SAVE EVERYBODY, SABLE COLE.”

Ms. Nova’s words ring in my ears as I slam the truck door.

“Oh, this one is going to be a good one,” Maren says. She rubs her hands together in anticipation before she links her hand with Nick.

The sky tonight is crystal clear, with not a cloud in sight. When I look up, stars twinkle back. At least when I get bored tonight, I have something incredible to stare up at.

“Can we hurry it up?” Alba asks impatiently.

Tonight’s party is another one set out in the country, but this one is in the middle of nowhere, requiring us to walk through the woods. Maren is using the cell phone as a makeshift flashlight. Twigs snap beneath our feet. Branches scratch at my skin. But soon, we walk into a clearing. A bonfire’s started with three pick-up trucks around it.

A few people, mostly girls, sit on the tailgates, their legs swinging back and forth. Some are standing up. And even less have a guy next to them, with either an arm draped over their shoulder or waist.

I scan the faces around me, trying to find Matty, but he’s nowhere to be found. His words linger in my mind and I can’t help but think that he might be right. Have I changed over the summer? Matty is quick to place the blame on Sam, but I’m not so sure. I think this change was inevitable. One chapter of my life is closing and a new, unwritten one is about to begin. As terrifying as it sometimes seems, it’s also exciting. But I don’t want Matty to be a part of my past, someone that I think about a few years down the road or randomly see on Facebook and think: *‘Oh, I remember him! I wonder what he’s up to?’*

After a good fifteen minutes of standing around by myself, people start to look my way. Alba slides up next to me. “You gotta mingle. You’re starting to look like a weirdo.”

“I’m looking for Matty,” I say out of the corner of my mouth.

“I saw him a few minutes ago. But he disappeared with some people.”

My gut sinks because I know he’s doing something he shouldn’t. I came here tonight for him and he’s not even around. So what’s the point of even being here?

“I want to go home,” I announce.

“Why are telling me? Nick is living it up with Maren.” Alba gestures behind me. I turn just in time to see the two of them already grinding against each other. “And there’s no way in hell Nick will let me use his truck to drive you home. So your options are to suck it up and have fun, find another ride, or get a head start now. You might make it home within the hour.”

“You’re no help,” I grumble.

Alba squeezes my cheeks. “Aww. You know you love me,” she coos before she walks away.

I watch as she joins a group of people with her head held high. Within seconds, Alba is talking to some guy. From the way the guy is staring at her, I know she already has him hooked.

“Hey! You made it!”

I turn around just in time to see Matty walking toward me. He has a loopy grin on his face and it instantly puts me on edge.

“I said I would, didn’t I?”

Matty drapes an arm around me. He reeks of alcohol and something I can’t pinpoint. The combination makes me grimace, but he doesn’t notice; he’s too blitzed out of his mind.

He glances down at me, tilting his head to the side. “Are you mad at me, Sable?”

“I wouldn’t have came here tonight if I knew you were going to be out of it.”

Matty looks at me with mock reproach. “Me? Out of it? Never.”

I roll my eyes. “Yeah right,” I mutter.

His smile slowly fades. “What’s your problem tonight? Mad that Sam isn’t here?”

I tilt my head to the side. “Why do you always make everything about him?”

“Because isn’t that who your entire world revolves around?”

“No, not at all!”

I look around. Luckily, the music blaring from a truck is so loud no one pays us any attention. Even so, I steer Matty toward a quiet area.

“He’s like a kid in the sandbox. He doesn’t want to share his pail and shovel. That’s all. The second he goes back to college, he’ll forget all about you.”

If I want to, I can write off Matty’s words. He doesn’t mean what he’s saying. Yet there’s truth to everything that comes out of his mouth. But I’m tired of him being a total asshole to me.

“Is this why you wanted me to come here? So you could bash Sam?”

“No. So we could hang out. I haven’t seen you all summer. I miss seeing you.”

“I miss you, too. But this isn’t hanging out. This is you being a complete tool. You want to judge me for forgetting where I come from and not hanging out with you this summer. But what have you really been up to this summer? You know, besides getting high like an idiot?”

From the way he freezes up, I know I hit the truth.

“You still want to get out of here, right?” I whisper.

“Of course I do,” he says, vehemently.

“Then stop it. You’re better than this.”

His mouth opens and closes. For a second, he looks vulnerable. Like the kind Matty I know so well. But then he turns in on himself and becomes cold once again.

“This is bullshit,” he mutters as he starts to walk away.

“No, it’s not. Tell me you’re still getting out of Antsett.”

He whirls on me. “Yes! But unlike you, I might be struggling with that decision.” Matty links his hands behind his head and looks at the sky. “This small town and my fucked-up home are all I know. I don’t know anything but dysfunction and chaos. Can I truly make it out there?” His hands drop heavily to his sides. He looks at me for a long moment and shakes his head. “You know what? Forget it.”

I grab his arm, but he shakes me off. “I don’t want to end things on a bad note between us. You’re one of my closest friends,” I call out.

He snorts and continues to walk away.

I once heard that friendships go through waves and you just have to ride them out. But this felt like a tidal wave. And neither one of us seems to want to hang on until the end.

Very slowly, I’m starting to realize that Matty’s still stuck in the past, still holding onto massive grudges against all the people who’ve done him wrong. While I’m not embracing the people of Antsett, I want to move on and focus on happier things.

Slowly, I make my way back to the bonfire. People are talking and holding roasting forks inches away from the flames. Out of all the groups at the party, they look the tamest. I make my way toward them, making sure that I keep enough distance so I don’t look like a hang around, but also not a complete loser.

And it works. I’m able to watch everything around me without being asked every second whether I want a drink or to

‘hang out.’ I start to scan the crowd, looking for Alba, Maren or Nick because I need to leave.

Then, I hear him.

Sam’s laugh always feels like a zap to my stomach. It’s rich and heady. It wakes up my heart and puts my body into overdrive.

Just from a laugh.

Which either makes him powerful, or me weak. Sadly, I think it’s the latter. My head jerks left, then right, trying to find where he is. It doesn’t take long. He stands to my left, leaning against a truck with a group of guys. A solo cup in one hand and the other tucked into his jeans. He is oblivious to me, which makes my heart plummet.

Just a few days ago, it was me and him having dinner, looking at me like he wanted to devour me, like he wanted... more from me. And now, here he is — talking to another girl. She’s standing next to him, surrounded by her friends. Their skin is sunkissed and they giggle at just the right times. They say: *‘Like, who does that?’* And whisper secretively to each other.

I hate them on principle.

Jealousy runs hot and thick through me, reminding me that I’m secretly envious of them. Their ability to live life. Be carefree. Not to have a single worry.

The truth is, I would trade lives with them in an instant.

All of them are sitting on the tailgate. While Sam and the girl talk, her flip-flops graze the grass. I try to look at them from a stranger’s perspective. When I do that, I have to admit to myself that they look like the perfect little couple. They make sense.

Much more sense than Sam and I will ever make.

She’ll fall over his every word and won’t have to count every single dollar in hopes that she’ll make this month’s rent. It makes sense that he would step into a party with his arm draped over one of their shoulders. It makes sense that she

would be at every game he played, not working a double shift or cramming in more study sessions.

“Stop it.”

I jump at the sound of Maren’s voice. She stands right next to me, her gaze staring straight forward at the group of girls I envy slash hate.

“Stop what?”

Maren gestures angrily in their direction. “Stop looking at them like that. You’re better than them. No. I take that back. You’re a billion times better than them.”

Instead of replying, I cross my arms, and together, we rudely continue to stare at the girls.

“They’re stupid, mindless idiots,” Maren continues. “They’ll peak in high school and spend the rest of their lives reliving their glory days.

I don’t say anything to that; it’s just common fact that beneath brutal words and hatred is pain so encompassing, it’s impossible to control. I hate that that sort of anger lives in me and my sisters.

Silence surrounds us.

“Don’t you ever wish you could be like them?” I finally ask.

Maren looks me straight in the eye. “Of course. Why do you think I’m drinking?”

Her reply slams into me and makes me wonder what my mom is drinking so hard to forget.

“I just got done talking to Matty,” I say out of nowhere.

“Yeah?”

I stare at the flames. “He came by this afternoon upset that we haven’t seen each other as much this summer.”

“Fair,” Maren remarks.

“And then tonight he confesses he’s struggling with the idea of leaving Antsett.”

“What?”

I shrug, feeling as shocked as she looks. I explain the entire situation. When I’m done, I take a deep breath.

Maren’s quiet for a moment, staring thoughtfully at the contents of her drink. “He’s projecting.”

“He’s what?”

“Pro-jec-ting,” Maren enunciates slowly, as if I’m the village idiot. “He’s dealing with his own shit and is probably frustrated and is blaming you for a lot of those problems.” Then, she shrugs as if the answer is so obvious.

For a few seconds I just stare at her until she starts to fidget.

“What?” she says defensively.

“How did you get all of that from what I said?”

Again, she shrugs. “You haven’t been hanging out with him as much.”

“I’ve been babysitting Audree!” I hotly cut in.

Maren holds her hands out. “Easy, there. I’m not blaming you. I’m just saying that you haven’t been around him as much and he’s been hanging out with total morons, slowly losing brain cells. Alba and I have talked about it.”

“Matty and me?” When she nods, I forge on. “When and what did you say?”

“It’s not the center of our worlds. It just comes up when we see Matty around.”

I’m silent for a second, mulling over her words. Just then a drunk guy, standing in one of the truck beds, tries to jump over a girl sitting in front of him. He fails miserably and accidentally tackles her to the ground. Unfortunately, it isn’t the girl that was talking to Sam earlier. She’s still in the same spot, but Sam is now standing with a group of guys, his back toward me.

Why does that fill me with so much relief?

“Where’s Nick?” I ask, just to change the subject.

Maren points to the left where Nick’s standing with a group of guys. His cheeks are red and he’s cracking up at something someone is saying.

“Is he going to be okay?”

Maren rolls her eyes and grins. “Oh, yeah. He’s no lightweight.”

“I know that, but what exactly is he doing?”

Maren squints. “I think he’s imitating Chunk doing the Truffle Shuffle.”

“This is painful to watch. But I can’t look away.”

“It’s kind of like a train wreck.”

“I couldn’t have said it better.”

“Remember the video I took of him two months ago trying to do the moonwalk?”

I whip my head in her direction. “I forgot!” I back up and mimic Nick from the video, which is basically hands flailing and him trying to slide smoothly. When, in reality, it looks like he’s trying really hard to wipe his shoes off.

Maren giggles loudly. Like Lennon, she has this infectious laugh that’s impossible to ignore. It has me laughing within seconds. Not the small kind that only last for a few seconds. No, this one I feel deep in my gut. It has my eyes tearing up and my side hurting.

I lean against her shoulder and take a deep breath and realize that I needed to have a laugh like that.

Then, Maren says, “I don’t mean to kill the mood, but he’s staring right at you.”

My smile fades. I straighten my shoulders and look to the left. Sure enough, there Sam is, looking in my direction. Even if Sam was miles away, I would feel the weight of his stare. It cuts through all barriers and pierces my soul. My first instinct is to look away, but I’m no coward, and even if he can see into the deepest part of me, I stare back until it becomes too much.

“What are the chances that he didn’t just see me look like an idiot dancing?” I say out of the corner of my mouth.

“I’d say they’re really low.”

I groan. Right about now, I could use a drink to push aside my embarrassment. I reach for Maren’s drink but she holds it away from me.

“What’s in there?” I ask.

“Jack and coke.”

She finally hands it over. I take a small sip and instantly want to gag. It tastes like lighter fluid and burns going down. But slowly I felt a warmth in my belly. I glance over at Sam and still find him staring at me. To forget what I can’t have, and what will never be with my *friend*, I down the rest of the drink.

When I hand it back to Maren, she’s staring at me like I’ve grown three heads.

“Is there more of that?” I ask.

“Uh...yeah,” Maren finally replies.

“I want some more,” I state firmly.

“Are you all right?”

I cross my arms over my chest and look her in the eye. “Yeah. I’m fine. I just want something to drink.”

She tilts her head to the side, looking like she wants to say more. Luckily for me, she doesn’t. I can’t deal with a pep talk right now. With a nod, she leads me toward the alcohol.



WITHIN THIRTY MINUTES, I’D SAY I’VE EMPTIED THREE FULL cups of beer. Like any good sister, Maren has been matching me drink for drink. After that, we switch over to shots. The first one felt like fire going down my throat, but slowly, they start to burn less and less. And then something wonderful starts to happen: the tension in my shoulders eases and the

worry that normally plagues me is a distant thought. Everything feels so far away, I don't believe them to be mine.

"I like you like this," Maren says a little too loudly.

I smile brightly at her. "I like me too. But you know who I don't like?" I stab a finger in Sam's direction. My drink sloshes over the rim. "Him...I don't like him."

"Sam?"

I nod and take another drink. "Samson McShane."

"Is he why you're drinking? I thought you were upset over Matty?"

My eyes narrow. Is it just me or is that girl standing next to Sam getting closer and closer? Tipsy or not, I've managed to stay out of Sam's line of sight and I like it like that. Anytime we need alcohol, Maren gets it or Nick does.

Completely ignoring Maren's question, I ask one of my own. "Why is he even here?"

"Why do you even care?" Maren asks softly.

The small buzz that I have slowly starts to fizzle away. I glance down at my drink, chug the rest of the contents and toss the cup over my shoulder. I clap my hands and smile at Maren. "Finish off your drink. We need more shots!"

"Yes!" she shouts happily.

This time around, I lead us toward the alcohol, where we, of course, run into Alba. She's by my side the second I finish my shot and stares at me like I'm insane.

"Do my eyes deceive me or are you really drinking?"

I sling my arm around her shoulder and get in her face. "I'm really drinking and lemme tell ya, I feel great."

Alba grins. "I would've never guessed."

"Houston we have a problem...Sam has just seen you," Maren interrupts.

My head snaps up and there's nothing I want more than to look over my shoulder and see if what she's saying is true, but

I stare straight ahead.

Then I see Baker, one of Nick and Sam's friends, walking toward us. If my memory serves me correctly, Baker was on the basketball team with them. Makes sense. He's so tall and lanky, my head meets his chest.

Before I take my shot, I squint carefully and read Baker's shirt. I begin to laugh. "Trust me, you don't want to go there."

He looks between me and Maren. "What are you talking about?"

I drink the shot that goes down like water. "Your shirt."

"What's wrong with the state of Virginia?"

"Ohh..." Understanding fills my words. "I thought that said vagina. My bad."

I should be embarrassed over my blunder, but surprisingly, I'm not. In fact, the longer I think about it, the funnier it becomes.

"You moron." Maren whacks my arm. "It says, I wish I was in VIRGINIA."

Maren and I start cracking up. But Baker doesn't. He just stares at us as though we're crazy.

"McShane!" he bellows. "Your girl is wasted!"

My heart beats harshly as I see Sam crane his neck, looking in our direction. I lean toward Baker. "One: I'm not his girl. Two: Why'd you do that? You're harshin' my buzz."

He holds his hands out in front of him. "Hey, I'm not getting involved."

"There's nothing to get involved with," I argue.

Baker shoots me one last doubtful look before he hurries away. The feeling of someone staring at me makes my back feel like it's on fire. I look over my shoulder and, sure enough, Sam is looking straight at me. His head is cocked to the side and then he's standing up, though he doesn't walk this way. Even so, I find another guy that I can use as a barrier of sorts. If he comes over here, who knows what I'll do or say.

To my left, I see another group of guys hanging out. I recognize one of them.

“Stone!” I shout.

If my memory serves me right, Jase Stone played football with Sam all four years in high school. Was a defensive lineman. Like Sam he was popular and had a flock of girls around him. Right now, none of that matters. What does is the fact that he has huge shoulders like Sam. He’s tall like Sam.

Sam, Sam, Sam.

Stone turns, looking momentarily stunned that I even knew his name.

“Yeah, I’m talking to you,” I say as I make my way over to him.

When I reach him, a song blasts through the speakers. It’s one that I normally just tap my foot to. One that I want to dance along with but never do because I’m so damn uptight.

“Let’s dance.” Wrapping my arm around his arm, I half drag him away from the group.

The song isn’t some sappy love song, but one that demands you move your entire body. Jase moves behind me, his hands loosely holding onto my waist.

Don’t feel guilty. You deserve to let your hair down and have fun, my conscience whispers to me. I hang onto the words like a lifeline and let go.

And I have to say, it feels pretty damn good.

I stop caring about what Sam is doing. Or my fight with Matty. I don’t worry whether I look like a fool. Jase moves with me, but sometimes, his face blurs and when it does, I swear I see Sam.

“Get outta my head.” I groan.

“What did you say?” Jase half-shouts over the music.

“Nothing,” I reply and continue to dance.

We move together, close but not too close. I wait to feel any sparks, attraction, electricity. But there's nothing. Just the smallest awareness of someone's hands on me.

But I'm having fun and that's all that matters.

The hands that have been holding my waist tighten. Before I know it, I'm pressed against a hard, warm body. I stiffen for a second as two very large, very familiar, hands drift up my stomach and stop at my ribs. I whirl around and find Sam standing there. "Oh, it's you."

"Such a sweet hello, Cole." He keeps his hands on my waist and we continue to move. I try to move back so that we're chest to back, but he won't let me. "What were you doing with Jase?" he asks.

"Dancing," I reply innocently.

I turn just in time to see a muscle tick along his jawline. He bends down and says into my ear, "Are you trying to make me jealous?"

"Noooo," I drag out. "You'd never be jealous."

"Good because I'm already fucking green with envy. I already know that guys are going to come and go, trying to take my place. They all want to see if they can catch one of the Cole girls, but they won't be able to handle you."

My body freezes up. I can agree, and if I did, that's just an acknowledgment that only Sam can handle me. So I say nothing.

The song changes to another upbeat one and we continue to move. The difference between dancing with Jase and with Sam is with Sam I'm hyperaware of every little thing that he does: the smell of his cologne, his body flush against mine, his hands that keep moving up and down my stomach, teasing but never drifting too far.

I wish my body didn't respond. That I didn't press myself further into his body. But I did. The worst part is that I don't regret it.

Sam's touch becomes bold, his fingers stop on the underside of my breasts. His palms flat against my skin and I have no doubt he can feel the pounding of my pulse. Deliberately, he spreads his fingers against my warm skin, making his thumbs brush against the wire of my bra. It makes me jolt every time and I swear I can feel Sam grin against my hair.

By this point, I have a white-knuckle grip on my solo cup. I'm surprised it hasn't broken apart by now.

The warm air makes sweat trickle down between my breasts. Sam follows the action and I know, right then, I have two choices: stop this right now or let it continue.

The choice no longer becomes mine though because Sam says in a deep voice: "Let's get away from everyone and talk."

I hesitate. "I gotta..." Helplessly, I look around, trying to find Maren or Alba. Anyone. "I gotta..."

His grip on my shoulder makes thinking impossible. "We have to talk," he repeats, this time his voice is firmer.

The look in his eyes shows he won't take no for an answer. Still, I make one last ditch attempt at resisting. "If we need to talk, let's talk here. With an audience."

He smirks. "No audience."

With his fingers firmly wrapped around my bicep, he walks away from the party.

"You're manhandling me," I say out of the corner of my mouth.

"You won't listen to me," he says in a calm voice.

"Listen to you?" I peer up at him. "You haven't said anything for me to listen to."

"Because you won't give me a chance to talk. You've been running away from me this whole damn party."

"I haven't been running anywhere," I lie, trying to keep up with his long strides.

“That’s right. You don’t run, you just hide behind Maren or anyone else for that matter.”

Branches snap beneath my feet and it only takes a few seconds for me to realize that we’re now in the woods, far, far away from the party and prying eyes. *This* is exactly what I didn’t want to happen.

Now away from the crowd, Sam lets go of me. I take a step back and face him.

Liquid courage. That’s what I need. My cup is still in my hand. Some of the contents may have spilled over the rim, but there’s enough there to chug. And that’s just what I do.

Sam stares at me like I’m a stranger. And tonight I am. Tonight stiff, uptight Sable is tucked into a corner of my mind and the carefree side of me is out to play. “What are you even doing here?” he finally asks.

I smirk, which just makes him raise both brows. “Is there a law against me going to a party?”

“Sable, you hate parties,” he points out.

“I’ll have you know that this is the second party I’ve been to this summer.”

Sam raises both brows again and then his gaze falls to the empty cup in my hand. “How much have you had to drink?”

I point a shaky finger at him. “It’s all your fault,” I say, probably a little too loudly.

Even in the dark, I can see him peering at me as if I’ve lost my damn mind. “What is?” “This,” I gesture to the cup and stumble toward him. “And the thoughts running through my head.”

“How drunk are you?”

“I’m not drunk,” I adamantly deny. “I’m...I’m simply under the influence.”

He arches a single brow. The moon casts the angles of his face in a silver hue. He looks so...lickable. I stop myself from moving forward.

“Because that’s totally different than being wasted?”

“In my book, it is,” I say solemnly.

Sam grins at me and my stomach dips a little. I find myself smiling back and giving into this small pleasure makes me feel free.

“Come on.” He nudges his head toward the trail that leads through the woods. “I’ll take you home.”

“Going home is the last thing I want to do,” I admit. “Besides” — I stretch out both arms and smile — “I’m having fun.”

“When you say fun, as fuuuunnn, I think you’ve already had a little too much fun.” He snatches my cup and tosses it onto the ground.

I lunge for it, but it’s too late. “I was gonna drink that you know.”

“You know that was nearly empty, right?”

“Oh,” I say remorsefully.

“Besides, you’re in for a world of pain tomorrow,” he mutters.

“Impossible.” I do a little spin and smile at the sky. “I feel great. Come join me!”

He wants to be stern, and maybe a little angry, but the edges of his lips keep curling upward, before he breaks out into a small smile.

The sound of a high-pitch giggle drifts our way. I stop spinning right in front of him. “Unless you want to spend some more time with your fan club.”

He looks confused by the change of subject. Good. So am I. With beer goggles on, everything becomes hazy. Not only does my body become loose, so does my tongue, and now I want to say aloud all my feelings.

“My fan club?” he repeats.

“Yep, your fan club.” I wildly swing my hand around, trying to aim at the bonfire. “All those girls you were standing next to earlier.”

Sam crosses his arms. Even tipsy and surrounded in darkness, I can make out his strong shoulders and well-defined arms. Warmth runs through me and it has nothing to do with the alcohol coursing through my veins.

“I’ll gladly admit that I get jealous seeing you around another guy. But I know you won’t.”

My eyes meet his. I snort. “I’m not jealous.”

Lie, lie, lie.

I’m so incredibly jealous I’m surprised my skin isn’t turning green with envy.

Sam gives me a half-smirk. “They’re not my fan club and I don’t want to hang out with them. I don’t even know them.” His eyes never leave mine. “I want to be with you.”

He can’t say things like that to me because they make me way too happy. And it’s much easier to be angry at him, to have walls up. “You’re driving me crazy.” I groan.

Sam’s smile slowly fades. He takes a step forward. I hold my hand out, stopping him in his tracks. “Everywhere I go. There you are. And even when you’re not there, you still haunt me.”

I’m ranting. I’m ranting and it feels amazing. Tomorrow, though, I’ll regret it. I expect Sam to speak up, but he stays quiet. The look on his face shows I’ve completely blindsided him.

“Seriously. Let me take you home, okay?” His voice is gentle, like he’s talking to a child. “Once you get some sleep, we’ll see if you stand by your words.”

There’s that smile of his again. Showing me that he really has no idea what I think about or how I feel for him. I drop my face into my hands. “You don’t get it.” I groan dramatically.

“What don’t I get?”

I drop my hands and stare up at him. “How I feel!”

Words clearly aren’t doing the trick. So I grab a section of his shirt and tug. Briefly, Sam looks at me in shock before he stumbles into me. I drag my fingers through his hair and yank him to me. He sucks in a sharp breath and I kiss him hard on the mouth.

No kiss is done with good intentions.

You kiss someone to ruin them.

Brand them.

Make them yours. And that’s exactly what I’m doing right now.

My hands grip his face, almost desperately, as his lips move over mine. Every emotion I’ve ever had for him bursts free. My tongue moves against his. I turn my head to the side and the kiss goes deeper. Sam kisses me back for a second before he pulls away.

“Sable, wait.” He groans.

“I don’t want to.” My hands slip under his shirt, tracing the curves of muscles that I’ve touched so many times before.

A strangled groan escapes his lips.

I kiss his throat and suck gently on his skin. “I don’t think I can,” I whisper. I bite down on his skin and hear another tortured groan. “Unless you really, really want me to stop.” I stop and my eyes meet his. “Do you want me to stop?”

“Fuck no.” He grabs my face between both of his hands and peers down at me. “How drunk are you?”

“Drunk enough to tell you how I feel,” I say, gasping for air.

“Drunk enough to regret this tomorrow?”

“No,” I reply without a second thought.

It’s the truth. There’s a really, really good chance I’ll cringe over my decisions, but in my heart of hearts, I really want this. I want Sam. I want us together. Even if it’s for a

single night. I have no expectations for anything to go further. So neither one of us will get hurt.

Sam stares at me for a second longer and then we're back to kissing. He takes the lead, his hands raking through my hair, holding me in place. My hands wrap around his waist as I sink into him. Well, sink isn't the right word. More like fall into him because the next thing I know, Sam stumbles back and we both fall in a heap onto the ground. He grunts but doesn't make an attempt to get up. I make myself comfortable, my knees resting on the cold ground as I straddle him.

I sit back and Sam takes the opportunity to lift his head right as I remove my shirt.

"Take your shirt off," I whisper. "I want to touch you."

"What?" he says in a strangled laugh. His eyes never stray from my chest.

"Take. Your. Shirt. Off. You have no idea how much I want to touch you."

As he does as I say, I think of how good it feels to say exactly what I'm thinking. Why don't I do this more often? I definitely should. From here on out, I'm just going to say whatever is on my mind.

"What's gotten into you?" he breathes.

My fingers gently brush over his nipples, making him jump. I move down his chest, feeling every groove of his abs. "Why do you think something's gotten into me?"

"You're...you're never like this."

"Maybe I'm always like this." I look at him from beneath his lashes. "You want me to stop?"

He swallows. "No," his voice turns gruff. "I like this side."

"So do I," I admit.

Conversation soon comes to a screeching halt as our hands and lips do all the talking. Our touching is punctuated by our heavy breathing and vibrating sounds of the music coming from the party not far from us. What's going on outside of

what we're doing doesn't matter; right now, we are in our own private world.

I suppose, on some level, I knew that this was bound to happen. Tension has been brewing between Sam and me like a storm. And now our actions are frenzied, to the point of desperate, like a person who hasn't had a drop of water in days.

After three tries, my shorts finally drop right next to my shirt. Sam helps me with the snap of his shorts. They're half-way down his hips before I lose patience and sneak a hand into his boxers.

Liquid courage makes me bold, allows me to wrap a hand around his dick without a second thought. I take my time moving my hand up and down. It's far from expert, but it still makes Sam's breath hitch in his throat. And while I'm touching him, he never takes over. Which I love. I love this power. Crave it because I always feel like my life is spiraling out of control, never mine to hang onto.

And whether I'm talking to Sam or touching Sam, I feel like the world won't crumble beneath my feet.

As my touch becomes bolder, Sam's breathing increases before he stills my hand. "Stop, stop." He pants. "Or this is going to end much quicker than I hoped."

"I don't want this to end."

"Neither do I."

Slowly, I rise up and curl a finger around the edge of his boxers. "Then let me please you."

With his chest rapidly rising and falling, Sam watches as I drag his boxers down his legs. As Sam kicks his legs free of his boxers, I watch his dick, long and hard. Just for me.

Bending over him, I take his dick into my mouth.

"Jesus Christ," he bites out, and his hands grip my head.

My mouth moves up and down slowly.

"Faster," Sam requests.

I feel his thighs clench and know he's trying not to lose control. I move faster, finding a rhythm that has Sam hissing in a sharp breath.

Beneath my lashes, I look at him and find him heatedly staring at me as though he's going to devour me.

Anticipation courses through me. I move faster, causing him to kick his head back. "I'm going to come."

Abruptly, I pull back because I don't want this to end soon. Sam looks momentarily lost. When he spots me, he reaches out, and I go to him willingly. In the dark, our hands find each other. Our fingers link together as Sam raises our hands above his head. Our lips meet and tongues collide.

My breasts rub against his bare chest and the hard wall of muscle causes me to moan into his mouth.

Sam pulls back a fraction, our foreheads touching as he blindly reaches out for something.

"What are you doing?"

"Condom. I have one in my wallet. At least I hope to God I do," he mutters.

I sit up and watch as he grabs his wallet. He riffs through it, and thankfully, he has one. His hands shake as he tries to tear open the foil package. After the third try, he uses his teeth.

"Anxious, Samson?" I whisper teasingly.

"After what you just did, hell yeah." He slides the condom on and looks me in the eye. "But you can just look at me a certain way and I want you."

Heat pools in my belly over his words. Right then I feel wanted and desired. I rest my palms on the cold ground and lean forward. My hair falls forward, becoming a curtain around us. "I want you, too," I confess. "I always want you."

His hands find their way to my waist. And before I know it, he moves me up until I'm on my knees, directly above his dick. "I'm all yours, Sable."

There's an aching moment where I don't move. Just stare down at him, watching in fascination at the way his pulse pounds against his neck. And I suddenly become aware of the fact that I miss us.

"Don't you miss this?" I whisper as I slowly slid down his length.

Sam's eyes close and his hips lift off the ground. "I always miss this," he rushes out. "There's nothing I don't miss about you."

It's been so long since we've been together like this that there's a small amount of pain, but very quickly, my body adjusts. I find myself leaning back, my hands resting on his knees. The position brings Sam even deeper and I start to move a bit frantically. I suck in a sharp breath because I didn't realize how much I needed this.

His hands shoot out, holding me in place. "Don't." He groans. "Go slower."

Then, with ease he guides me up and down, directing me how to move.

A year ago, we were young and our movements were awkward and filled with lust. The only thing that's remained the same is the young part. Our lust is on a whole other level. The awkwardness is gone, only to be replaced with ease. Skill.

A fresh bout of jealousy runs through my veins at the thought of Sam with someone else to earn that skill.

So I move my hips a bit and watch as Sam hisses in a sharp breath. Hands steadily drift up my body, moving toward my breast. His thumbs brushing across my nipples before they drift back down. He looks torn, like he doesn't know whether to touch me or confine me.

Ultimately, his hands land on my hips. It's a matter of seconds until we find a perfect rhythm.

"God, Sable," Sam groans. "You feel so good."

I'd reply if I could gather a single coherent thought. My body has taken over, driving me toward one goal: relief.

Sam starts to pump his hips, and soon, I'm the one hanging on, my fingernails digging into sides of his stomach. His abs contract with each thrust and he's holding my hips so tight, I can see the veins on his forearms.

I try to take in everything about this moment because there's a really good chance that this will be the last time I'm with Sam like this, but he increases his speed and instinctively my eyes close. I suck in a sharp breath and gasp his name.

Then, his body surges up one last time and I feel every single inch of him. My mouth opens, but my heart is thundering so loud in my ear that I can't hear myself. My bones have been reduced to mush. And I. Feel. Amazing.

In a giant heap, I collapse onto him. His heartbeat pounds against my ear. Greedily, I gulp in as much air as I can, waiting for my heart to slow down. I may have been drunk when I started this, but that buzz is long gone and now I'm slowly sinking back into my own skin.

Air brushes against my bare skin, cooling me down. Minutes have passed, and by this point, I know I should probably get up. "Am I crushing you?" I ask.

"Not at all," Sam instantly replies.

So I stay put, reveling in the comfort of his arms. Regret should be sinking in, but instead, I just feel relief. Relief that for once I followed my heart and let go.

Sam wraps his arm around me and says against my hair, "You don't know what you do to me. I love you, Sable. I've never stopped loving you."



CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

SABLE

NOW

THE NEXT MORNING, I WAKE UP TO ALBA LOOMING OVER ME.

I jump, my head hitting the headboard, and quickly sit up. My head aches so badly that the room starts to spin.

“Holy shit!” I groan.

Alba offers no apology and sits on the edge of my bed. “I see the party animal has decided to wake up.”

I close my eyes and rub my temples. “What time is it?”

“One in the afternoon.”

“Are you kidding me?” I whip back my covers and reach for my shorts on the floor, trying to ignore the flood of nausea that slams into me.

Alba waves her hand in the air. “Relax. You’re covered for the day.”

Dropping the shorts, I look at her very carefully. “What do you mean?”

“Sam’s watching Audree.”

I sit back down on the bed. Hearing his name makes my heart speed up in a different way because I remember dancing with him last night. His hands on me. I remember kissing him, having sex. I remember his last words. *‘I’ve never stopped loving you.’*

“He called here?” I ask quietly.

“Yup. Called our phone bright and early this morning. Lucky for you, I answered.”

No. Lucky for me would’ve been if Lennon answered. I’m tempted to say just that, but I’m close to vomiting so instead I ask, “What did you say to him?”

Alba’s eyes widen. She holds her hands up in surrender, but I know she’s getting a kick out of seeing me so worked up.

“Relax, you freak. The conversation barely lasted a minute. I didn’t have enough time to ask what happened last night.”

I breathe easy.

“But now that I have you here...what *did* happen? I saw you two walking toward the woods.” She wiggles her brows at me.

Oh, shit. Oh, shit. Oh, shit.

I sit there, and force myself to think about last night. The only new images I can make out is of me and Maren laughing. A lot. Drinking. A lot. Very quickly, I’m starting to realize that I did a lot of things that I normally don’t do.

I drop my face into my hands and groan. When Sam dropped me off last night, I remember him carrying me into the trailer. I begged him not to leave. Begged him to stay with me.

God I’m so pathetic.

This is why I don’t drink. The shame is enough to drive me into hiding.

Alba sighs next to me and pats my shoulder. “I’ve been there, my friend. Give it time. After the nausea, self-loathing and headache fades, you’ll get a few hours of sleep and feel better. Now, you *might* remember the night before. Sometimes you don’t. Just a few months ago, I went to a party and the next day I logged onto my Facebook and put my location at an airport in Guatemala. To this day, I still don’t know how or why that happened. It really depends on what I drink. Maren said you guys had shots of Vodka. I’m more of a Jack Daniels’ kind of girl, myself.”

I lift my head a fraction. “Are you trying to make me feel better?”

She shrugs a shoulder. “Just making conversation.”

I rub my temples and take a deep breath. “Did Sam sound strange on the phone?”

Alba takes a second before she answers, “I don’t know. I wasn’t listening to the tone of his voice. He sounded like

Sam.”

“Is Maren home?”

Alba grins wickedly. “Yes, your drinking buddy is home. Although, I must say, she’s holding up a lot better than you are.”

My face goes pale as I think over one key point. “How did you guys get home?”

“The same way we got there. Nick drove us home.”

Last night is my fault. I can’t put the blame on anyone else. Every shot Maren gave me, I willingly took.

“I can’t believe I got drunk,” I mutter.

“Relax. Everyone has to let loose once in a while.”

Alba’s right. Everyone should let loose. But typically, I’m not one of those people. For this very reason.



THE TELEVISION HAS A LINE RUNNING DOWN THE MIDDLE OF the screen. Once upon a time, it had been a small, barely noticeable line, but it’s gradually become bigger. On top of that, the sound tends to go in and out, resulting in one of us constantly having to hit the left side of the television. If that doesn’t work, we toy with the volume on the side, alternating between pressing both buttons at the same time or at a rapid pace. We *could* use the remote, but we lost that bad boy years ago.

“No!” Lennon groans. “Turn it down. It’s way too loud.”

“Not that low. I can barely hear anything!” Maren calls out impatiently.

“I’m sorry, do I have SONY stamped across my forehead?” Alba snaps.

“Hey, it’s your turn to be the human remote,” Maren points out.

“No, it’s not!”

“Yes, it is. My chart shows that it’s been almost a month since you’ve done this.” To back up her words, Maren snatches up a notebook and flips to the very back. She flicks the paper and tosses it to Alba. It slides across the carpet. Alba peers at it, her hand never leaving the television.

“The remote schedule? You made an actual schedule? You’ve officially crossed the line into control freak.”

Typically, Maren isn’t this cranky. But Alba had the phone all morning and now there’s no minutes left and Maren’s resembling an addict that’s going through withdrawal.

“You’re just mad that I have proof that you’ve bowed out of remote duties the past two times.”

“I can’t believe you, Maren. You’re such a—”

I start to tune them out. So does Lennon. She grabs a magazine from the end table and flips through it.

Alba and Maren launch into a fight that could make any patient person fly off the handle. Between their shrill voices and the volume on the TV going up and down, my ears are starting to ring.

“Alba, if there was a Nobel Prize for being a mega bitch, you would be the reigning winner.”

Lennon snorts and Alba shoots her a look.

“I’m out of here,” I announce to no one in particular.

It isn’t the bickering that’s driving me crazy. I’m used to it. This is how it is with sisters. You get into the most inane, pointless arguments. Sometimes you bring out the big guns and start hurling the cruelest things you can think of, things that if anyone else said it would be unforgivable, but a few minutes later, the shouting fades and you’ve moved on to a different subject.

But lately, we’re all stressed, trying to keep everything together. We’ve all been attacking each other over the silliest things. On top of that, I still feel like shit. The pounding in my head keeps on increasing and it feels like I’m seeing double.

As I walk toward our room, I hear my mom snoring loudly in hers. According to Alba, she came home early this morning. Sometime around five. Surprisingly, she wasn't with a man, but she reeked of weed and booze. And while Maren and I slept, she woke up Alba and Lennon, dragging them out into the living room, to drunkenly tell them how much she loved and cared for all of us. She went on to say that she needed help. She sobbed and told us how sorry she was.

We're used to this. She sleeps for twelve to thirteen hours. Wakes up hungover. Lies in bed for another five hours. And when she walks back out of her room, she avoids eye contact, and it's like our conversation never took place.

Yes, it happens a lot, but every time she has this talk with us, I can't help but sometimes feel cautiously optimistic. She hurts my heart every time she goes back out to a bar, or fucks some random guy.

I lie down on the bed, my body facing the door. After a few deep breaths, the wave of nausea passes. Sighing, I close my eyes.

It feels like I'm asleep for no longer than a few seconds when the door opens. "Hey, Sleeping Beauty," Maren calls out way too loudly.

"Maren," I groan, "just please, for the love of God, shut the fuck up."

"I don't think it's okay to use God and fuck in the same sentence."

"I don't think it's right for you to be talking like you're at a damn rave — shut up!"

She whistles loudly. "My, my," she tsks, "someone is cranky."

She climbs up onto her bed. If our phone still had minutes on it, I'm sure she'd be on it. Instead, she has to resort to flipping through a magazine.

The silence in the room is so blissful, I want to cry. But in the midst of that silence is a hazy montage of the events from last night. The more time that passes, the more I remember.

The newest memory is of me looking down at Sam, my hands braced on his chest as I rode him. It doesn't matter how brief the moment may be, I keep replaying it over and over.

I open both eyes and stare at the wall. "Maren," I say out of nowhere.

"What? I mean, what?" she whispers dramatically.

Pull the band-aid off and just tell someone.

"I had sex with Sam last night...in the woods."

Maren's eyes look like they're going to pop out of their sockets. She throws the magazine behind her and sits on the edge of her bed. "Noooo!" she drags out.

I nod.

"What happened?"

"I don't know!" I confess and abruptly stand up. With my hands on my hips, I pace the small room. "I don't know. Things are a little hazy. I just remember we were talking and the next thing I know, we're going at it. Well, I take that back. It was more like me going at him."

Maren mouths the word, *wow*, but says nothing else.

With a groan, I close my eyes and drag my hands through my hair. "I just can't believe this happened."

"I can't believe it took you all summer to get it on," she says beneath her breath.

"Where's this coming from? Weren't you the one at the beginning of the summer warning me to keep my distance from him?"

"I said that simply because I'm your sister. I'm your hype girl. You wanted to avoid him, so I encouraged that. But...it's you and Sam. You two were bound to go at again."

"We weren't bound to do anything. Oh, this is all my fault."

At this, Maren snorts. "Oh, yeah. Sure. You make it seem like he was forced to endure your touch and kisses." Another

snort. “Things may be hazy for you, but I’m willing to bet money that the two of you went at it so hard.”

“Not helping, Mare.” I moan.

Even now, my lower lip still tingles. Unconsciously, I brush my finger against my swollen lip. I think he bit it. Maybe I bit it.

Someone bit it.

I need to think this through. Maren and I constantly spend hours going through the bills and finding solutions to problems. We can do the same for this situation.

“People have random hookups all the time,” I comment out loud.

Maren glances at me skeptically. “I guess so. But it’s only considered a ‘hookup’ when it happens out of the blue.”

I stop pacing and stare at her. “Is that some unwritten rule?”

“Kinda. Yeah.”

My brows furrow. “But then Sam and I said we would be friends where we create the rules.”

At that, Maren widens her eyes. “Oh? When did you two have that conversation?”

I kick myself for saying that part out loud. “Awhile back. We said we would create the rules.”

“Hmmm. Interesting,” Maren says with a small smirk.

I don’t have the energy to ask what’s on her mind. I continue talking, “Back to the conversation at hand. Let’s pretend this is a random hookup.”

“While we’re pretending, can you put some make-believe minutes on the phone?” She waves it in the air wildly. “I’d like to text some people.”

“Focus!”

“Right, right...” Maren drops the phone onto her bed. “This is about you and your denial.”

“I’m not in denial,” I quickly say.

Maren sighs heavily and picks up her magazine once again. “The question you have to ask yourself is: do you still feel something for him?”

I know the answer, but I’m terrified to utter the words out loud. Terrified to speak them into existence. Once they’re said, I can’t take them back. “I don’t know,” I lie. “We had this ‘thing’ a year ago, but it was only for a few months. Should that even count?”

“I think it should. Especially if that *thing* is making an impact on you a year later.”

Maren has a valid point. But I don’t want to think of it from that angle because if I do, I’ll be further confused. “I should probably just swallow my pride and talk to him. I’ll tell him that I messed-up. I’ll apologize and then we can move on.” I turn on my feet and keep pacing. “I mean, that’s for the best because by the time he’s back at school, he’ll find some other girl to be with.”

“Probably,” Maren replies, dully.

“He won’t give last night a second-thought.”

She turns a page. “Definitely won’t.”

“And then months on down the road, he’ll be flipping through a yearbook and see a picture of me and go: ‘Sable Cole...Sable Cole — the name sounds familiar. How do I know her? Wait! Didn’t we hook up a few times?’”

“Oh, absolutely,” Maren keeps her eyes glued to the page.

I stop and put my hands on my hips. “Are you just saying what you think I want to hear?”

“Absolutely,” she replies, without missing a beat.

“I want to know what you really think!”

Finally, Maren drops the magazine onto her lap and gives me her attention. “No, you don’t.”

“I really, really do.”

“Fine. You asked for it.” She takes a deep breath. “This relationship is the most talked about relationship in the history of non-relationships.”

Like an animal, I pounce on her words. “So you agree that we never had a relationship?”

“Did I say that? No. If Sammy boy had it his way, you’d be together. It’s *you* who won’t commit.”

“That’s ridiculous,” I scoff.

“Is it, though? Think back on the chain of events. Hell, look beyond Sam and you’ll see you never attach yourself to anything or anyone. Ever.”

“I can’t attach myself to anything because there’s no time to make an attachment. There’s too much to worry about.”

“But there could be time if you made time for it,” she calmly points out.

“Look, I could be like you. I could dream up a future where we’re together but let’s be real — something has to keep us rooted together. Especially since we’re going to different colleges. You know, I once read somewhere that forty percent of all long-distance relationships end in break ups.”

“Yeah. I know.” Maren flicks a finger against the magazine. “I just got done reading said article.”

“Well, don’t you think that’s pretty telling?”

She shrugs, looking nonchalant. “If you want to think it’s telling, then it’s telling. But you should have some faith that you have a chance at making it.”

“Do you think you and Nick have a chance?”

With that said, she flicks her gaze up to meet mine. “I’d like to think so. And if we don’t work out, that sucks, but at least I know that I tried.”

There’s nothing I can say to that. And while I understand Maren’s reasoning, and even respect her for thinking that way, I just can’t go down that path. The risk of getting hurt is too great.

Maren looks expectantly, waiting for my reply, when someone starts to pound on the front door. I frown at the closed bedroom door. “Hold on a second,” I say as I walk to the door.

Opening it up, I peek my head out into the hall as the pounding continues. “Anybody gonna get that?” I shout.

No reply.

I look over my shoulder at Maren. “I’ll be right back.”

“You’re running away! Typical, Sable!” she hollers.

I roll my eyes and hurry down the hall. In the living room, Lennon and Alba are lying on the couch, their eyes glued to the TV.

“Don’t worry,” I say dryly. “I got it. You two just sit there and relax.”

Alba grunts in reply.

I jerk open the front door, expecting to see one of Mom’s ‘friends.’ Instead, I come face-to-face with Sam.

Heavily, I lean against the door jam, making sure to block his view of my house. “Hey,” I say dumbly. I know I look like a deer in headlights.

He grins at me. “Hey.”

“What are you doing here?”

Sam takes off his baseball cap and drags a hand through his hair. “I wanted to talk to you.”

Sam definitely didn’t drink as much as me, and he looks as fresh as a daisy dressed in khaki cargo shorts and a gray t-shirt that, as always, strains against his shoulders. I don’t need a mirror to reveal that I’m probably as white as a ghost and my hair probably looks like a rat’s nest.

My hand tightens around the door knob. “About?”

“About last night.”

Even though I know that this conversation needs to happen sooner than later, I’m not quite ready for it.

Sam tries to peer inside. I mirror his movements, trying to block him.

“I can’t come in?” he questions.

“It’s a mess,” I reply casually. Which is more than the truth. It’s a dump and the last thing I want to do is give Sam another glimpse of *Casa de craphole*.

“Why don’t we talk outside?”

Quickly, I slip outside and shut the door behind me. The wooden beams creak beneath my feet as I walk to the opposite side of the porch and lean against the railing.

Tucking his hands into his pockets, Sam stands next to me.

I pick at my nails because if I look at him, at those delicious arms, I might jump him again. “I think I owe you an apology,” I say quietly.

Sam slowly turns his head to me and lifts a brow. “You owe me an apology?”

I drop my hands and face him. “Yeah, because of how I... attacked you last night at the party.”

A slow half-smile appears across his lips. “And you think because of *that* you owe me an apology?”

My hands drop heavily to my sides. “Well, yeah,” I say a bit impatiently.

“Let me ask you something: do you regret last night?”

I’m silent for a few seconds and then I say, very quietly, “I don’t.”

“If you don’t regret it, then why did you apologize to me?”

“Because...” I suddenly become tongue-tied. I don’t want to say it aloud, but I know I have to. “Because last night, I lost control and it reminded me of my mom,” I confess in one big breath.

Sam’s eyes widen slightly. He doesn’t say a word and for that I’m grateful.

“I’ve always said I’ll never be like her. Ever. And last night, I used one of her greatest vices.”

“You are nothing like your mom,” he whispers fiercely.

“But maybe I am,” I continue, “I don’t believe that someone can wake up one day and magically become an alcoholic. She probably had a small, innocent drink years ago and here we are today.”

Sam wraps an arm around me and gives me a squeeze. “You’re stronger than her,” he says against my hair.

He says that and I really, really want to believe him. But I don’t know if I am. If living with my mom has shown me anything, it’s that we all have our weaknesses. And Sam is mine.

“For the record, I remember everything about last night and you definitely did *not* attack me.” He peers down at me and looks at me thoughtfully. “What all do you remember from last night?”

His stare is knifelike, almost daring me to lie. But still. It’s more than embarrassing to remember all the details. I look across the street as I speak. “I remember getting to the party and talking to Matty briefly. I remember talking to Maren and then I had a few shots.” I deliberately leave out the part of seeing him with all those girls and feeling insanely jealous. “I remember me and you talking. I remember...touching. But it’s all a blur,” I lie.

I’ve never stopped loving you.

“You want all the details? I’ll be happy to give them to you,” he says with a wicked smile that makes me tingle throughout my whole body.

“No,” I say a little hoarsely, “I’ll figure it out.”

“Come on. Let me jump start your memory.” He shifts closer, until I’m forced to tilt my head back. “You and Maren did have a lot to drink. Last night was the first time that I’ve ever seen you wasted, or drinking alcohol for that matter.” His voice goes down an octave. “You and I fucked and I think it’s

the best I've ever had because you were unrestrained. You were this greedy, wild little thing and I couldn't look away."

For a moment the two of us are silent. I exhale a shaky breath and rest my head against his chest.

"Sam...the summer's almost over and we'll both be leaving for college." I leave my words open-ended.

He laughs ruefully as he holds me close to him. "Not this conversation again."

I push back. "But it can't be avoided." I tilt my head back and look at him. "Will we still be...*friends*?"

"Of course," Sam says, his voice low.

I know I shouldn't, but I look over at him. My gaze collides with his and I see frustration weaved with a possessiveness that makes me want to take Maren's advice and try to see where things can go between Sam and me.

Sam looks away first. He taps his knuckles against the railing before he stands up straight and takes a small step back. "You're hungover right now, so I'm just gonna leave. But you and I both know there is something, and there will always be something between us."

He leaves me there. I watch him go with five words echoing in my head, *I've never stopped loving you*.

It's one thing to want someone.

It's a whole other thing to love them.



CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

SAMSON

THEN

“SAMSON! WE’RE EATING DINNER...TOGETHER! GET DOWN here!”

“I’m coming!” I shouted back, yet my feet were rooted to the floor. I looked down at my phone. Sable’s text was still on the screen:

SABLE

I’ll see you in an hour?

My fingers were lightning fast as I texted back:

Sounds good.

At this point, there wasn’t a day that went by that I didn’t see Sable. After last month, in my Jeep, I couldn’t keep my hands off of her. Sable didn’t object. In fact, she was just as enthusiastic as I was. If not more.

What I felt was beyond obsession. More like an addiction. And just like any good addict, I couldn’t get enough. Each time we saw each other, Sable opened up more and more. She was even starting to relax around my parents. But this little voice inside my head, warned me that even though I loved Sable, and she was slowly opening up to me, there was so much I didn’t know about her.

And I probably never would. My senior year was wrapping up and we still had the summer, but what about after that?

Fuck if I knew.

“Samson, I mean it!” Mom hollered up the stairs.

Dropping my phone onto the bed, I walked out of my room. Dinner was typical with Audree giving us a play by play of her entire day.

My mom's words pulled me back to the present. "...we need to start looking for one."

"One what?" I asked.

"A babysitter for Audree over the summer."

"Ask Sable." The words stumbled out of my mouth before I could give them much thought.

My mom stopped eating; her fork poised above her mashed potatoes. "Sable?"

I nodded, already on the run with this idea. "Yeah. It'd be perfect; Audree loves Sable."

Audree nodded. "I do. She has pretty hair."

I gestured toward Audree as if her explanation was enough of a reason to hire Sable. Mom just laughed. "While I love having Sable around, I think this is something I need to talk to her more about."

"What's there to talk about?" I prodded.

"Oh, I don't know, if she even wants the job. And just talk to her one-on-one. Get to know her better."

Warning bells were going off in my head. Mom made it seem like it was nothing, but I knew what her intent was. She wanted to know about Sable and me.

"She's smart. She's responsible. That's enough to babysit Audree, right?" I asked between a mouthful of food.

Both of my parents looked at me as if I'd lost my mind.

Fuck. I'd said too much. I could see the interrogation on the horizon.

"Anything else we should know about Sable?" Mom asked, her lips quirked into a small smile.

"No. Why are you looking at me like that?"

"How am I looking at you?"

"Ease up on him, Elaine," Dad quietly interjected.

"Thank you," I said with relief.

“This is the first time Sam’s actually been interested in a girl,” Dad thinks over his words. “Well, long enough for us to notice.”

Mom nodded at the last of his words before she wagged her fork at me. “That’s true. But I think it’s more than that. I think he’s in love.”

Thank God I wasn’t eating a piece of chicken because I’m ninety-nine percent sure I’d be choking right now. Rapidly, I shook my head, but, in reality, all I could think was, *Is it that obvious?*

If my parents could see the truth? Could everyone else?

“Look, this isn’t an after-school special where we talk about feelings and emotions. I just suggested Sable as Audree’s babysitter. That’s it,” I stated firmly.

Mom took a long sip of her Diet Coke. While Dad shrugged and continued eating.

For a few blissful moments, there was silence, with just the sound of forks and knives hitting the plates.

I was slowly starting to relax and thought the conversation was done and over with when Mom said out of the blue: “And those tutoring sessions with Sable — how are they going?”

The look Mom gave me revealed that she knew a lot more than studying was going on.

I choked on my water. Once I was out of the danger zone of not choking, I answered my mom, albeit a little hoarsely, “They’re good.”

They were more than good. With things progressing between us, many times our studying sessions would turn into make-out sessions and sometimes even further. Okay, a lot of the time.

“Just good?”

I threw my hands up in the air. Mom was like a dog with a bone. She wasn’t going to let this subject go. “Can we just stick to you asking Sable if she’d be interested in babysitting Audree?”

Mom gave me an innocent smile. “Absolutely. In fact, I’ll call her tomorrow and ask her.”



AFTER DINNER, I HURRIED DOWN THE HALL, INTENT ON grabbing my phone and keys to go meet Sable.

“Sam, can I talk to you?”

I turned to my left and saw Dad leaning against the living room doorframe.

“Sure.”

He stepped forward and rested his hand around the banister. “While your mom won’t come out and say it, I will: if Sable becomes Audree’s babysitter, that doesn’t mean you get to sit around the house all summer chasing after her.”

“I’m not—”

“Oh, save it,” Dad cut in. “I was your age and I know exactly what’s running through that perverted mind of yours.”

Silence at this point was the best course of action. Simply because he was completely spot-on.

“Besides, you won’t have much time to moon over Sable because your ass is working this summer.”

“What?”

“A job,” Dad said slowly, as if I was an infant. “You’ve heard of it before, right?”

“Yeah. I’ve had one before.”

“Good. Then there should be no issue.”

“But I have football camp,” I pointed out.

“You have football camp all summer long?” he challenged.

“Well, no.”

“Well, then that means you’re getting a job.”

“I’m not detasseling corn this summer. I did it two years ago and it was a nightmare.”

“Okay. So you don’t have to detassel. Find something else,” Dad reasoned.

Having a job wasn’t an issue. I’ve had one before, but if I was being completely honest, it’d be a pretty fucking awesome summer if I didn’t have to work. The cherry on top would be seeing Sable most of the time and the look in Dad’s eyes showed he knew exactly what I was thinking.

“If she babysits your sister, then that’s it. Got it?”

I held my hands out in front of me, in compliance. “I got it.”

But even as I said those words, I was thinking about all the ways I could see her over the summer before I left.



CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

SABLE

NOW

LIKE MOST TOWNS, ANTSETT HAS A GROCERY STORE. IT'S KIND of a last-stop resort when you're too lazy to go into the city to get something as simple as bread and milk. Mostly, because the prices here are astronomical, causing me to never shop there. The only reason I'm here now is because we're out of toilet paper. Even if I did want to go into the city, I don't have enough gas for that. So overpriced toilet paper it is.

Slamming the car door, I smooth out my shorts and walk across the gravel parking lot. The heat over the summer has been relentless. I glance at the sun, as it slowly sets, even if it appears sluggish from the heat.

Outside of the grocery store is a line of vending machines and a newspaper stand that still has a newspaper from over two years ago. The sun beats down, making me grateful that I put my hair up into a bun before I left the house. This is the point of summer where I become so sick of the heat that I dream of snow and crisp winter air.

The bell attached to the door jingles as I walk in. A cold blast of the air conditioning hits me, covering my body in goosebumps and making me sigh in relief.

“Are you here to keep me company?”

Alba stands behind register two. A gossip magazine planted in front of her. Very slowly, she turns the glossy pages.

“No. We need some toilet paper.”

“Can we splurge and get the Charmin kind?” She gives me a pouty face and bats her eyelashes. “Please, Ma? Please?”

Ignoring her, I roll my eyes. A customer stops in front of Alba's register. She's an older woman. Mrs. Davis, I think. She doesn't say hi. Not that I expect her to. Every time I see her, she has this careworn expression. Her beady little eyes narrow at me and Alba, as if all the problems in the world exist because of us.

From the look on Alba's face, I know she's dying to say something snarky back to this old woman. I make eye contact with Alba and mouth, *be good*, before I quickly walk away.

The last thing we need is for Alba to lose her job.

Because I don't want to step back out into the scorching heat, I walk through each aisle, idly scanning items and looking around until I know I've officially been here too long.

I head over to the toilet paper and grab the cheapest one they have available. When I see the Charmin, an unexpected sadness unfurls in the pit of my stomach. All over toilet paper. But we have so little money, toilet paper is now considered a luxury. I keep waiting for my sisters and me to reach rock bottom, but we seem to keep falling with nothing to break our fall. I'm tired of waiting for the next curve ball that life throws at us. I'm tired of having no money. I want to be pushed down one last time, so I can pick myself up and know it's only up from there.

"You've been staring at that toilet paper for five minutes."

The sound of Sam's voice makes me shriek. I clutch the toilet paper to my chest and turn around. "Don't do that."

Sam looms behind me with his hands tucked into his basketball shorts. He's wearing a well-worn U of I football shirt. The sleeves stretch across his massive biceps and look like they're on the brink of tearing at the seams. Reluctantly, I pull my gaze away from his body to look at his face. Arrogantly, he's smiling at me. "What? Walk around a store?"

"No! Sneak up on me," I huff.

"I didn't sneak up on you. You were just staring that intensely at toilet paper, which is kind of concerning. I didn't know you took grocery shopping so seriously."

"I didn't know that you turned into a stalker."

"Not stalking. Came here for some milk."

"It's three aisles over," I point out.

Sam shrugs. "Now that I'm here, I think I'll hang out with you."

Together, we walk toward the dairy section. Some 80s song plays lightly from the speakers. Sam and I are silent, awkwardly so. We only talked yesterday about what happened at the party and judging from the heated look in Sam's eyes, I know what we did is still fresh in his mind. Which is minor consolation because I can't stop thinking about it either.

I remember when I was ten and developed my first crush. His name was Chris Rovida. He was staying with his grandparents for the summer in Antsett and with his chocolate brown eyes and perfect dimples, I was a goner. I was obsessed. Always trying to sneak looks at him. I talked to him once when his grandma came over to Ms. Nova's and I squeaked out a reply. I'll always remember that summer for how amplified and vivid it was. Everything felt as though it had the potential to be perfect.

I don't think I've ever been in that simple, crush phase with Sam. I went from seeing him as the enemy, having all these pre-conceived notions of him, to being full-blown consumed by him and needing to see him every day.

I don't think I ever truly got over him. I simply went through the motions of life because I had to. And what did I do when he came back? Started seeing him daily, which inevitably ended up with the two of us having sex. I'm falling back into old habits and I can't seem to stop myself.

Again, what in the hell was I thinking?

In the next aisle over, I hear my mom's name. Instantly, I go silent. Sam stops abruptly and I know he's listening right alongside me.

"Annie's back at it again." The voice is familiar and distinctly female, with a southern lilt to her words. The more she speaks, the quicker I put a name to the voice. Karen Milligan. Or Mrs. Milligan, as everyone refers to her. Even her husband calls her that. She's a lady who's sixty-eight and still sports a beehive hairdo. Alba and I have joked that it probably takes her one can of Aqua Net per day to get it that high. If she ever lights a match, anyone in a two-mile radius will blow up right along with her, but that isn't the most interesting thing

about her. It's that damn southern accent. I want to shake her and tell her that she's lived in the mid-west for her whole life. But no one challenges her; she comes from money. She could probably get away with murder if she wanted to.

"Sniffing around places she doesn't belong," Mrs. Milligan continues. "I was talking to Phyllis yesterday and she said that she overheard one of the bank tellers saying that Annie's sleeping with Phillip Roberts."

I wince. Maybe Mom is. Maybe she isn't. But the sad part is I wouldn't be shocked if she is. Mom has been with men a lot worse.

Her friend tsked lightly. "Lord be with those girls."

Like any small town, if you bring up the Lord in your gossip, it becomes concern, not malicious words.

Mrs. Milligan snorts. "Be with them? They're a lost cause. Look at that oldest girl of hers...always sniffing around at the McShane's."

Beside me, Sam tenses up. He places a hand on my lower back. I want to glance at him, but I'm too mortified. I stare down at the floor and bite down so hard on my lip, I draw blood.

"But isn't the oldest going to college?"

"Let's be honest, none of those girls are going to college. They're not worth a nickel. They'll turn out just like their mother," Mrs. Milligan says.

You'd think after years of hearing harsh words and insulting nicknames being tossed my way, I would've created a thick skin. On some level, I think I have, but her words still cut me like a knife.

The ladies finally walk away, but their conversation lingers around me. If it was possible to crawl out of my skin and slink away as quickly as possible, I would.

Don't feel embarrassed, I try to tell myself. You're not your mother. You're not your mother. You're not your mother.

“Don’t listen to her,” Sam whispers in my ear. “She’s full of shit.”

My head snaps up. He stares down at me, the half-smirk of his is gone, replaced by lips drawn into a tight line and blue eyes filled with concern.

As quietly as possible, I clear my throat when I really want to cry. I find myself leaning into him. “That’s not true. My mom might actually be fucking this Phillip man. So Mrs. Milligan is 99.9% full of shit.”

My attempt to ease the tension fails miserably, as Sam doesn’t crack a smile, not even a smirk.

“Are you gonna tell her to fuck off, or am I?” he asks.

Instinctively, I grab his arm. “Neither one of us is going to say a word. What she just said...it happens all the time. It’s my life.”

Sam leans in. “It shouldn’t be,” he replies in a low voice.

Before I can reply, someone says, “You’re gonna have to pay for that, ma’am.”

I roll my eyes as I turn around. Alba’s leaning against a rack of baby shampoo with a twenty-percent off sign beneath it. It’s obvious by her mischievous grin she didn’t hear the ladies talking. She takes one good look at me and walks toward us. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” I say at the same time Sam replies, “It’s not nothing.”

Shooting him a dirty look, I quickly smile at Alba. “Don’t listen to him.”

Ignoring me, Alba stares at Sam. “What happened?”

He tells her everything we overheard, while Mrs. Milligan continues to shop, completely oblivious. When he’s done talking, Alba slowly looks out of the corner of her eye to where Mrs. Milligan is. She looks about two seconds away from going off, and then she finally looks me in the eyes. “She said that?” she asks quietly.

“What a bitter ole’ bat,” she mutters underneath her breath.

“Alba, it was nothing,” I rush out in a hurried whisper.

“Yeah, fucking right,” she hotly replies. “Sable, I’m sick of the whispers. I’m sick of the lies and I’m sick of sitting back and pretending that it’s okay ‘cause it’s not.”

“Just take a deep breath,” I reason. “All right? I promise ___”

“I’m ready to check out,” Mrs. Milligan calls out. She looks around, trying to find the cashier. She spots Alba and me, and doesn’t blink an eye. There’s not a trace of guilt on her face. Then she has the nerve to wave Alba over, like she’s the hired help.

Before Alba steps forward, she pushes back her shoulders and smiles brightly. It’s like watching an actress get into character. “I’ll be right there!” she says brightly.

I step forward. “Alba—”

She looks over her shoulder at me, her eyes flashing. “I got this.”

This is going to go south in seconds. Alba has a temper that easily puts mine to shame. And once she’s at that point, there’s no stopping her.

Quickly, I follow behind her, only to have Sam stop me. “She’s going to do something stupid,” I hiss.

“What? Like scream and yell?” He smirks. “Give your sister a little credit.”

He lets go of me, and with my toilet paper in hand, I hurry to the front of the store and patiently wait behind Karen. I anxiously bite on my nails, while Sam patiently stands beside me.

Alba doesn’t look at me once. She appears to be the dutiful clerk, scanning every item...as slowly as possible then carefully bagging the items.

“I said paper,” Mrs. Milligan huffs out.

Alba looks up and blinks once. Twice. Then she smiles. “Oh, I’m so sorry. I could’ve sworn you said plastic. Sorry about that.”

Alba spends another five minutes unloading the groceries and putting them in paper. By now, Mrs. Milligan is impatiently tapping her foot, waiting for her to finish.

“How are you today?” Alba asks as she continues to put the groceries away.

“Busy.” Mrs. Milligan sighs as if the weight of her world is on her shoulders. “The Red Hat Society Luncheon will be at my house.” She glances down at her flashy watch. “Well, they’re probably already there.”

Alba nods, like she can relate. She scans the last item. “That’ll be \$45.60.” Mrs. Milligan opens her wallet and gives her the exact change.

Alba hums along to the tune coming through the speakers as she opens up the cash register. She hands over the receipt. “Do you want me to help you carry the groceries out to the car?”

“No,” Mrs. Milligan huffs. “I’ve got it.”

With her elbows resting on the counter, Alba looks her up and down. “I’m sure you do.”

As she gathers all her bags and walks away, Alba stands up. “Mrs. Milligan, you have you a grandson, don’t you?”

She stops and turns to Alba. “Yes, I do,” she replies, impatience laced throughout her words.

“People call him one of the golden boys,” Alba remarks cryptically. It’s enough to make Mrs. Milligan arch a brow. Alba may be my sister, but even I look inquisitively at Sam. He just shrugs.

“Since he’s related to the perfect and all-knowing Karen Milligan, he would never ever be the drunk guy at all the parties,” Alba continues, “And he would never be the creepy asshole who hits on anything with a vagina. And he would

definitely never hide cocaine in the console of his car. Or buy said cocaine from Matty Elwood's dad...would he?"

How the hell does she know all of this?

Mrs. Milligan's face turns completely white the same time Alba gives her the first genuine smile. "Don't ever talk about one of my family members again because I have no problem talking about yours. Whether I'm the daughter of the town whore or not, every single one of your friends salivates over gossip. They'd die for a chance to hear anything about you."

Mrs. Milligan's mouth is agape for only a millisecond before she pulls herself together. Her shoulders straighten around the same time she clears her throat. Without a word, she walks away.

"Have a blessed day!" Alba calls out in a sugary sweet voice.



CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

SABLE

NOW

“IF YOU THINK ABOUT IT, THIS IS KIND OF YOUR FAULT!” ALBA yells as she slams the door.

I whirl around. “How is this my fault?”

“You once told me to be the bad cop in life!”

I toss the keys onto the kitchen table. They skid across it and land on the floor. Lennon, who’s lying on the couch, lifts her head up long enough to stare at us. Seconds later, she flops back down and goes back to staring at the TV.

“Yes, I once told you to be the bad cop,” I snap. “Not part of the Gestapo!”

“What was I supposed to do?” Alba plops down in one of the kitchen chairs and rubs her temples. “Sit there and not say something?”

“Yes! That’s exactly what you’re supposed to do. Be the bigger person.”

Alba sits back in the chair and crosses her arms. “Oh, fuck that. People talk behind our backs everywhere we go and I’m sick of it.”

I sigh loudly. “I get it. You have no idea how much I get it. But that one rant cost you a week’s worth of pay and now we won’t make rent.”

“Oh, no. We have no money,” Alba says dryly. “That’s a new development.”

Seconds later, she stands up and walks down the hallway. Alba has a fiery temper, but when it boils right down to it, she hates arguing, and when it gets too much for her, she’ll walk away from the situation. In that way, we’re alike. But this is something we can’t sweep under the rug and forget about. Missing a week of work is a big deal. Just thinking about it causes my heart to race. I can feel the beginnings of a panic attack taking over.

I follow behind her. “You need to care about this. When I’m gone, you and Maren are going to have to step up and help —”

“Sable, just stop!” Alba takes a deep breath and faces me. “God, it never ends with you. Pay the bills. Worry about money. Go to work. Do this, do that. The list just goes on!”

“Alba, this”— I gesture between the two of us— “is all I know. We have no mom. We have no parents. It’s just us girls.”

“Yes, but that doesn’t mean that you need to replace their roles. You’re my sister. Stop worrying about me, okay?”

“I just want to protect you.”

“Really? Protect me?” Alba laughs humorlessly. “This is coming from the person that up until the age of twelve, thought every time Mom talked about Molly, she was referring to one of the original American Girl Dolls. I’m the one that had to tell you what she really meant.”

“And that’s the saddest thing about our childhood: we had to see the bad of this world way too soon and I’m trying my hardest to give us something different.”

“Your efforts are failing miserably because you’re bitter, defensive and sad all the fucking time.”

Her words are like arrows. Each one piercing my heart. Instead of taking a step back from the situation, I dive headfirst into my anger. “At least I’m not a drunk like you!”

Alba barely flinches, but her face becomes bright red. “I don’t get drunk. I become fabulously happy.”

“Keep making jokes. That’s all you do. God forbid you ever take something seriously.”

“Why should I? You’ve been doing a bang-up job of worrying for the both of us.”

There’s a small break between hurling insults at each other. Insults is the wrong word. More like low blows. But we’re both so amped up and angry at what just happened back at the grocery store and we need to unload our stress. Unfortunately, it’s on each other.

The two of us take a deep breath.

I lean against the wall, carefully thinking over my words. “If I didn’t care about you, Maren, and Lennon, I wouldn’t be this way,” I explain slowly. “You could become a drug dealer. Sell your body. You could live in this trailer for the rest of your life and turn into Mom and I wouldn’t give a shit. But I love you so I do care and I always will.”

Alba never replies. Just pushes away from the wall and slams the bedroom door. A heavy sigh escapes me, as I slouch heavily against the wall.

A door creaks open behind me. Maren peeks her head out of our room. She glances to where Alba’s lying on the bed and then back to me, before she steps out of the room and quietly shuts the door behind her. “What was that about?”

“Alba mouthed off to someone at work,” I sigh.

“And that’s different from every other day because?”

“Because she mouthed off to Karen Milligan. That’s why it’s different.”

Maren makes a face before she mutters, “God, I hate that woman.”

“Join the club. But focusing on my hatred won’t magically fill my pockets up with cash.” I take a deep breath. “She’s been suspended for a week.”

Maren’s eyes widen. “Shit.”

“Yeah.” I look at her hopefully. “You have any shifts you can pick up at work?”

I feel guilty even asking Maren this. She carries her load around here and I don’t want to ask any more of her.

She doesn’t think twice before she replies, “Probably.”

I nod, but I’m already preoccupied, trying to figure out how to stretch our limited money even further. “I can swing by the Assisted Living Facility and see if they’re looking to hire anyone. Someone’s always quitting in the kitchen.”

The two of us are quiet for a few seconds. A terrible silence descends around us. It's heavy and oppressive. Only further compounding the weight of the situation we're in.

Finally, Maren sighs and smiles weakly. "Don't worry. We'll figure it out."

All I can do is nod.

She gives me a small pat on the shoulder before she walks back into our bedroom, softly shutting the door behind her. Seconds later, I can hear both Alba and Maren quietly talking. I'm willing to bet that Alba is probably talking shit about me.

If I had money, that is.

Pressing the heel of my palms into my closed eyes, I take a deep breath before I straighten my shoulders and make my way to the kitchen. Do I want to go back to work at the Assisted Living Facility? Hell no. Just thinking about it makes me cringe. Working in the kitchen is a lot of work. A lot of running back and forth getting orders. It's like a restaurant filled with people that are on borrowed time, where most conversations center around who's being transferred across the street to the nursing home, what the next Thursday night movie is going to be, and how many pills they need to take with their meals. It always creeped me out.

But if I have to go back there and work, I'll do it. Even if it's only until I leave for college.

I open the fridge and scan the items. We're down to just half a gallon of milk, a package of cheese, and some moldy bologna. Just as I close the door, the lights flicker on and off a few times. I look around and watch as they struggle to stay on before the lights turn off altogether.

"Fan-fucking-tastic," I mutter.

The trailer becomes ominously quiet. The TV goes blank. All the fans stop running. From our bedroom, I hear Alba say, "The hell just happened?"

Our house is put on pause while the world goes on around us. I feel a sinking dread in my stomach, but try to shove it down and hurry down the hall.

“What’s going on?” Lennon asks.

I don’t reply as I open the panel cover. There used to be labels right next to the black switches, but the writing has long since faded, so I end up flipping every switch, hoping that one of them will do the trick.

Nothing turns back on.

Slamming the cover, I slowly slide down the wall and cover my face with my hands. This is the last thing that I needed to deal with.

A few minutes later, someone clears their throat. I lift my head and find Maren, once again, staring at me. “Uh...did you pay the electric bill?”

Staring straight ahead, I try to think of all the things I’ve done this week: coming and going from the McShane’s, going to Ms. Nova’s, getting groceries, fueling up the car. I returned some library books...

And then it hits me — as I was walking out of the library, I remember glancing at the blue post box next to the road and thinking that I needed to mail off the electric bill and then I promptly tripped over the cracked sidewalk, dropping the books I just checked out.

“Shit.” I groan and drop my face into my hands.

“Should I go stock up on some candles and matches?”

I peek through my fingers at her. “Yes.”



CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

SAMSON

THEN

IMPATIENTLY, I TUGGED ON THE COLLAR OF MY SHIRT.

The gymnasium was packed with parents, extended family that were brave enough to sit on uncomfortable fold-out chairs and bleachers for an hour. It was only May, but the air was filled with humidity. It didn't matter that all the gym doors were open and fans were running; it was still unbearably hot. Most people were using the programs to fan themselves.

Craning my neck, I looked around, trying to find the one face that I wanted to see.

Sable was nowhere to be seen and the ceremony was about to start in five minutes.

Even though I knew she didn't want to come here and be surrounded by people that talked about her, Sable promised she'd show up.

At seven on the dot, the principal walked up to the podium. Behind him were school board members and my mom all patiently waiting for him to begin. He straightened his papers and lightly tapped the microphone in front of him. A high-pitched noise reverberated through the room. I cringed. The principal cleared his throat. I swore half of the crowd sighed with relief. Everyone quieted down, except for a baby who cried out in his mom's arms.

“Good evening everyone and thank you for coming tonight for—”

While the principal rambled on, I twisted in my seat and scanned the crowd once again. By this point, it was futile to search for Sable; the gym was so packed, even if she was in clear sight, I probably wouldn't find her.

I faced the stage and halfheartedly listened to the principal talk about keeping the ‘dignity’ of tonight's ceremony and if everyone would please wait to clap until the end of the ceremony, that would be great.

He started to announce names and one by one, my classmates stood up to receive their diplomas. Most of us sitting there in our caps and gowns were sweating bullets and wanted to be anywhere else but there. In my opinion, the pomp and circumstance were more for the parents and families.

Even my mom was tearing up. I made eye contact with her and mouthed, *stop it*. That just made her eyes well up with tears further.

“Samson Thomas McShane.”

Let's get this done and over with. I stood and before I walked down the aisle, I glanced at Audree. She grinned widely and went to clap. Before her hands could meet, Dad grabbed them and lowered them onto her lap.

Sweat dripped down my neck, and by this point, I couldn't care less about this diploma. I was counting down the hours until I could take this damn cap and gown off.

“Congratulations,” the principal said as he handed me my diploma and shook my hand.

If I'm being completely honest, I'd say that there was relief in finally being done with high school. It was like a giant check mark I could put on a long list life had given me. I was moving on and looking forward to college. There was an extra pep in my step as I walked back to my seat.

It was a good twenty minutes before the final name was called. By then, my ass was half-numb by sitting in the world's most uncomfortable chair. When the principal congratulated us all, I swore everyone took a collective sigh of relief and stood up.

Contrary to the sitcoms and TV shows, no hats were thrown in the air. Supposedly, a girl last year got hit in the eye with someone else's cap and had to wear an eye patch for half the summer. But there was always that one person who forgot the memo and did the opposite. That moron just happened to be Drew.

I brushed past him, toward my family. After a long round of hugs from my parents and grandparents from my mom's

side, I was finally able to extract myself from the group long enough to scan the faces around me. Where was she?

“You look good in your cap and gown.”

Quickly, I twisted around and saw Sable standing there. Judging from the way she protectively had her arms crossed, I knew her sisters weren't with her. She was wearing shorts and some frilly white tank top that looked like something one of her sisters would wear.

Either way, she looked fucking amazing.

“You've been here the whole time?”

She shrugged as she walked forward. “Well not the whole time. Technically, I was fifteen minutes late, but thank God school functions always seem to run late because that made me right on time.”

I was so used to seeing Sable constantly surrounded by her sisters. I'd come to the conclusion that if you had one Cole sister in your life, you had them all. It was strange not to have them around.

“Sisters didn't want to come?”

She rolled her eyes. “Oh, they did. I would've been later than I was and Alba would've been the one person that clapped when your name was called. Technically, I did you a favor.”

“Well, thank you...I think.”

Sable tilted her head to the side and smiled at me. My gut twisted so violently, it felt like I'd been punched in the stomach. Around Sable, this sometimes happened. It was a visceral reaction. Like my mind was telling me, *Hey, in case you didn't know, this girl is someone you're never going to forget.*

My feelings for her hadn't changed. I loved her. I kept wanting to deny it, but all the time I spent with her made it clear.

Did I tell her?

Hell no. I could see it now: her green eyes going all wide. She would make an excuse and leave within seconds. When it came to emotions, Sable was a vault. She kept everything bottled up so tightly. It was only when we were alone, I would see the real Sable, and even that side took months of setting free.

If I told her how I felt...God, I might never see her again and that couldn't happen.

“Sable!” A small voice shrieked behind us.

I groaned because I already knew what was about to happen, and sure enough, Audree came barreling around me and practically tackled Sable in a bear hug. All of the tension in Sable's shoulders disappeared as she wrapped her arms around Audree.

“You came!” my sister said.

“Of course I did. Where else would I be tonight?” Sable's eyes met mine for a brief second before she refocused on Audree. “Isn't it great your big brother graduated?”

Audree thought over her answer. “Not really. It's too boring here, and during the ceremony, I had to sit still.”

Sable nodded her head as if she completely understood. “Sitting still is not what it's cracked up to be.”

“It isn't,” Audree agreed. “But Daddy said if I was quiet, I could have all the cake I wanted when we got home.”

Sable's eyes widened. “That's amazing!”

Finally, Audree extracted herself from Sable. “During Sam's party, you should have cake with me too. I bet if I ask Daddy, we can just eat the cake with our hands — no forks or plates!”

Sable's smile remained intact but she snuck a glance at me and hesitated before she answered, “I might sit tonight out and let you enjoy all the wonderful family time.”

“Nooo!” Audree laced her fingers together and batted her eyes, looking like a starving animal begging for scraps. “You have to come.”

Sable hesitated. “I’ll think about it. How’s that?”

Apparently, it was good enough for Audree because she soon skittered off toward Mom and Dad. Sable looked over my shoulder to where the rest of my family was. “I’m assuming the couple standing next to your parents are your grandparents?”

I looked over my shoulder at them. “You guessed right.”

“It’s nice they came,” she commented so quietly I barely heard her.

I faced her just in time to see the wistfulness in her eyes. “You should come to my graduation party and meet them.”

Sable gave me some serious side-eye. “You know how I feel about parties.”

“I do, and I’m happy to tell you that this is a simple graduation party my parents are hosting with just extended family. It’ll be completely boring,” I assured her.

It was a shot in the dark, inviting her to come over. The first time she met my parents, she was as stiff as a board. I didn’t want to put her in another uncomfortable situation, yet I wanted her there.

“But won’t that be...awkward?”

“Why would it be awkward?”

“Because your whole family is going to be there,” she pointed out.

“Relax. My extended family is mostly made up of my mom’s parents. Besides, my mom has talked about you many times.” The minute the words came out of my mouth, I knew it was a big fucking mistake.

Sable’s eyes widened in alarm. I could see her mind coming up with the worst possible scenario.

“No, no, no, no,” I quickly spoke up. “You know my entire family loves you. Everything she said was good. In my family, you’re considered a hero for helping me pass English Lit.”

“Sam...” Sable’s resolve was weakening. I reached out, and gently grabbed her left wrist, guiding her to me. I didn’t give a fuck who saw, and for once, neither did Sable. Once she was close enough, I linked our fingers together.

“Just come, okay? I really want you to be there.” I saw the indecision and doubt in her eyes and added, “You’ll be with me. I won’t let anything happen to you.”

She swallowed before she replied, “I’ll go.”



SABLE DIDN’T CLAM UP LIKE I EXPECTED HER TO AROUND MY grandparents. In fact, most of the night, she talked to my grandma and my mom. Well, they did most of the talking. But not once did Sable look uncomfortable or bored. She genuinely appeared interested in them. I knew from the look in my grandma’s eyes that she was sold on Sable. Which was damn near impossible. She had opinions and she wasn’t afraid to say them. To most people, she was a lot to take and the feeling was usually mutual.

I was convinced that I’d have to physically extract Sable from their clutches in order to get a moment alone with her.

By nine o’clock, everyone was winding down their conversations and I went in for the kill and draped an arm across her shoulders, pressing her into me. She easily leaned in, her warm body fitting perfectly against mine.

“We get it. You want her all to yourself,” my grandma commented with a sly smirk.

“You’ve had her all night,” I replied.

Grandma’s eyes sparkled. She turned her attention to Sable. “What do you see in our Samson?”

For most people, this question would have them hemming and hawing their way through an answer. But not Sable. “Honestly, I don’t know,” she said matter-of-factly. “I just keep coming over because I feel bad for him.”

Grandma clapped her hands and laughed loudly.

She pointed a finger at Sable. “Oh, I like you. I like you a lot.”

Before my grandma and mom could reel Sable into another conversation, I guided Sable toward the front door, anxious to get away.

Once on the front porch, Sable leaned against the railing and faced me. I stepped toward her, my arms bracketing her body. Sable tilted her head back and leaned in close enough that our bodies touched.

“Are you having fun?” I asked.

Sable lifted a brow, a playful gleam in her eyes. “Absolutely. I love your grandparents and your grandma is a riot.”

“A riot? Most people are terrified of her.”

“She’s got a mouth and that’s why I like her so much.”

“Well, at least someone outside of the family thinks that,” I joked.

Sable grinned. “And your grandparents are adorable.”

“Adorable?” I asked.

“I know, I know. I don’t use the word...ever. But they really are. I mean, Daniel and Donna? They’re the perfect match.”

I cleared my throat. Not even a day ago, Mom remarked to me out of the blue: “Sam and Sable. Sam and Sable — your names are the perfect match. If that isn’t a sign, I don’t know what is.”

While I appreciated Mom’s enthusiasm for us to be together, she was starting to be as bad as Audree, who by now wanted small plastic versions of us to put in her Dreamhouse so we could go on double dates with Ken and Barbie.

“Yep, they’re great people,” I rushed. “Hey, you know what most graduates typically get?” I asked.

Sable gave me a curious look. “What?”

“Gifts.” I rubbed my hands together. “Hand it over, Cole.”

Did I really expect a gift from Sable? Hell no. But I was eager to change the subject from anything that had to do with ‘perfect matches.’

“What makes you think you deserve a gift?” she joked.

“Come to think of it, you were the tutor...so you probably deserve the gift.”

“Hmm...” She worried her lower lip between her teeth and then her eyes widened and she snapped her finger. “I got it.”

“Your hands are empty so I really don’t think you got anything.”

“Oh, I do.” Her smile broadened. “This is something that you’ve wanted for a *really* long time.”

I wiggled a brow. “Holy shit, are you going to reenact the whipped-cream bikini scene from *Varsity Blues*?”

“Don’t know what you’re talking about, but I’m gonna have to go with a big hell no.”

“Then what?”

Lacing her fingers together, Sable took a deep breath. Then, very slowly, the corners of her mouth tilted up. “My first name is Alexandra.”

Alexandra Sable Cole. It was a full name. One that didn’t readily roll off the tongue. Trying to picture Sable as an Alexandra was hard at first. Yet the longer I looked at her, from her eyes, even to the way she held herself, Alexandra seemed to fit her to a T.

“It fits,” was all I said.

Sable shrugged. “Maybe it did when I was born, but now it’s just foreign. It feels more like a middle name than my actual middle name.”

“Are you sisters names their actual names?”

“Nope.” One by one, Sable started to tick their names off on her fingers. “There’s Theodora Alba, Josephine Maren and Isabella Lennon.”

I could get on board with Josephine and Isabella but Theodora? What the hell? No words.

“Judging from your expression, I can tell Theodora’s your favorite name out of all four.”

“It’s just...Alba’s no Theodora. That’s a name for some lady in the Victorian Era.”

“For some reason it’s what my mom chose. I think she saw it on some soap opera. To be fair, all of our first names were plucked from a soap opera.”

By now, I didn’t care where the hell her mom found their names. Not knowing all these months had honestly driven me crazy. It feels amazing to finally know just a bit more about Sable. Even something as small as a name. But the saddest part? I thought I’d gone through every girl name starting with an A and not once did I ever think of Alexandra. I gathered Sable into my arms.

“Well, thank you,” I said against the top of her head, “For the best graduation present ever. Tell Theodora, I said hi when you get home.”

With her hands against my chest, she playfully pushed me away. “If she knew that I told you her first name, she might kill me.”

“Shame,” I murmured. “I was hoping to see you a lot this summer.” I gave her a small squeeze before we pulled apart. “Besides watching my sister, what are your plans for the summer?”

“Oh, in a few weeks, my family will pack up for the Hamptons. It’s terribly exhausting, but our mansion next to the water makes up for it,” Sable replied. “What are you doing?”

“In a perfect world, I’d sit around and do nothing but hang out with you. But I’m probably going to be working construction with my uncle. So...livin’ the dream.”

“I’m actually really excited to be babysitting your sister this summer,” Sable confessed.

“Don’t get too excited. I’ve watched that girl a few times and let me tell ya, she’s more than a handful. In fact, my thoughts and prayers are with you. Word of advice: whenever she throws one of her famous fits, it might benefit you to have some Holy water you can throw on her. That usually does the trick.”

“If she’s such a handful then why did you suggest me as a babysitter? Do you secretly hate me?” she teased.

What I felt for her was the opposite of hate. It was a feeling that I couldn’t accurately describe. And so I just played it cool and shrugged a shoulder. “You like Audree. Audree likes you. You never know, she might be a perfect angel around you,” I replied.

Sable smiled and there it was, the punch to my gut. That made me want to mold her body to mine and never let go. “She’s a little kid so doubtful. But it’s a nice sentiment.”

The two of us were quiet for a while. Sable’s elbows were resting on the railing as she stared at the house across the street. “I’ve always loved this street,” she softly remarked.

I turned to her. “What?”

She nodded. “Alba and I would ride our bikes up and down this street, pretending that we lived in one of the houses.”

That might be the saddest thing I’ve heard from her yet. “Which house did you live in?”

She shrugged; her cheeks turned red. “Most of the time yours.” She quickly spoke. “I didn’t know you lived here until later on. But sometimes that house.” She gestured to the same house she’d been looking at for the past few minutes.

Mrs. Mayfield, who was old as shit, had lived there for as long as I could remember. Hell, she was probably here when this town was founded. As if she could sense us staring, she lifted her head and gave me a wave. Her eyes shifted to Sable,

and with casual disdain, she turned away and went back to watering her flowers.

Sable saw it, but she didn't say a word about it. Just quickly averted her gaze and stared off down the street. My lips went into a thin line.

"Anyways," she sighed, "I might have wanted to kick you in the nuts back then, but I did think you had the perfect family."

I gestured to the front door. "Clearly, they aren't."

Just then someone laughed uproariously, which made Sable smile. "I stand by my words. They're pretty damn perfect."

There was a beat of silence. Sable was the first one to break it. "Hey, Sam?"

The corner of my mouth lifted. "Hey, what?"

"Are you...are you..." She started and stopped her sentence several times. "Are you excited for college?" she blurted.

Sable stared at me expectantly and I knew there was way more to her question than she was letting on.

College was a topic we rarely touched upon. For good reason. Me leaving Antsett and her. I didn't want to think about that. Things were perfect the way they were.

"I'm ready to see what college has in store," I replied carefully. "And I'm definitely ready to move on from all the high-school bullshit, but excited? I don't think excited is the word."

I thought my answer was pretty damn good, but one look at Sable's devastated face quickly changed my mind.

Reaching out, I cupped her face between my hands. "Hey, hey, hey. What's wrong?"

Sable gave a smile that didn't reach her eyes. "Nothing is wrong."

Standing on her tiptoes, she pressed her lips against mine. I tasted her sadness and despair. When I tried to kiss her back, she was evasive, her tongue darting away from mine and gliding across my lower lip. It was a chase, trying to get her to submit. Yet she wouldn't relent. Her lips were teasing and soft, driving me to the point of madness. Every slant of her mouth took a hit at my self-control, and whispered into my ear, *This is what you'll be missing when you leave.*

When Sable pulled back it was a minor consolation to see her rapidly breathing. She wasn't as in control as she thought she was. She rested her head on my chest and wrapped her arms tightly around me. In a daze, I held the back of her head, my fingers sinking into her hair. After a few moments of silence, she whispered so softly, I almost didn't hear. "Oh, Sam. What am I going to do without you?"

I think the better question was, what would I do without her?



CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

SAMSON

THEN

“WHAT ABOUT THIS?” SABLE HELD UP AN OLD BASKETBALL trophy from back in the day when I played YMCA basketball.

“Definitely not taking.”

Instead of putting it in the box labeled ATTIC, Sable turned the trophy around in her hand and glanced at the engraved letters. “Samson McShane, Most Valuable Player.”

I continued to blindly throw junk into a black trash bag. “Don’t believe it. Everyone on the team got a trophy with the exact same thing engraved.”

Sable pointed to the plastic guy’s left arm, or what was once his left arm. “What happened here?”

“Oh, that was a tragic accident.” I stood and walked over, peering over her shoulder at that damn trophy. “My parents took me out to eat after I got it. We were driving home. Dad slammed on the brakes, and I dropped my beloved trophy and trophy man hit the window. We found his missing arm and tried to super glue it back on, but it never was quite the same.”

“It sounds tragic.”

“Oh, it was...until the year after that when I got the next trophy. Then he was old news.”

Sable laughed and gently placed the old trophy into the box. Placing her hands on her hips, she sighed and surveyed the room.

“What’s that sigh for?”

She looked over her shoulder at me. “Once again, I’m shocked at the amount of stuff you have.”

I snorted. “You act like I’m a hoarder.”

“Compared to my small room, you kind of are.”

“You’re never going to let me see your room...are you?”

She vehemently shook her head. Almost as though I was asking her to kill a person for me.

“Your room is starting to become infamous in my eyes.”

This time, Sable snorted. “There’s nothing to wonder about. It’s just a typical room.”

She always tried her hardest to steer the subject away from her home life, but it bothered the shit out of me. Drove me crazy, in fact. Because she had nothing to be embarrassed about. I was obsessed with her. There was nothing she could say or do that would steer my feelings in a different direction.

Every time we were together, the tightness in my chest didn’t ease up. At school, I was ready to shield her from anyone’s glare. In town, I prepared to snarl like a damn beast at anyone who whispered about her or her family.

How did she go from being my fucking tutor to...to being my *Sable*? When did it change?

Loudly, I cleared my throat. For the first time, it was me wanting to change the subject. “How has it been watching Audree so far?”

Sable walked over to my bed and flopped down. A wide smile spread across her face. “It’s been great. I love your sister.”

“No really. Tell the truth,” I said dryly.

“I am!” she laughed out loud.

“She can be sweet and funny but also kind of a little shit. I’ve seen the fits she’s thrown. It’s enough to make me want to be celibate for the rest of my life.”

Sable arched a brow, giving me a suggestive look. And just like that, I became hard. Only Sable could give me the hardest case of blue balls in history. The one time in my Jeep wasn’t enough for us. Any time we had the chance to be alone together we took it, but I always wanted more.

I didn’t think I’d ever get enough of Sable Cole.

“Maybe not for my whole life,” I said, my voice low as I walked over to her and placed my hands next to hers. Sable tilted her head back, her green eyes inviting. I dipped my head, my lips nearly grazed hers.

And then my mom walked into the room. Boner was gone within seconds. I jumped back from Sable and turned to one of the open boxes on my desk in a flash.

“How is it going in here?” Mom breezed in, completely oblivious to the fact that I was seconds away from jumping Sable.

I looked over my shoulder at Mom trying to look casual as I itched the back of my neck. Sable was beet red and refused to look at me.

“We’ve made some good progress,” I replied.

Mom took in the garbage bags and the box labeled ATTIC that was barely filled and gave me a look. “It appears you’re getting rid of more things than keeping.”

“Hey, you said to clean everything out. I’m doing just that. Plus, Sable is a control freak. She won’t let me keep a thing.”

Before I could finish the sentence, Sable jumped up, her face multiple shades of red. “I did not!”

It was borderline fascinating — the way Sable changed around my family. The solemn face and knowing eyes disappeared. And although she wasn’t as timid or as shy as she was when she first met them, she still appeared like this little girl, seeking approval from them. There’d been so many times when she came over that she’d say hi to my mom and then end up having an hour-long conversation with her. During those moments, you could tell how badly Sable craved moments like that.

Mom picked up on my sarcasm while it flew over Sable’s head. “Sable, what is he going to do without you?” she asked with a smile.

The second she said that, Sable’s body tensed up. She gave a tentative smile. “I ask myself that every day,” she replied.

We hadn't discussed what would happen when I left for college. A few times, I'd tried to broach the subject, but Sable would quickly speak up and change it or we'd be interrupted by one of our family members. Usually one of her sisters.

But we were running out of time. I could feel the annoying motherfucker tapping my shoulder, telling me that the conversation had to happen. That we couldn't keep avoiding it. Yet I was no closer to figuring out how to broach the subject because there was no label on us. We just kind of joined together and that was that. Although everyone else took a while to get used to it, for us, it just seemed...right.

While I was mulling over all this, Sable and Mom chatted. I watched as Sable smiled and nodded as Mom spoke about the time when I was six and got in trouble because I was hiding my dirty clothes underneath my bed (God knows why). And I couldn't watch TV for a week. I packed up my *Going to Grandma's* suitcase and announced to my parents that I was leaving this planet for a better one.

Sable was laughing so hard, her arms were wrapped around her stomach.

I was not. "Why do you tell her this stuff? What did I ever do to you?" I asked with the smallest of smirks.

Mom waved off my comment. "It's a cute story."

"That's debatable."

"Well, Sable will be the deciding factor."

We both looked at her.

Only a few seconds went by before Sable pointed to my mom. "She's right. It's a cute story."

"You're not helping."

She shrugged and smiled at me, open affection shining in her eyes. "What can I say? It's the truth."

"Well, I'll let you get back to work," Mom said, pulling me out of my thoughts. She slowly looked around, taking in the room. Sadness crept into her eyes. It didn't help matters that I was leaving tomorrow. I hoped to God she didn't start sobbing

right then and there. But she just sighed heavily and walked to the door. “Clean things up but don’t go overboard. This is still your room, you know.”

“I know, I know,” I said.

She left, but kept the door cracked. I waited until she was down the stairs before I turned to Sable.

“She doesn’t want us alone,” she remarked quietly, almost as if Mom would come back upstairs and bust back into the room.

I turned around and leaned against the door. “Was it that obvious?” I remarked.

“You don’t think she doesn’t trust me...do you?” Sable asked.

“Trust me, it’s not you she doesn’t trust. It’s all me.” I cleared my throat, knowing that now was the perfect time to talk about us. Didn’t make it any easier though. “I was thinking we should talk about some things.”

Sable sat on my bed and looked down at the comforter, tracing part of the blue-checkered pattern. “What things do you want to talk about?”

“You know, about me leavi—”

Suddenly, Sable lifted her head. She gave me a tense smile. “Can we not?”

I stopped right in front of her. “When can we talk about it? Because I’m going to leave at some point.”

“I don’t know,” she muttered.

I sat down next to her. Gone were the days of keeping a healthy distance between us. My body was pressed right against hers. Sable leaned against me.

“Tomorrow, Sable,” I started off slowly. “I’m leaving tomorrow.”

She sighed and sat up straight, before she began pacing the room. “I know that.”

“So we’re running out of time to talk about the things that need to be discussed,” I replied impatiently.

I knew when this girl was angry. I knew when she was happy. But right now, she was neither of those things. She looked sad and a little bit lost. “What needs to be discussed?”

“Us!” I half-shouted.

She cringed, as though the very thought of talking about us was painful.

“Come on.” I sighed. “This needs to happen.”

“Okay,” she finally said. She stopped walking and faced me. “What happens to us when you go to college?”

I took a deep breath and dragged my hands through my hair. “I don’t know.”

The words love and relationship were never mentioned between us. Because what the hell did I know about either of those things? And as book smart as Sable might be, something told me that she was just as clueless as I was.

“If you don’t know then that’s your answer right there.”

“It’s not my answer!” I said heatedly.

“But you obviously can’t make up your mind.”

“Yeah, well, you look just as fucking clueless as me, so if you have any suggestions I’m all ears.”

Sable’s cheeks turned red. “I’m not clueless!”

I stood up, half-looming over her. “Then tell me what you’re thinking. I’m not a mind reader.”

She crossed her arms and stared at me stubbornly. “I’m thinking that maybe we just leave what we have...here,” she finally said.

Even though I was unsure of where we went next, hearing her suggest that we move on with our lives was like being punched in the gut. I dipped my head until our faces were inches apart. “Are you fucking kidding me?”

“What do you want me to say?” She threw her hands up in the air. “It’s not like we actually dated. Probably because you were ashamed to be with a Cole.”

“That’s a fucking low blow and you know it.”

“Just a few weeks ago you said you couldn’t wait to move on,” she pointed out.

“Yeah. From the high-school bullshit,” I explained hotly.

“I am still in high school so doesn’t that make me part of the bullshit?”

“Seriously? You’re seventeen going on twenty. You’re so far beyond the high-school bullshit.”

What I wanted more than anything at that moment was for my words to soothe her. Reassure her. But Sable didn’t crack a smile, nor did she break down.

“Deciding to go our separate ways should make you thrilled. You have nothing to tie you down. Nothing to worry about while you…” She swallowed and looked away. That small action would be the only indication that she wasn’t as okay with everything as she appeared. “While you have fun in college.”

Crossing my arms over my chest, I watched her carefully. “And you think fun for me means fucking girls and partying.”

Of course she did. That was my life before I met her. Sable merely stared at me, her eyes wide and imploring for me to understand.

“Tell me what you’re thinking,” she said quietly, her eyes never leaving mine.

I thought over my words carefully. “I’m thinking that I’m going to go off to college and it may not be instantaneous, but some guy is going to see you for what you really are and then you’re going to be forever out of my reach.”

There was nothing but deafening silence between us. Sable took a deep breath. “In our room, there are hundreds of post-it notes covering the walls. Inspirational and thoughtful sayings are written down in Maren’s handwriting. I’ve practically

memorized the ones surrounding my bed.” She sighed. “I’m not into them but a few quotes stand out to me. There’s this one by this Richard Bach guy that says, ‘If you love someone, set them free. If they come back, they’re yours; if they don’t —’“

“They never were,” I finished for her. “Yes, I know that quote. Everyone does. But did you ever think that quote is for gamblers or people who’ve fucked up and need reassurance that everything’s going to be okay?” I sounded like a jaded asshole, but my heart was pounding in my chest a mile a minute because I was ninety-ninety percent sure that Sable Cole just said she loved me. I released a shaky breath. “I don’t want to fuck up.”

“We both fucked up the minute we started this thing between us.” Sighing, Sable dropped her face into her hands and moaned. When she lifted her head, I saw pain in her eyes. “I’m trying to do what’s best in the long run.”

“And you think this is what’s best?”

“Yes, I do. We’re too different, Sam!”

“That’s good. Opposites attract.”

She was shaking her head before I could finish. “No. It’s not that. I don’t have the romanticized view of life like you do. Life hit me cruelly in the face as a kid. I know we won’t last.”

“You don’t know that.”

“Yes, I do!” Her voice cracked. She took a deep breath. “Maybe things might be different if we loved each other. But we don’t.”

Sable became silent, waiting for me to answer. It was my turn to speak. My turn to correct her and tell her how I really felt. But my tongue felt three sizes too big for my mouth.

Sable’s eyes became shuttered. My window of opportunity was gone. “It’s okay,” she said quietly. “I’m not asking for that.”

Downstairs, Audree shrieked with laughter, effectively pulling Sable out of the conversation. She jumped slightly and

glanced at the closed door. She was going to bolt. It was only a matter of minutes before she was running down the stairs, out the door and maybe out of my life. For good.

“I should be going,” she said quietly.

Panic was starting to surge through me. I didn't know what to do, or how to make this feeling go away. I just knew that it had everything to do with the girl standing in front of me.

“So that's it?”

Sable looked me in the eye. “I don't know what you want me to say.”

“What I want is for us to figure this out.”

She frowned at the floor. “I don't think there's anything to figure out.” She sighed and looked back at me; her eyes blank. “Because we're not anything.”

Then she turned and walked toward the door. It took every ounce of my willpower not to run after her like a fucking pussy.

I could've told her that I needed her.

I could've told her that I loved her with everything inside me, but who was I kidding? Even that wouldn't have been enough.

I could've told her a lot of things, but I didn't.

Instead, I let her slip away because if I pushed Sable, she would panic and push back. Then there would be nothing but irreparable damage between the two of us. I had to let her go.

But I knew this wasn't the end of Sam and Sable.

She thought there was nothing between us, but she was wrong. I loved her and she was mine. As scared as she was, she loved me too.

I simply needed to give Sable time to figure that out.



CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

SABLE

NOW: AUGUST

THE ELECTRICITY'S BEEN OFF FOR SIX DAYS.

The first day, it wasn't that big of a deal. We lit candles, making it look like we were getting ready to start a seance. The second day? The novelty was starting to wear off. We all grumbled underneath our breath, but tried to keep smiles on our faces. Day three and four, it was impossible to hide our agitation. Even Lennon, the calmest of the four of us, was cranky. Ms. Nova let us come over frequently, but I was afraid that we were getting on her nerves. By day five, I'd had enough. We spent the night at Ms. Nova's. We all slept on the living room floor, zipped into sleeping bags from the seventies. They smelled like mothballs, but I ignored it because we were sleeping with cool air running and the ceiling fan moving above us.

It was the best sleep I'd had in months.

The sixth day was pretty much the same as the last with us moving between Ms. Nova's and our own house. But now I worried about the gas and water bill. We could pay them, but they were already a day late. What if they were shut off like the electricity? There's a penalty fee when you pay your bill late. That much I knew. God only knew how much the fee was on the electric bill right now. If Alba, Maren and I pooled everything we made these past two weeks, we could definitely pay everything off, but there'd literally be nothing left.

We need to eat.

My worries make me pace the living room and bite my nails, trying to think of all alternative options. Turning to Mom is definitely a futile thought.

She'll help you! Of course she will. She's your mom! my heart shouts wistfully.

It's a tragic thing — that no matter what you go through or how time goes by, your heart remains this fragile piece of you, always hoping and wishing for the best, even if it breaks you.

I find myself peeking out Ms. Nova's living room window across the street. Mom's car is in our driveway.

Does she even realize where we are or that the electricity is out? Does she even care? She might not be drinking. She might be sleeping. Or she might be up. She's always been a night owl. Maybe I can talk to her, explain the situation. And maybe, just maybe, she might fix this whole disaster.

My footsteps are light as I move across the room and slowly open the door. I softly shut the door and hurry across the street. The sky is clear with stars twinkling brightly. Crickets chirp loudly in the distance. This should calm me, but it doesn't. I'm on edge as I walk across our driveway and up the front steps.

I walk inside and plug my nose. God, it reeks of sweat and moldy food. The sad part is I hardly noticed the smell this past week, but now that we've been in a home that's clean and has fresh air, I notice just how rancid and powerful this stench is.

Covering my nose with my shirt, I walk deeper into the trailer. "Mom?" I shout, but it's muffled. She doesn't reply back.

I walk down the hall and into her room. With a full moon out tonight, I reach over and jerk down the bed sheet covering the window. Weak light filters in and it's enough to reveal the dozens of pill bottles scattered across the end table, along with a water bottle and more beer cans than I can count. Empty vodka bottles litter the floor. The white sheets have stains all over them. Food wrappers overflow the trashcan. Small flecks of food crumbs litter the floor.

"What happened to the electricity?" I hear behind me.

My heart freezes as I whirl around. It takes me awhile, but I finally see her sitting on the edge of her bed wearing only a dirty white tank top and underwear.

I grimace; this is not how I want to see her. I snatch the robe from the floor and throw it at her. It lands next to her feet in one big, black heap. She bends down and picks up the robe

and I distinctly see the track marks running up and down her arms.

“I didn’t see you there,” I say.

She turns her head and looks at me. In the stillness of the night, her actions are beyond creepy. I’m tempted to start inching toward the door and to get the hell out of here.

Once upon a time, my mom used to be a pretty woman. I have a vague memory of being little, sitting on the ledge of the tub, watching her put on red lipstick. Her brown hair used to be so shiny and smooth, and cut so the strands framed her face.

I used to be in awe of her, wanting to emulate every little thing she did.

Not anymore.

She now has sunken-in cheeks and purple rings below her eyes, as if she hasn’t slept in days, which is ironic considering all she does is lie in bed.

“What happened to the electricity?” she repeats.

I cross my arms and fight the urge to go back into the kitchen, grab a few trash bags and clean up this fucking pigsty. No, no, no. I’m done cleaning up her messes.

“It was shut off a few days ago,” I reply.

“Oh.”

Instead of worry, there’s nothing. Almost like I told her we ran out of Diet Coke. The lack of emotion shouldn’t shock me, yet it does.

“Don’t you even care?” I ask. “The water’s going to be next, you know.”

“Of course I care.”

“And without water you can’t take showers. You can’t use the faucet. You can’t—”

“I get it. I get it,” she cuts in impatiently. She drops her hands between her legs and stares at the ground. “I’ll find the

money.”

There’s no telling where this magical money will come from. I have my theories, but I refuse to think they’re true.

“You know,” I start out slowly, “your kids shouldn’t have to remind you to pay the bills. Your kids shouldn’t be paying those bills either.”

She lifts her head and points a finger at me. “Enough!” she yells. “You come in here all dramatic when everything will be fine.”

“Everything will not be fine. When I leave for college, I’ll find a place for them to go. I won’t let them live here.”

We both know who *them* is: Alba, Maren, and Lennon.

“You guys aren’t fucking kids anymore! I don’t need to brush your hair and make your lunches and tuck you into bed!”

“You’re absolutely right. You don’t need to wipe our asses, but because we’re growing up doesn’t mean that you stop being a mom!” I shout.

“All you do is talk back to me.” She drags her hands through her tangled hair. It looks like she’s going to tug the strands, but she jerks her hands away at the last second and advances on me, as if I’m her target. She doesn’t stop until she’s right in front of my face. “Do you think that you’re better than me?”

“N-no,” I stammer.

“Well, you’re not. I was your age once upon a time. I thought I had the world in the palm of my hands and I was going to do big things. But look at me now.” She smiles but it doesn’t reach her eyes. “You’re going to be in my shoes before you know it. May not be a choice but mark my words you’ll become me.”

“I’m never going to be you. Ever.”

The words slip out of my mouth before I can stop them. Mom’s eyes flare in anger

“You’re a little bitch. You’re a bitch!” she screams so loudly, I know the neighbors can hear.

And then she lunges for me. Her hands wrapping around my neck. Taken aback, I stumble, causing my shoulders to hit the wall. I claw at her fingers and then her face, but her grip on my neck tightens. Mom has lost her temper before. She’s raged around the house, yelling at each and every one of us. Throughout the years, she may occasionally slap me, but never this.

I feel like a fish out water, I can’t seem to get out of her hold. While she’s spewing her words of hatred, calling me a stupid bitch, I don’t stop trying to pry her hands off me, until finally, I hook my fingers around her grip and tug. She stumbles back for a second and when she lifts her head, her face is red with anger. She’s panting while I gasp for air.

She takes a step forward and it’s like I turn into a kid. I duck and cover my head with both hands.

She stops dead in her tracks and stares down at me. Very slowly, I lower my hands and lift my eyes.

Mom’s throat constricts. Her gaze never leaves my face. Her entire body is shaking. What’s going through her mind? What is she going to do next?

I brace myself for impact, but instead, she points to the door, her chest heaving. “Go!” she screams.

But I don’t and I have no idea why. My legs are just frozen to the ground. It’s as if I’m in quicksand, slowly sinking.

“I said go!” she screams.

It’s when Mom drops to the floor that my legs finally move. I run to the front door, tripping on one of the kitchen chairs on the way there. I don’t stop moving until my fingers are firmly wrapped around the door handle. For reasons beyond me, I turn back around and hear the sounds of Mom loudly sobbing.

Instead of going back to her, I run out the front door like I should’ve done minutes ago.

If I go back into Ms. Nova's house, I'll wake one of my sisters up and I don't want to explain what happened just now. They're way too close to the situation and this week has already been stressful enough.

No, I run down the sidewalk, ignoring the barking dogs and the loud music blaring from one of the trailers. I should've never went back into the trailer tonight. It was a bad idea.

Half a block later, once I'm out of the trailer park, I slow down. It's only when I'm standing in front of the McShane's house that I take a deep breath.

My night has been filled with bad decisions, but I know, with absolute certainty, that coming here isn't one. Inside my heart there's this frantic fear. I need someone. I need comfort. I need someone to say that everything is going to be okay even if it isn't.

Samson McShane is the only person who can do that.

My nerves are so frazzled that at first I start to walk up the front steps and then I realize it's the middle of the night. Quietly I turn around and walk toward the side of the house. I stop in front of a large oak tree and stare up at Sam's window. I grab a few rocks from the landscape around the house and hope my aim is as good as it was before.

Three rocks later, the window opens. Sam peeks his head out. When I see him, my knees nearly buckle. "Cole, there's this beautiful thing called a door and if you need to see me—"

"It's locked," I cut in. "I-I just need to see you."

Sam rubs his eyes. His signature smirk disappears as he really takes me in. Maybe he sees the desperation in my eyes, or the sadness. Either way, he doesn't ask what's wrong. Just says, "I'll let you in."

I hurry across the lawn, toward the back door. It's only a few seconds before Sam is there, motioning for me to come inside. He grabs my hand and maneuvers us through the pitch black. I hold on tight to his hand. We sidestep furniture and dodge the creaks in the stairs, making it to his room without a single sound.

Samson shuts the door and turns around to face me. Before he can say a word, I rush forward, wrap my arms around his waist and place my head on his chest. I know I've caught him off guard. I can feel it in the way his body tenses up.

But in seconds, his arms are around me. "What's going on, Sable?"

Out of everything that's happened tonight, it's the concern in his voice that makes me break. I start to cry. Big sobs that I know I'll be embarrassed about later on, but it feels good to get out now.

"Shh...It's okay," Sam says into my hair as he holds me tight. "It's okay."

He'll protect you. You're safe with him, my heart whispers.

And for once, I don't fight the truth. I sink deeper into it, squeezing him closer and listening to the beating of his heart.

My tears let up and Sam guides me toward his bed. I wipe my tears with the hem of my shirt while Sam rubs my back.

After a few seconds he says, "What happened?"

With my hands between my legs, I stare at the floor. His mom probably makes sure that these hardwood floors are swept and mopped. She loves her family that much. Cares enough to make sure they live in comfort.

"My mom and I got into a fight," I murmur.

"About what?"

Every part of me is screaming to tell him. All of it. I know it will make me feel better. At least for now. By tomorrow I'll regret spilling my guts. So I give in and admit some of the truth. "She was drunk," I start out slowly. "And said things that she didn't mean. I ran out and now I'm here."

Sam is silent. He knows there's more. Sam's been around me far too many times to recognize when I'm telling the truth and when I'm being evasive. "What else happened?"

Exhaling I shaky breath, I continue. "She started choking me and-"

“Are you fucking kidding me?”

Tentatively, I look over at him and see him rubbing his palms against his thighs as though he’s fighting for control.

“She’s never done that before.”

“That doesn’t make it okay!” he explodes.

“I know it doesn’t!” I shoot back.

Abruptly, he stands up and begins pacing, his hands on his hips. I should have omitted the choking part because he looks ready to rip someone apart.

And then he stops in front of me and holds his hand out. “We need to get out of here.”

My eyes widen. “And go where exactly?”

“I don’t know. Anywhere but my home or yours.” He pulls me off the bed and grabs his keys. “Just trust me on this.”

So I do.



TEN MINUTES LATER, SAM IS TURNING OFF HIS HEADLIGHTS and parking on the side of the road next to the Mound.

Sam turns to me. “This okay?”

“It’s perfect,” I reply and get out of the car.

For late July, tonight is surprisingly chilly. I furiously rub my arms and walk forward. In seconds, Sam’s right beside me. We scan the area, double-checking to make sure there’s no park rangers perusing the property for people trespassing... people like us, and climb over the locked gate. Sam goes first, scaling it like he’s done this hundreds of times before. He probably has. I follow behind him, my fingers curling around the cool steel. I quickly reach the top, swinging my legs over and landing on both feet.

For the second time tonight, he takes my hand. And for the second time, I don’t stop him. We hurry across the grass,

making sure to dodge the streetlamps lit around the small parking lot. Once we're in the wooded area, we both relax.

“Someday we're going to get caught.”

Sam shrugs a large shoulder. “Maybe. But it's doubtful. With our stealthy climbing skills, they'll never find us.”

“You're too confident, McShane.”

“And you're a pessimist, Cole.”

For the first time tonight, I smile. We continue to walk with only the moon as our guide. Branches and twigs snap beneath our feet. Sounds of insects and animals echo around us. Finally, we leave the woods and are standing at the top of the Mound. It's not that bad of a climb and it doesn't even seem that high, but with no trees surrounding us, the wind whips at my skin, making it feel as though it's a fall day.

I ignore the cold and sit down, stretching my legs out in front of me. Sam sits right next to me, his body pressed right up against mine.

We sit there in silence, and soon, I'm lying down in the grass, staring up at the clear, dark sky. With the stars twinkling and the soft sound of the leaves moving, all my apprehension slowly starts to fade. It's easy in this silence to breathe and think through things clearly. I'm still shaken by my fight with my mom and I have no idea if I'll ever look at her the same way.

In a way, tonight backs up my actions and my fears. Shows that I have every right to worry about leaving my sisters. Yet at the same time, it shows me that something has to be done. Someone has to step in and do something because what if Mom has it out with Alba? Alba won't back down. She has no problem fighting back.

Closing my eyes, I try to take a deep breath in and a deep breath out. As I'm trying to calm myself, a callused hand covers mine, fingers lacing between mine. There's a reassuring squeeze.

My eyes open and I turn Sam's way. “Thank you for taking me here,” I whisper.

He looks back and then shrugs as if it's nothing. "No big deal. Sometimes you gotta get away from all the..."

"Havoc," I cut in. "My life is nothing but havoc and chaos."

He doesn't reply. So I roll on my side and look him over. "You don't think so. After everything I just told you?"

"Look, I'm not denying that you have a chaotic life. You do. But you might be the only person who could handle something like this. Most people would crack."

"Do you not remember me blubbering like an idiot less than thirty minutes ago?"

"I'm not talking about that. You're allowed a moment of weakness. But I think you might be one of the strongest people I know."

The few times someone has handed me a compliment, I go out of my way to hand it back by shrugging off their words. But tonight, I hold onto his words like a lifeline because I know in the harsh light of tomorrow, I'll need them.

We're both quiet for a moment as I rest my head on the ground, watching the tree limbs behind Sam slowly sway.

Then Sam clears his throat, breaking the silence. "You shouldn't be there anymore."

I lift my head. "What?"

"Living with your mom. You and your sisters shouldn't live with her."

Even though I know he's right, panic courses through me. In some demented way, the thought of leaving Mom and the trailer seems wrong. For starters, my sisters and I have nowhere else to go. "That's our home," I reply.

"That's not a home, Sable, and you know it."

I quickly sit up, scrambling for words because I did not expect this sudden turn in the conversation. "We're not leaving."

"You guys are pretty much taking care of yourselves."

“No, we’re not,” I lie. “We’re f—”

“Sable,” Sam cuts in. “I don’t have to know everything about how you live to realize it’s just you and your sisters.” He looks me in the eye, almost daring me to say he’s lying.

But I can’t do it.

Looking up at the sky, I take a deep breath and close my eyes, reminding myself that I have to keep it together. “It’s always been like this,” I finally reply.

Sam doesn’t say anything and that’s okay. His presence is powerful enough. Besides, any words from him right now and I think I’ll lose all my courage and fold in on myself.

“We’ve taken care of ourselves while she drinks and sleeps around. But it’s never been this bad. It’s never gotten to this point.”

“Don’t tell anyone.” My voice turns desperate, needy. Yet I don’t care. I’ll beg for my sisters. “I mean it. Don’t tell anyone.”

“Sable, relax.” He gently drags his fingers through my hair before settling his hands at the base of my neck. “I won’t tell a soul. I promise.”

I nod, my breath coming out in soft pants.

“Relax,” he says softly. He brushes his thumb across my bottom lip once, twice, before he carefully leans in and gives me a soft kiss.

It’s soothing. Comforting.

But that one kiss extends into a second, then a third. And before I know it, that grip around my neck tightens. My hands move upward, curling around Sam’s shoulders.

He shifts our positions until I’m on the ground and he’s above me. It’s almost impossible for my mind and heart to agree. Ever. But with Sam, they do, and right then they’re both saying that this feels right.

There’s been too many hours, minutes, seconds of him being apart from me. I needed him now. Right now.

Sam is the only guy that has this power to flip a switch in me. One minute I'm cold. Then hot. And once I reach that point, there's no going back.

He'll let me take what I want and never protest. In fact, I think he likes it as much I do because for all the words I never say to him, I make sure my actions make up for it.

I tug his shirt up and over his head and rake my nails down his stomach. Hearing him moan is just an added bonus. His hands move down my body, never staying in one place for long. Wherever he touches, he leaves a blazing trail of desire that has me shaking.

I try to make quick work of his belt buckle and pants. All I had in my head was one thing: *take him, take him, take him.*

Then his phone rings. It makes me pause for half a second before I'm back to attacking him.

It finally stops ringing. My fingers slip beneath the waistband of Sam's boxers, my fingers brushing against the tip of his dick when the damn phone rings again.

This time, Sam swears softly as he reaches for his phone. I grab his forearm. "Just ignore it. I'm sure they'll stop calling."

"It's one in the morning, Sable. I—"

I start to kiss the side of his neck, causing him to groan.

But once again the phone starts to ring. It's hopeless. Whoever is calling is not going to stop anytime soon. I lie back and sigh as Sam grabs the phone.

He frowns at the screen and answers. "Hey."

I stare at him curiously and he mouths, *It's my mom.* Quickly, I sit up and begin fixing my clothes, as if his mom can see the two of us and wait.

"What? What do you mean?" Sam asks sharply. Then he looks at me. There's an edge to his voice that's outlined in panic. It makes goosebumps appear on my arms. My shoulders stiffen as I anxiously wait for him to get off.

But he doesn't. Instead, he hands the phone over to me. "It's for you."

I grab the phone but glance at him with confusion.

"It's for you," he repeats.

"Hello?" I ask tentatively.

"Sable?"

The sound of Lennon's frantic voice makes my heart race. "What's wrong?"

"I didn't know who else to call. M-m-mom came over and she started to..." Her voice becomes all choked up, her words unintelligible.

"Lennon," I rush out as I stand up. I need to leave. Right now. I need to be with my sisters, "Calm down. Tell me what happened."

"S-s-she came over pounding on the door. Ms. Nova answered. She was slurring her words. Then she vomited and passed out on the porch. She wouldn't wake up and wasn't breathing. Ms. Nova called 911. I didn't know where you were, but I thought you might be with Sam, so I went to the McShane's."

I grip the phone so hard it threatens to break. "Is Mom okay?"

She hiccups loudly, trying to catch her breath.

"Sable?" Elaine says with motherly authority that my own mom has never possessed.

"I'm here."

My heart is racing a mile a minute. I can feel Sam's eyes on me as he puts his shirt back on, but I barely know what's going on. What can I tell him? He knows something's not right and hurriedly steers us through the woods, back toward his Jeep. I keep in step, not paying attention to anything around me. "I'm at the hospital with Lennon right now," Elaine says.

"My mom—"

“We’ll talk about your mom when you get here,” she says soothingly.

The normal relief that her comforting tone gives me goes straight over my head. I have so many questions running through my mind and no one seems to have the answers. “We’ll be there,” I say as we approach the fence.

Elaine doesn’t question where we are or what we’re doing out in the middle of the night. She just says, “Everything will be okay.” And hangs up.

That’s when you know something is really, really wrong—when average drama and minor mistakes no longer matter—because the curve ball life has thrown at you is that bad.

I think I’ve finally reached rock bottom.



CHAPTER THIRTY

SABLE

NOW

WHEN SAM AND I ARRIVE AT THE HOSPITAL, WE FIND everyone in the waiting room. Alba and Maren are standing by the receptionist desk.

Lennon is sitting next to Elaine, her arm wrapped around my little sister protectively.

Desperately, I look between the four of them, unsure of what to say or do next when Alba spots me. Immediately, she heads straight toward me. “There you are.”

“We got here as soon as we could.”

“I’m so glad to see you,” is her only reply. And then she pulls me into the tightest hug. All animosity from our fight is gone. It doesn’t matter anymore. We have more important things to worry about.

I hug her back before I pull away. “Has there been any update?”

Alba wordlessly shakes her head. “No.”

My mind races to both the worst-case scenario and the best. I never linger on one thought for long. What if she’s not okay? No, no, no. She’s going to be all right. She *has* to be all right.

I can’t have my last moments with my mom be her screaming at me to leave.

Anxiously, I look over to Elaine. She stands and walks over to us. “Your mom has only been back there for an hour. So we just need to wait and be optimistic,” she provides as if she can read my thoughts.

Taking a deep breath I nod, holding onto her words like a lifeline.

“Let’s sit down,” Elaine encourages.

Nodding, I follow her with Sam beside me.

Elaine looks over her shoulder. “Alba, you want to join us?”

Alba stands there and looks at the seats before she backs up. “No, I’m good. I’m just...I’m just going to walk around.”

“When she’s scared, she likes to pace,” Maren provides as we take a seat.

“She hasn’t stopped since we arrived,” Elaine remarks.

Resting my head on Sam’s shoulder, I watch Alba stare out of the floor-to-ceiling windows toward the parking lot.

For the middle of the night, it’s relatively busy in the emergency room. People come and go, some being pushed in, in wheelchairs, others are hunched over, their hands crossed over their stomachs. Dress code is thrown out the window. People are wearing the first thing they found on their bedroom floor, and the same goes for shoes. The energy in the waiting room is somber and tense. No one truly wants to be here. We all have our reasons.

Nervously, I bounce my leg up and down as I distractedly watch Animal Planet play on the TV in the corner, but nothing can hold my attention for long.

Shifting in my chair, I look at Elaine. “Can you tell me what happened? I know you said Lennon came over to get me because of Mom, but this all seems...surreal to me.”

Elaine nods sympathetically. “Of course. When Lennon came over, she couldn’t find you and she thought you might be at our house.” She levels a long look at Sam before she turns her attention back to me. “By the time we made it back to the trailer, Ms. Nova had already called 911. They were taking her away.”

“Was she...” I swallow, as I try to get the words out. Sam wraps an arm around me. “Was she conscious?”

Elaine doesn’t answer immediately. “I don’t know, sweetheart. All they would tell me was the hospital they were taking her to, but that’s it because I’m not a family member.”

What happened? my mind screams.

In the span of me leaving and going to Sam's. What did she consume or do? That I don't have the answers instantaneously feels as though I'm going crazy.

Even worse, at the back of my mind, there's one question that's eating away at me: was I responsible for this? Did our fight push my mom to harm herself? The very thought causes me to hunch over in pain.

Sam follows me, one hand making soothing circles on my back and the other gripping my upper arm.

"Hey, Cole, look at me."

Tucking my hair behind my ear, I look at him from beneath my lashes. "Take a deep breath. I'm right here with you," he gently says.

"What if-"

"There's no what if," he cuts in. "There's only when the doctor comes out and tells us good news and then we move forward after that. Okay?"

I stare deeply into his sincere blue eyes, wanting desperately to believe his words, but I can't hold onto them long enough for them to be true.

"And if they say differently?" I ask, my voice quivering.

"You can't think that way."

Wordlessly, I nod, knowing what he's saying is the truth. But I can't get my mind to think in pure positive light. So I cling to Sam because he's the only thing keeping me calm.

It's hard to say how much time goes by. Hours? Minutes? Feels like years when a doctor finally pushes open the double doors. Instinctively I look her way, hoping she's here for us. As she walks into the waiting room, I stand up, and everyone else follows suit.

The doctor makes eye contact with me before looking at Elaine. "Is there a Sable Cole?"

"That's me," I rush. "I'm Annie's daughter."

The doctor approaches, her face revealing nothing. When she's close enough, the six of us circle around her with Elaine and Sam standing slightly back. "I'm Dr. Ellixson." I shake her hand, and then the questions begin.

"How is she?" I ask.

"She's alive, right?" Comes from Lennon.

"When can we see her?" That's Maren.

The doctor looks between us, absorbing our questions with remarkable patience. She pauses before she looks to me. "We have her stabilized."

Maren takes a deep sigh of relief and leans against me.

"The EMTs administered Narcan on the way to the hospital and that saved your mom's life."

It's an overdose.

Confused, Lennon turns to us. "What's Narcan?"

Alba, Maren, and I wordlessly look at one another. We've gone out of our way to protect our baby sister. The innocence in her gaze makes that abundantly clear. Even so, I still don't plan on being the one to let her know what Narcan does.

I turn to the doctor. "When can we see her?" I ask.

"Tomorrow during visiting hours."

"No, no, no. Please we have to see her now," Maren begs.

"Just for ten minutes," I chime in.

The doctor looks between us for several seconds. "Only ten minutes, and then you have to leave."

I nod. "Of course."

"Your mom is still lethargic and needs rest. Also, it might be difficult for you to see her this way."

"I need to see her," I say.

The doctor nods and looks at everyone. "It's family only."

As she speaks those words, my hand reaches for Sam's. I'm not going back there without him. I'm trying to brace

myself for what I might see. Can I do it on my own? Absolutely. I've gone through life with it being just me and my sisters.

But when he's with me, it's easier to breathe. The pieces of my life align, and the overwhelming anxiety I feel? It calms. For a gentle heartbeat everything calms.

"Sam-" Elaine protest.

I turn around, a pleading look in my eyes. I need him with me right now.

Her eyes briefly close and she nods. "Go with her."

I begin to turn away when I notice Alba stepping back to stand near Elaine. "Aren't you coming with us?"

Crossing her arms, Alba shakes her head. "No. I'll just stay here." She flings her head in the direction of the double doors. "You guys go."

"Alba-"

"Sable, I just don't..." She breathes deep through her nose. "I'm not ready yet."

No one can force Alba to do something she's not ready to do. Everything has to be on her own terms.

"I'll take you back to see her," the doctor says, before I can reply.

Leaving behind Alba and Elaine, we follow Dr. Ellixson. Upon entering the double doors, I'm greeted with the scent of antiseptic. Nurses go from room to room, while several others sit behind the nurses' station. None of them pay us much attention, all of them have single-minded focus.

Blood pressure monitors, wheelchairs, and equipment neatly line the wall. A spot on the linoleum floor has been freshly mopped with a caution sign over it.

Silently, we follow the doctor, turning down another hall until we finally stop in front of a cracked open door.

There's only a single light on in the room, making it impossible to see her. But at the foot of the bed, I see the

outline of feet. My heart begins to pound furiously. The doctor pushes the door open for us. “Only ten minutes,” she says.

We step inside, slowly making our way to the bed. Mom’s eyes are closed, her chest slowly rising and falling. An IV is hooked up, and a nasal cannula is in her nostrils.

The unmistakable scent of sweat and throw-up linger on her. Even with half the lights off in the room, we can clearly see how pale she is. Her dark hair is so matted and tangled and oily at the roots.

But lying in this hospital bed, she looks so small and fragile. So easily breakable.

At times I hate her for what she never gave us as children and the love I desperately craved from her. Even now, I’m slightly angry with her. But my heart breaks seeing her like this. It doesn’t align with the image I have of her in my head. The one that’s either getting ready to go out, yelling about something, laughing at something far too loudly.

Either way, she makes her presence known and to receive silence from her is unnerving.

I don’t know what to do with it.

A machine continuously beats. Maren gestures to it. “Good thing Alba didn’t come with us. That would’ve driven her crazy,” she weakly jokes.

We all chuckle and the sound makes Mom’s lashes flutter.

Her eyes blink open and closed several times before she looks around at us, her eyes disoriented.

I swallow. *You will not cry. You will not cry.*

“Hi, Mom.”

She licks her lips. “Hi.” The word comes out as a rasp.

Briefly, I meet Maren’s gaze. She’s the next to speak. “How are you feeling?”

Shrugging, she looks away, smoothing the sheets tucked in around her waist. “Tired.”

What happened? Why did you do this? Was it because of me? Do you hate me? Those are the questions my heart is begging to ask, yet my lips can't form the words and I'm half afraid to hear the answers.

Mom looks around at us. "Where's Alba?"

Lennon peaks her head around Maren's shoulder. "She's in the waiting room."

When Mom spots Lennon, she shrinks back in her bed, her lower lip quivering. The visceral reaction is plain for everyone.

With pleading eyes, she looks to Maren. Not me. "I don't want her seeing me like this."

"She wanted to see you. She loves you," Maren replies.

Mom closes her eyes and doesn't respond. A tear slips from the corner of her eye and falls onto her hospital gown.

"Mom, it's okay," Lennon says soothingly. "You're okay."

"No, I'm not," she whispers.

When she opens her eyes, I try to get her to meet my gaze, but she never truly looks me in my eyes.

Does she blame me for what happened?

A sharp knock on the door pulls our attention from Mom. The doctor stands in the doorway. "I'm sorry. I'm afraid your time is up."



BY THE TIME WE MAKE IT HOME FROM THE HOSPITAL, IT'S early morning.

Elaine drives my sisters, while Sam and I follow behind her. When we all get out of the cars, exhaustion is written on all of our faces.

More than anything, I want to go to bed, but I need to gather some belongings from our trailer.

“Sable wait,” Elaine says.

I stop and look at Sam’s mom. She stands back with my sisters, while Sam leans against his Jeep, his arms crossed. When I look to him, he shrugs.

Slowly, I make my way over and stand next to Alba.

Elaine looks between the four of us, and then focuses her gaze on me. “Honey, I’m concerned for you girls.”

“We’re fine,” I answer instantaneously.

The words flow from my lips so easily. I’ve been saying them for years to teachers and counselors. Anyone remotely concerned about the state of me and my sisters put my defenses up. All of those adults meant well, but all I saw was me and my sisters being split up and I would lose everything I knew and loved.

“You’re not fine. I briefly spoke to Ms. Nova before we left for the hospital and she says you girls have been staying at her home because your home doesn’t have electricity.” Her gaze is searching. “How long has it been this way?”

My mouth opens, a reply on the tip of my tongue, but Alba beats me to it. “Not long.”

She stands beside me, her body tense and alert, just like mine. We’re like two guard dogs protecting their territory and their back.

“They’re lying,” Maren says quietly. “It’s been six days.”

Alba’s head shoots in her direction. “Maren,” she hisses.

Elaine eyes volley among us, processing the information being thrown at her.

I need to fix this. Convince her that everything is okay and we can continue on our own. But my mind can’t find the words. Maybe it’s because I’m too tired, or emotionally exhausted. Or all the above.

“We’re fine.” I muster a smile. “I promise.”

Elaine’s shaking her head before I can finish my words. “No, you aren’t.” Sighing, she crosses her arms. “You girls

need stability and safety. Being here,” she gestures to our run-down trailer, “is not safe.”

Oh, God. It’s over.

All this work at keeping everything together and I failed.

“Is there anywhere you can stay for the foreseeable future?”

“No,” Alba and I say in unison at the same time Maren says, “Ms. Nova?”

Once again, Alba and I stare at her as though she’s lost her mind. Maren simply shrugs.

“I want to stay with Ms. Nova,” Lennon says.

Elaine nods, taking our words in and looks over at Ms. Nova’s trailer. “I’ll talk to her and see if she’s receptive to the idea of letting you girls stay with her.”

“Oh, she loves us. She’ll say yes,” Lennon continues.

She’s not heartbroken by the idea of getting away from our house; in fact, Lennon almost seems excited. Like she’s been waiting for this suggestion for some time now.

“Lennon, do you want to walk over with me?” Elaine asks.

All too happily, Lennon hurries away. Once out of ear shot, Alba nudges Maren. “What the hell was that?”

“Nothing! I’m giving up and giving in. I’m tired of running myself ragged. Aren’t you?”

When Alba doesn’t answer, Maren looks to me. “Aren’t you?”

I can’t answer her question. Not honestly at least. Because the truth is I’m tired. Bone-deep tired.

Wordlessly, I walk toward the trailer, slamming the door behind me and head straight to my bedroom.

Opening and slamming doors, I grab my clothes and shove them in my book bag when a figure steps into the doorway. I don’t have to look to know it’s Sam.

“What’s wrong?” he asks.

Abruptly, I stop packing and turn to him. “Is living with Ms. Nova the worst thing? No. But everything is changing so quickly. I don’t know how to process it.”

“That’s fair.” His gaze lands on the ground before he looks back at me. “You know my mom genuinely cares about you and your sisters. She wants what’s best for you guys.”

“I know that. But it’s too much.”

Sam tilts his head to the side. “People caring?”

“No. It’s just...” My words falter as a maelstrom of emotions bubble inside me. Fear. Anxiety. Confusion. I don’t know how to process them all. And I’m someone who has to have order and control. Right now, everything in my life is out of my control.

I don’t know what to do.

“You deserve more in life than what you were given. Why can’t you see that?”

“Oh, I see that! I don’t need anyone to remind me!”

Sam gestures to all around us. “Then don’t settle for this!”

“I’m not settling, Sam. This is surviving.”

“And when you leave for college, will you still be surviving? Because you won’t be here anymore. You will only have yourself to worry about. What are you going to do then?”

I swallow at that thought. My heart squeezes at the idea of being away from my sisters. I have to make sure they’re safe.

“What are you going to do?” Sam presses.

“Maybe I take a year off or go to community college.” I take a deep breath before I continue, “My sisters need me and my mom is too unreliable.”

Sam drags his hands through his hair. “Are you hearing yourself? College has been your dream for years. You belong there. You deserve it!”

“I know I do! But it’s not as easy as you think!”

“Yes, it is. It truly is that easy. You go to college, enjoy the new life that you deserve, and trust that everything is okay back in Antsett. Because it’s not your job to worry about it. It should have never been your job and the fact that your mom placed you in that position is beyond fucked.” He takes a deep breath. “It’s time you live life for yourself.”

Sam’s on the pulse of the truth. He’s saying everything I need to hear but don’t want to accept. Overwhelming anxiety builds inside me, spreading throughout until I feel like I’m going to explode.

And then I do. “The fuck do you know? You have had it easy your whole life!” I yell.

The silence that descends on us is deafening. Sam rocks back on his feet. “You know that’s not true.”

Stubbornly, I meet his gaze. I said what I said. I can’t go back now. “Yes, I do know. We come from two different worlds. You were born with a silver spoon in your mouth. I was born with a mom that slowly got addicted to drugs. So I’m sorry if I find it hard to listen to your words, because life has treated us very differently.”

Thirty seconds. That’s all it took for me to push Sam away. His eyes become shuttered and cold, and for a moment, I see a brief glimpse of the past, to when he first realized I’d be his tutor. He looks at me the same way.

“You’re a bitch, Cole.”

I keep my face stoic, but my heart breaks into millions of little pieces. “That’s what I’ve been told.” I blink rapidly, trying to keep the tears at bay. “Can you go now...please?”

For a moment, Sam looks like he’s going to step forward. His hands lift, hovering directly above my shoulders. I want to lean into him, but I don’t have much longer before I completely break down.

At the last second, his hands lower to his sides. His blue eyes never leave mine. “I love you, Sable. But you need to make a choice: your life and future...or this. But I’m fucking done trying to help.”

He turns his back and walks away. Moments later, I hear the front door slam.

I sit heavily on my bed, and close my eyes, as his words settle over me. I exhale a shaky breath and then release a choked sob.

Before I know it, I'm crying so hard my shoulders are shaking and I can barely catch a breath. I've pushed away the only person who has ever loved me for who I am. The only person I've ever needed.

All because I'm scared.

As I sit there crying, I feel the mattress dip. An arm wraps around me. Through my fingers, I see it's Alba. "I got into it with Sam," I hiccup.

"I know. I was eavesdropping on the entire conversation." She hands me a tissue. "You said...a lot."

I blow my nose and look at her before I look down at the ground. "I know."

"He's right you know," she says after a beat of silence. "You deserve more in life than what you were given. We all do."

My lips start to quiver. "I know that. But..." More tears begin to slip down my cheeks. "It's crazy how I was so excited at the beginning of the summer to leave for college. And now that I'm so close to the end, I'm terrified."

"You should be scared. There's nothing wrong with that. What is wrong is not going out there and following your dreams. Me, Maren and Lennon will be fine. I know you worry, but in life, our roles are constantly changing. You've always taken care of us three, but it's time you take care of yourself."

Her words are meant to be comforting, but they only bring a new wave of tears. The two of us sit in our small, childhood room while I sob at the chapter that is closing in my life, the new one I'm petrified of taking, and the cruel words I can never take back.



CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

SABLE

NOW: ONE WEEK LATER

ADJUSTING TO LIFE WITHOUT MOM HASN'T BEEN AN adjustment. We've already been functioning without her.

What has been an adjustment is living with Ms. Nova. Any structure we had at our home, we had to create ourselves. There was never a parent to guide us. What's different with Ms. Nova is she expects to know where we're going and when we'll be home. And even though she isn't our grandparent, she set a curfew for all of us.

That didn't sit well with Alba. For the first time in her life, she had rules she had to follow and someone to answer to. More than once I saw her open her mouth, ready to say something, but she would look at Lennon and see how content she was sitting on the couch, with a tv tray in front of her, happily talking to Ms. Nova, while they watched Wheel of Fortune. For Lennon, she kept quiet.

As for me, I'm in my own personal hell. I leave for college in three weeks, but my life feels like it's in shambles. Since my blow out with Sam, I've seen him in passing while watching Audree. He's either coming or going, and each time, my heart squeezes so tightly. I know he sees me too, because his entire body tenses, and rather than acknowledge me with his cocky grin and brilliant blue eyes, he gives me his back. I deserve it. I want to call out his name, and tell him how sorry I am. I shouldn't have been cruel with my words and pushed him away. I miss him.

I miss him with a desperation that scares me.

And what does it say about me that I miss him more than I miss my own mom?

We see her continually at the hospital. She looks good, but the first few days were incredibly rough as she went through withdrawals from alcohol. Tremors and throwing up. Her skin was a pale, a waxy shade. During that period, she was irritated, and our visits were cut short. But a week later, she has a clarity

to her eyes I haven't seen in years. If I spoke to her, I knew she was following along and listening. Yet she isn't completely in the clear. The doctor treating Mom said if Mom doesn't get the proper help, she will most likely get post-acute withdrawal syndrome.

I was oddly numb when she delivered the news. My mom deserves a chance at sobriety and a fresh start, but I'm not stupid. I know treatment costs money. Money we don't have.

I don't know what to do or where to turn to. Mom is due to come home within days. Alba and I have dumped all the alcohol we could find in the trailer. We tore Mom's room apart, throwing away any empty bottles and cigarette butts. I found far too many discarded needles behind the headboard. Alba and I didn't know who used the needles and didn't want to pick them up, but we couldn't leave them there.

We found a pair of ski gloves. She put the gloves on, while I double bagged some grocery bags and held it wide.

One by one, Alba picked them up. The whole time, muttering, "This is fucked up. This is so fucked up."

She's not wrong. I counted eighteen needles in all. I'm sure there was a sterile way to go about removing them, but this was all we had. And in the back of my mind, all I could think was that we were giving Mom the best fresh start we possibly could.

We ended up paying the electricity bill, but we still didn't go back home. Elaine would come by Ms. Nova's trailer frequently, asking how everything was. When I saw her at her home, she would privately ask how I was doing. I would lie and say fine. The truth is, I am barely keeping it together.

I think she sees the truth because she reaches out and gives my arm a quick squeeze. "Oh, sweetheart. Everything is going to be okay."

As I step into Ms. Nova's trailer, exhaustion makes my bones ache. I stayed later at the McShane's than normal. Elaine had a meeting that was running late and needed me to stay an extra two hours. All I wanted to do was collapse on the

couch and fall asleep, but people are moving about. Maren rushes past me with a fresh pile of folded clothes. Alba is holding a crying Lennon.

“Here you go, Mom!” Maren says, as she hurries out the door.

Mom is home?

I follow her across the street and into my trailer, my heart pounding the entire time. “Maren?” I call out, my voice higher than normal.

I walk down the hallway, when she peeks her head out of Mom’s room. “What?”

I lean against the wall. “Can someone tell me what the hell is going on? Why is Lennon crying?”

Maren steps out of the doorway and gestures for me to step through. “See for yourself.”

I give her a weary look; I’m afraid at what I might see. But I move into Mom’s room and stop short. Our mom’s up. Rushing around the room. Two black, ratty suitcases are open with items in them.

Mom jerks open her dresser drawer and thumbs through her clothes, finding what she wants. For once, she’s active and alert. I have no idea what to say or do.

“You’re home early,” I say by way of greeting.

Mom lifts her head for barely a second and gives me a distracted smile. “Hi, Sabes. How are you, hon?”

I can’t remember the last time Mom called me Sabe or hon.

“Mom,” I say urgently, “what’s going on?”

She stops in the middle of the room, and names off items on each of her fingers, completely ignoring me. She snaps her fingers. “Toothpaste. That’s what I’m forgetting.”

“I’ll go get it,” Maren says.

“Mom!” I shout. She finally looks at me. “What’s going on?”

She gives me the saddest smile. Filled with regret, yet, mixed in there I can see something I haven’t seen in her eyes for a long, long time: hope.

“Something incredible happened.”

“Are you going to tell me what it is?”

She packs one suitcase before she sighs and looks at me. “I’ve been given an incredible opportunity to get better.”

“What?” I breathe.

She nods, before she continues, “I’m taking it because if I don’t take this chance, it’ll never happen again.” Mom rushes toward me, and instinctively, I flinch. I can’t help it. She notices the action and stays put. “I need to go away and get better.” Her voice cracks and eyes fill with tears. “I need to get help.”

For several seconds, I stand there. Not once has Mom ever tried to get clean. What she’s saying is amazing. It’s everything I’ve wanted to hear since I was a little girl. But it’s almost too good to be true.

“That night you...you did what you did. Was it my fault?” Pathetically, my lower lip quivers.

“No, Sable no.” Mom’s answer is instantaneous. “It wasn’t your fault. I did it.”

Tears fall freely from my eyes as I soak in her words. Mom’s hands rise, almost like she wants to reach for me. But we aren’t in a place for her to console me. Maybe someday we can get there. I want that. But not now.

“Sable, you did nothing wrong,” she whispers.

I nod and wipe my tears with the back of my hand. We stand there in awkward silence, Mom waiting for any more questions and me trying to gather the courage to ask them.

And then it hits me: if Mom’s going to treatment, how is it being paid for?

My shoulders straighten. “How did this opportunity come about?”

“Found the toothpaste!” Maren says as she hurries into the room. Her words make Mom spring back into action, leaving my question unanswered. I stand there and watch as the two of them pack her second suitcase. Even in the flurry of activity, there’s no denying the undercurrent of hope within the room. It makes Mom and Maren excitedly talk to one another as they make sure she has everything she needs.

Maren zips the bag up, and looks between Mom and me. “I’ll be in the kitchen.” She slides past me, suitcase in tow.

Mom sighs and looks around before her eyes land on me. She approaches me. And then my mom does something she hasn’t done in years. She cups my face in her hands, looking me over as if I am precious China. Smiling, her eyes turn glassy. “Tell him thank you,” she whispers.

I wrap my fingers around her wrists, but I don’t push her away. “Who?”

“Mom!” Maren shouts. “Ms. Nova says it’s time to go!”

“I gotta go. I love you.” She leans in and hugs me. I can feel her smile against my shoulder. She pushes away and kisses my cheek. “Thank you. Thank you so much, honey.”

She hurries out to the hall. I follow behind her, hot on her trail. Maren’s waiting in the kitchen with Alba, Lennon’s beside her.

Mom says her goodbyes to them. Hugs and tears inevitably ensue. Alba uses sarcasm to keep her tears at bay, eliciting some laughs.

All four of us follow her out the door. Alba and Maren help Mom with her luggage. Before Mom gets into the car, she turns to us one last time. Her eyes fill with tears and she comes back for another round of hugs.

Ms. Nova pokes her head out of the driver’s side window. “Hurry it up! I’m not a taxi driver!” Even as she speaks her harsh words, there’s a hint of a smile on her lips.

Mom gives us one last smile and gets into the car. As they pull onto the street, Mom rolls down her window and sticks her head out. “I love you girls!” she shouts.

We wave until they’re out of sight, until Ms. Nova’s Buick is a small speck in the distance. Lennon is bawling at this point.

“She’ll be back,” Maren soothes, a protective arm around her. “Why don’t we go inside and watch some Real Housewives. Okay?”

Maren ushers Lennon into Ms. Nova’s house, leaving Alba and me alone. I cross my arms and stare at the empty street. Mom is getting treatment.

This is actually happening.

I shake my head in disbelief and turn to Alba. “How are we going to pay for this?”

My sarcastic sister slowly looks to me, confusion in her eyes. “What are you talking about?”

“How will we pay for Mom’s treatment,” I utter slowly.

“No one told you?”

I throw my hands up in the air. “No one has told me anything.”

“The rehab is completely covered. We don’t have to pay a thing.” As she speaks the words, Alba’s eyes fill with tears.

My heart begins to beat rapidly in my chest. This is our dream come true. But it can’t be real. Anything that’s too good to be true, usually is.

I grab my sister’s hands, and practically shake her. “Who did this?” I whisper.

She wipes away her tears and looks me in the eye. “Sam.”



I DON’T WALK TO HIS HOUSE. I RUN.

I run even when my lungs feel like they are going to burst. I push past the pain. My feet stomp on the pavement as I keep moving forward.

My mind screams that I've messed up and I could lose him forever if I don't go to him right now.

And that can't happen. It can't.

I didn't ask for Samson's help, but he gave it anyway, without expecting anything in return. No one has done something like this for me, and I doubt anyone ever would again.

I've never stopped loving you.

I clung to those words, wanting to believe them, yet being too afraid of them being true. I don't know what love truly is or see what a stable relationship looks like.

Time and time again, Sam's actions showed otherwise. He wasn't going anywhere. He loved me and yet I kept pushing him away, all because I was afraid of how I felt.

I jump over Audree's bike lying on the sidewalk and continue toward the front door, running up the porch steps. I pound on the front door, completely ignoring the doorbell.

His dad, Todd, answers the door. "Sable." He looks visibly shocked and then his expression changes. "Did Elaine forget to pay you again?" He begins to reach for his wallet in his back pocket. "I'm so sorry. How much do we owe you?"

"No, no, " I rush out. "Is Sam home?"

"No," he says carefully. "He's not. Is everything okay?"

I open my mouth to reply when Todd steps outside, closing the door behind him. He tucks his hands into his pockets. "Is this about your mother?"

"You know?"

He nods, his expression solemn. "Sam told me and-"

"I got it from here, Dad."

I whip my head around. Sam walks up the front porch, still dressed in his work clothes. I stare at him in disbelief and he looks back, his eyes weary and drained.

His dad stares between the two of us and slowly takes a step back. “All right then,” he says and shuts the front door.

Sam tucks his hands into his front pockets and leans against the railing. I can’t help but notice that he’s on the opposite side of the porch. Not that I blame him. “What’s up?” he asks. His voice is gruff and distant, as if we’re strangers. It makes me cringe.

Now that I’m here, with him standing only a few steps away, I have no words. The whole time I was running here I was so focused on catching him, but I never really thought how I would put all my feelings into words.

I can yell and be biting with my words. I know how to hurt someone before they get the chance to hurt me. But I have no idea how to express remorse or the truth. I have no clue how to be vulnerable because I don’t want to risk the chance of getting hurt.

“Well?” Sam prods.

“I’m sorry about what I said a few days ago,” I blurt.

At that, Sam lifts a brow.

I don’t know why I say that first. It’s the first thing to come to mind, and I’m so nervous. I just know I have to let all the words off my chest. No matter the order. “I didn’t mean it, Sam. I was angry and upset and I took it out on you. I-”

“Sable, I know,” he cuts in.

“I miss you,” I whisper.

His throat works. “I miss you, too.” Quickly, he looks away and then back. Crossing his arms, he looks me over. “Is that what you came here for?”

Wordlessly, I shake my head. I’ve already started talking. So why is it still so hard to breathe? Maybe it’s the distance between us. I want to be close to him and feel his arms around

me, but there's still words that need to be said. I just need to find the courage to say them.

"My mom..." I lick my lips and try to start over because I can already feel my voice cracking. "My mom just left."

Sam lifts his head, his blue eyes meeting mine. He doesn't say a word. After a few seconds, he straightens and comes a bit closer. But still several steps away. "I know it's not my business, and I would never break your trust, but I just wanted to help." He looks me straight in the eye. "But you looked so broken and beat down at the hospital and I didn't know what the fuck to do. I just wanted to make it better. So...I talked to my dad."

"Your dad," I repeat back.

He nods. "My uncle is a doctor in Springfield. He knew of a great rehab facility for your mom to go to."

"But the money. I can't pay-"

"Forget about the money," Sam interrupts. "It's covered."

"But-"

"It's covered," he repeats, this time more firmly. "Can you let me help you? Can you let me do this one thing?"

My lower lip starts to tremble. For the second time today, tears begin to fall from my eyes.

"Don't cry," Sam whispers. And in two quick steps, his hands are curving around my face. The tears fall freely, spilling onto his fingers. "You want me to give you the world? Tell me what you want and I'll do it. Just don't cry."

The hardest of hearts can't stand against Sam's actions. "Thank you," I whisper. My voice cracks and I know I'm going to burst out into sobs.

"Sable," Sam breathes. "Don't cry. Please don't cry."

"I can't help it," I hiccup. "No one's ever done something like this for my family."

My eyes close and I feel his thumb brush away the tears. "You're worth it. You're worth everything. I'd do it again."

Opening my eyes, I meet his gaze. I need to look him in the eyes. Anything less will make my words seem untrue and false. I think this may be the realest thing I've ever said. "I love you." My fingers hold onto his wrists, holding his hands in place, and I continue before I lose my courage. "I love you for your selflessness. I love you for your sarcastic humor and biting words. Most of all, I love you for putting up with me. I thought I was too young to feel this and it scared the shit out of me at times. But I was wrong. I love you now, and I'll love you one hundred years from now."

Once I'm done, I exhale a shaky breath.

I just held my heart in my hands and handed it to Samson McShane. It's his forever. What he does with it, is up to him.

As the seconds go by, my anxiety heightens. Sam has every right to turn me away or tell me it's too late.

Please tell me I'm not too late.

Then, a smile curves the edges of Sam's lips and two dimples carve into his cheeks. His hands drop from my face, and firmly wrap around my waist, pulling me against his body. "You have no idea how long I've been waiting to hear those words from you."

"They're out there. I can't take them back."

"Good. I hope you never do because I've always loved you."

He kisses me just like I want him too. Taking control. Angling my head one way so his tongue can glide against mine. I moan as I wrap my arms around his neck and kiss him back with all the fervor inside me.

When we pull back, our foreheads meet.

"This is real, Sable." Sam takes a deep breath and brushes his thumb across my lower lip. "I'm not letting you go. Never again. You're nothing but a handful but you're my handful. I love you and you're mine forever."

"Good," I whisper into his mouth, my heart nearly singing from his words, "because that will never change. You're all I

need.”



EPILOGUE

SABLE

THREE WEEKS LATER

“DO YOU HAVE EVERYTHING?”

I toss the last of my luggage into the back seat and look over my shoulder at Ms. Nova. “Yes, I have everything,” I say patiently.

She puts her hands on her hips. “Don’t you give me sass, Sable Cole. I’m just making sure you’re prepared.”

All morning has been pure chaos, packing up last-minute items and making sure I have everything so when we get on the road, I don’t have that nagging feeling that I forgot something.

Once I leave Antsett, the only time I’m returning is for short visits.

Ms. Nova sighs and walks down her porch steps. My heart drops to my stomach as I see her walk to me. I was hoping I could avoid this. I’ve never been great at goodbyes. They’re so final. And with Ms. Nova and my sisters, I have no idea how I’ll be able to do that.

These past three weeks, she’s been incredibly supportive to me and my sisters. Mom has called us once from the treatment facility to let us know she arrived. She let us know she couldn’t call until she was further along in treatment. She has to focus on her sobriety. Hearing Mom speak with clarity and have the ability to follow a conversation is surreal. I want her to stay at the facility for as long as she needs, so she gets the proper help she needs.

Ms. Nova assured Mom she would take care of us as long as needed. And I believe she will. When I leave Antsett, she’ll continue to be there for my sisters. All this time I’ve been worried about what would happen when I left. I thought me and my sisters were alone, when help was across the street all along. I open my mouth, ready to tell her how much I appreciate her, when her cat runs through her feet, moving so fast he’s more a dark shadow than a creature.

A potted plant on the porch tips over from Cat's abrupt departure. "Damn cat," Ms. Nova mutters as she kneels to pick up the plant.

Dusting off her hands, she straightens. She looks beyond me, her eyes narrowing slightly. "I think there's someone here to see you."

I turn and see Matty walking up the drive. "Hey," I say, unable to mask my surprise. I haven't seen Matty since the party. I thought there would be time to see one another and fix our friendship but life had different plans.

With his hands tucked into his pockets, he tilts his head in acknowledgment. "How are you?"

I cross my arms, unfamiliar with the awkwardness between us. "I'm good. All things considered."

As Matty stands in front of me, he shifts from foot to foot. Eventually, his gaze meets mine. "I heard about your mom."

"I'm sure all of Antsett has by now," I reply, trying to bring a moment of levity.

At that, he snorts but quickly becomes stoic. He looks at me carefully. "Do you think she has a chance?"

"My mom?"

He nods.

"I think so." I pause for a moment. "Remember when we were younger and we used to talk about what it'd be like to have normal parents?"

"Oh, I remember."

"I don't expect her to be perfect or 'normal.'" I put quotes around the last word. "But before she left, I saw the hope in her eyes. She wants this. That makes me think there's a chance.

Matty nods the entire time, a wistful note in his eyes. "Maybe your dad's next," I say.

A sardonic laugh slips from Matty's lips. "That'll be the day."

“Hey, you never know.”

“I’m not holding my breath.” He shakes his head then looks away. “I can’t take much more of his bullshit. He’s making leaving for college far easier.”

I don’t know what’s changed, or what happened since I saw him last. I also don’t want to rock the boat by asking. What I do know is Matty’s relationship with his dad is just as toxic, if not more so, than the one I had with my mom. While I hate that he has to deal with his dad’s antics, if that is the determining factor for Matty leaving, I’ll take it. I want Matty to get the hell out of here so he can have a fighting chance.

“When do you leave?” I ask.

“Four days.”

“Can you believe it? We’re finally doing it. We’re leaving this place.”

He smiles sadly. “About damn time.”

We fall into an uncomfortable silence. I don’t want it to end this way with Matty. I want it to be nothing but laughter and excitement for the future. I want us to end the summer being as close as we started it. But I’m learning I can never predict who will stay and who will go in my life. Whatever the length, it’s for a reason. Matty and I needed one another in Antsett, but we are going on different paths now. It’s time to let go.

“I’m sorry we didn’t get to spend more time together,” I say, regret coating my words.

Matty nods. “Me too.” He opens his arms and gives me one last hug. When I pull back, I smile up at him.

“Take care of yourself, Matty.”

With a sigh, I watch him walk away, feeling a small sense of relief that we were able to talk before I left

“Dear God, that was the longest goodbye.” Alba groans.

I turn and find her leaning against the railing.

“Have you heard of a thing called privacy?”

“No, I haven’t because I have three sisters who make that impossible,” she replies as she walks down the steps.

“I would tell you what he said, but I think you already know.”

Alba slings an arm over my shoulder. “You guys were talking about parents and leaving this shithole. Yada, yada, yada.”

“I’ll miss your way with words.”

She taps me on the nose. “Oh, are you getting all emotional on me, Sabes?”

I shrug her off. “Hardly.”

The truth is, once I get in the car, I’m probably going to bawl my eyes out, but she doesn’t need to know that.

Lennon and Maren make their way out of the trailer. Lennon is pestering Maren about the phone. While Maren swats her away and texts like her life depends on it.

“Come on, gimme the phone,” Lennon whines.

“No.”

“It’s been more than thirty minutes. Give it to me.”

“I said no!”

“You can text Nick later. It’s my phone time.”

When Maren replies, Lennon continues to bop over Maren’s shoulders like a bouncy kangaroo. “Come on, Maren! Maren, come on!” she repeats.

“Will you shut up?” Maren snaps.

Alba gestures to them like they’re a prize on *The Price is Right*, “Are you going to miss this?”

I blink my eyes rapidly and focus on Maren and Lennon’s biting words. “Without a doubt.”

Alba sees me fighting back tears and her smile briefly falls. “What time is it, Maren?”

Maren graciously takes a break from fighting with Lennon and texting to check the time. “Quarter till ten.”

“Shit. I gotta hit the road.”

Lennon and Maren stop their bickering, their eyes simultaneously widening before they hurry over.

Ms. Nova follows and walks around them to stand in front of me. Solemnly, she holds her arms out. “Come here, Sable Cole.”

Weakly I smile as I lean down and hug her tight. As I pull back, I quickly brush at my eyes.

“Are you crying?” she barks.

“No. Dust got in my eyes.”

She snorts, yet her eyes are starting to get a little misty too. Quickly, she looks away and sighs.

“You’re a strong girl,” she says out of nowhere.

“How do you know that?”

“Because God created Adam but he realized what he’d done and so he created Eve. The stronger one. The wiser one.”

I’d like to say she’s teasing but she once told me that she almost punched her pastor when he said woman was made from man.

Even so, her words are meant to encourage. My sadness is temporary and hopefully sometime down the road, I’ll look back at this moment with bittersweet fondness.

“Please call so I know you arrived there safely.”

“You know, if you had e-mail, we could keep in touch a lot easier.”

She rolls her eyes. “You know I’m not getting involved with that internet. It’s for p-”

“Porn. We know,” Alba and I say in unison.

“Well, if you know then don’t pester me about e-mail stuff.”

“It’s e-mail.” I sigh.

The expression on Ms. Nova’s face shows that for her, there’s no difference. “I expect calls and letters and if I don’t receive them, I’ll have to ask Alba for updates.”

“For the love of God, write the woman every day. I beg of you,” Alba mutters into my ear.

Ms. Nova hears her perfectly fine and grins before she pats my shoulder. She gives me one final squeeze. Slowly she moves her hands away. She looks torn as she takes a tiny step back and it’s the only indication that she’s struggling with this just as much as me.

But I can’t focus on that. Instead, I try to focus on how we’re leaving things - on a happy, carefree note.

This isn’t goodbye. Merely, a see ya later.

Then I look at my three sisters. This is something I’ve been waiting for and dreading all at the same time. I barely slept last night, waking up and feeling nauseous as I thought of what I would say during this moment. I’m not prepared. I’m afraid to hug my sisters. Afraid that once I wrap my arms around them, I won’t want to let go.

“Can we make this quick?” Alba says with a weak smile. “I don’t do goodbyes well at all and I can already tell this one is going to be a bitch.”

The two of us laugh as we hug one another. As I hold onto her, a choked sob escapes me because I’m leaving my best friend. Throughout everything, it’s always been Alba and Sable.

“It’s okay, Sable,” she says, holding on just as tightly. “We’re all so proud of you.”

Before she can say anything else that makes me break into tears, I pull back and nod. “I know.”

“It’s time for you to move into your dorm and micro manage your new roommate.”

Playfully, I shove her. “Shut up.”

Alba steps aside and lets Maren and Lennon walk up. Their bickering over the phone is momentarily put on pause. Rather than saying goodbye one at a time, the two bombard me. Their arms tightly wrap around me as they talk over one another.

“We’ll miss you so much,” Maren declares.

“And you might be bossy, but you’re the best big sister,” Lennon says.

“I’ll miss you guys too,” I say, trying to get a word in. “I know I was bossy, but I was trying to keep us afloat.”

“You were always fair, though,” Lennon continues, “and made sure I got the phone when you said you were going to give it to me.”

“Oh, my gosh!” Maren drops her arms. “Are you still bitching about it?”

Lennon holds her hand out. “Give me the phone!”

“Well, that lasted all of five minutes.” I sigh as I begin to slowly step back from them. “Love you guys.”

I watch as Alba snatches the phone from Maren and hands it to Lennon. “Love you!” Alba replies. She nudges a now pissed-off Maren and a victorious Lennon. “Love you,” they say in unison.

“I’ll call you later,” I tell Alba, feeling a tightness in my chest.

She merely nods.

I can't do this. I can't leave them.

Tears begin to fill my eyes.

“Are you ready?”

Turning around, I see Sam leaning against his Jeep with a patient and understanding expression on his face.

He’s stood back the entire time, packing the Jeep and moving things around while I said my goodbyes.

Seeing him solidifies my decision. I walk toward him and link my fingers through his. “I’m ready.”

Sam opens the passenger door for me. I get inside and buckle up before I exhale a shaky breath. Moments later, Sam gets into the driver’s side and starts up the Jeep.

As he puts the Jeep into reverse, my heart is wildly beating. He looks over at me and smiles. “You’re doing good, Cole.”

“You thought I’d be a mess by now?”

“That’s all you’ve been talking about the past three weeks,” he answers.

“That’s not the only thing I’ve talked about.”

In my spare time, I spent every waking moment with Sam, talking about our next year apart. We were giving our relationship a second chance, a true chance. No terms or conditions; we were together and even though he’s going to a different college than me, if the past year has shown me anything, it’s that our feelings for one another can’t die. We can be separated, but we’ll find our way back to one another and pick right up where we left off.

Sam laughs at my comment. He tilts his head back, revealing the strong column of his throat. “Yes, I know. You have our entire year mapped out and when we’ll see each other. What if I randomly come for a weekend visit?” he asks as he pulls out onto the road.

“Random visits are encouraged,” I say with a smile.

“Good. Because that will probably happen a lot.”

With his football schedule, I know there is going to be times we can’t see each other as much as we want. I’m sure there will be times we’ll get into fights. But whatever life throws at us, we’ll weather through it. Together.

He puts the Jeep into drive. My throat constricts as I look at my sisters and Ms. Nova one last time and give them a wave.

They wave back and the tears begin to fall from my eyes. As we drive away, I feel Sam grab a hold of my hand, and kiss the back of it. “I love you,” he murmurs. This is the start of something new and exciting, closing one chapter and starting a new one with fresh, blank pages.

And with Sam by my side, I can’t wait to see what the future holds.

“I love you more,” I reply.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A huge thank you to my beta readers: Melissa, Alyssa, and Kim. I am so grateful you guys took the time to read through the story and give your honest feedback. You guys always make the story better!

Thanks to my cover designer, Emily. For creating the perfect cover for Sam and Sable's story. I'm in awe of your talent.

My formatter, Juliana, thank you for always creating breathtaking interiors. Every. Single. Time!

Thank you to Crystal for proof reading Sam and Sable's story. I'm so thankful for you!

Annette, I'm so grateful for all your organization, positive attitude, and hard work. When I'm ready panic, you're calm and collected.

To my husband Joshua, thank you for everything. Thank you for always being there. I like you and I love you.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

College seemed like too much stress for me. Traveling across the world, getting married, and having five kids seemed much more relaxing. Yeah, I'm still waiting for the relaxing part to kick in...I change addresses every other year. It's not by choice but it is my reality.

While the crazies of life kept me busy, the stories in my head decided to bubble to the surface. They were dying to be told and I was dying to tell them. I hope you enjoy escaping to the crazy world of these characters with me!!

