



The  
*Valedictorian*  
and the  
*Big Man*  
on *Campus*

CURVY GIRLS' CLASS REUNION

KATE TILNEY  
LANA DASH

# THE VALEDICTORIAN AND THE BIG MAN ON CAMPUS

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# ONE

## SAMANTHA

Lips pursed, I tilt my head to the side. “Is it me, or does it need to go up about a quarter of an inch on the right?”

My all-too-capable—and long-suffering—assistant Allegra raises the banner exactly one-quarter of an inch and awaits my verdict.

Squinting, I study the “WELCOME BACK, WILDCATS” banner with the keen attention to detail that helped me graduate first in my class in high school and build my little empire after business school. Well, it’s not so little. It’s big enough that I’ve been featured in Forbes no fewer than five times, thank you very much.

I know it’s only a banner. Just like I know only a few hundred people will see it hanging in the high school gymnasium. Still, I want every detail of this weekend to be perfect. Including the banner.

“That looks great.” I give a short nod. “Do you need help coming down?”

“I’ve got this, Ms. Wingfield.”

I grin in satisfaction. I wish I could take credit for Allegra’s work ethic and skill at just about everything she does. While I’ve shown her a thing or two since hiring her, she’s always been the driven and dedicated woman now climbing up the corporate ladder while climbing down a literal ladder.

In high heels.

Regardless of her assurances, I hold the bottom of the ladder steady. The last thing we need right now is for Allegra to slip and hurt herself. Selfishly, there's no way I could pull off this class reunion all by myself.

As vice-president of my class at Pacific West High, it's my responsibility to organize our 10-year class reunion and make sure everyone has an amazing time taking a trip down memory lane. Of course, it wouldn't be my sole responsibility if Zack Strovers ever answered any of my emails. As the guy who narrowly beat me to claim the title of president, this really should have been his job.

I was never able to prove it, but I always wondered if Zack's dad paid someone off to give him a few extra ballots. God knows the only reason he was so popular was because his dad owns half of the town and everyone wants to stay on his good side.

It's not like Zack had a winning personality or anything. Okay, so maybe he was charming. But he was hardly sincere. Like a used car salesman or a lobbyist. They all work in lies.

Zack Strovers included.

I clench my teeth together and take a deep breath. There's no point in getting worked up now. I'd hate for anyone to think I'm still carrying any resentment around from something that happened more than a decade ago.

My phone rings and Allegra presses the connected Bluetooth in her ear as she reaches the ground. "Allegra St. Clair for Samantha Wingfield. How may I help you?"

After a pause, she turns to me and mouths, "Turley Enterprises."

I give a short nod and with the click of a button, the call transfers to my Bluetooth. "Samantha Wingfield. How are you doing, Mr. Turley?"

He doesn't waste time with pleasantries. "How are we going to get that old fossil at Renegade Solutions to stop

dragging his heels with this merger? At the rate he's going, I'll be six feet under before he signs off on everything."

"I can certainly appreciate your frustration." I motion for Allegra to follow me outside. "Let's talk through this."

While I comfort my client, we grab more decorations and supplies from my Land Rover out at the curb. By the time we're making our last trip, I've downgraded him from a Code Red Panic Level to Yellow.

"Let's circle back on Monday," I roll my eyes at myself for busting out the lame corporate lingo. "But I don't want you to let this ruin your weekend. Can you promise me that?"

Mr. Turley releases a heavy sigh and gloomily says, "I won't let it ruin my weekend."

"Oh come on." I adjust my grip on the bag draped over my shoulder and balance a box against my hip while I try to open the door. "I think we can do a little better than that. What aren't you going to do?"

He chuckles. "I won't let this ruin my weekend."

I pull the door open and juggle my load. "Do you promise?"

"I promise."

"Great, now I'll call you first thing on Monday and—" My high-heeled boot catches on the door. I bite back the f-bomb on the tip of my tongue as I—and the box full of name tags and door prizes—fly forward.

"Whoa, there." A pair of firm hands grab my forearms and pull me back upright. Those same hands pluck the box and tote bag away from me, giving me a chance to catch my breath.

"Oh, thank you so much." I release a shaky breath. "I was trying to do too many things at once, and..."

I trail off as I face my rescuer. Even if I didn't routinely stalk him on social media, I'd recognize the tall, broad-shouldered man with rich brown eyes anywhere. You never forget your nemesis. Not even when his square jaw is now

sprinkled with well-groomed whiskers that your fingers are practically itching to touch.

“Zack Strovers.”

Zack’s lips curve up, and his signature dimple appears on his chin, still visible through the whiskers. “Still conquering the world and not letting anyone stand in your way, I see.”

My traitorous heart skips a beat.

Ignoring the reaction, I force a smile and bat my eyes. I gesture to the logo stitched into his button-up shirt. “Still cashing in on your dad’s name, I see.”

The smirk falls from his face. “You always did know how to make a direct hit.”

“It’s why I won Model UN our senior year.”

“We tied. I believe there’s even a plaque hanging somewhere to prove it, if you need evidence.”

“Everyone knows I won.” I scoff. “We only tied because your father was one of the judges and had the rest of them in his pocket.”

Zack’s jaw clenches. “Yeah, well, I asked him to stay out of it, but he never did care about my opinion on anything.”

Something in his voice—it’s remorse or resentment, or maybe even regret—stops my next biting remarks.

Instead, I take a moment to look at Zack, really look at him. As I already noted, he’s grown up well. There are still plenty of traces of the boy who held the best parties in high school and always charmed the lunch ladies out of an extra cookie.

But there are also signs of the man he’s become. A man who has surprisingly firm hands for someone who works in real estate investments.

And suddenly, it’s really warm in here.

I push a stray lock of hair from my forehead and fan myself with my hand. “Was there something you needed?”



“Your email said to come early to set up for the reunion.”  
He lifts a shoulder. “I came to help.”

“So you did get my emails?”

“Of course, I got your emails.”

“I wasn’t sure. You never responded to any of them.”

“Maybe I would’ve responded if you would have been a little more pleasant and a lot less demanding.”

Any hint of attraction or sympathy for Zack immediately evaporates. There’s a reason this man is my nemesis. I’m just glad he reminded me of that before I went soft on him.

I open my mouth—ready to really lay into him, at long last—when a loud, booming voice turns both of our attentions. “Well, aren’t you a welcome blast from the past?”

We turn in unison to face the principal of Pacific West High. He’s a little grayer at his temples. Otherwise, the man looks almost exactly the same as he did when he handed me my diploma.

“Dr. K.” I smile at him. “It’s so good to see you.”

He nods at me, his eyes knitting together slightly before he gives Zack his full attention.

“Mr. Strovers.” Dr. K cuffs his shoulder and beams at him like a proud father. “It has been way too long.”

Zack flashes that winning smile of his. “Dr. K, you’ve never looked better. I hope that means you’ve had more time out on the golf course.”

I wonder how fast that dimple of his would go away if you threw a dart at it. Not that I would.

As if he can read my thoughts, Zack arches an eyebrow at me. Is that the grown-up version of sticking out his tongue?

“If only.” Dr. K’s eyes crease around the edges. He spares me a glance. I can tell he’s trying to place me, but can’t. That’s fine. I only volunteered as a student assistant every day of my junior year. I quietly seethe while the bromantic love fest continues.

Turning his attention back to Zack, Dr. K says, “Maybe we should play a round sometime.”

“I’d love that. Let me check with my assistant and we should get something on the books.”

“Just take it easy on me. If you play anything like you did in high school, I’ll have my work cut out for me.

It’s tempting to roll my eyes. But working in the business world, I’m used to dealing with the boys’ club. And boy seems especially appropriate considering Zack is involved.

Dr. K glances around at the decorations at the gym. “It looks like you’re ready to go for the reunion.”

“Just about,” Zack says before I can chime in.

“You always did a good job at everything you did. Prom. Your class gift. Model UN.”

I breathe in deeply, barely containing my anger as Dr. K gives Zack credit for all of my high school achievements past and present.

Dr. K pats his back. “If something was getting done, I always knew I’d find Zack Strovers in the area. I’m glad to see that hasn’t changed.”

“Well, you know I always say there’s no “I” in team.” Zack casts a sidelong glance my way, his smile brighter than ever. “Isn’t that right, Sammy?”

I changed my mind. I definitely want to see how quickly I could make that dimple disappear with a dart.

## TWO

### ZACK

If looks could kill, I'd be buried six feet under the gymnasium floor. And Samantha would be holding the shovel.

No doubt she'd like nothing more than to conk me over the head with the overstuffed tote bag she's carrying. Unfortunately for her, we have witnesses. She has no choice but to do what she's always done.

Pretend she doesn't hate me.

Samantha straightens her spine and plasters a bright smile on her face.

"That's right, Zacky. Teamwork makes the dream work," she replies in a chipper voice through gritted teeth.

I mask a laugh with a cough.

"Poor, Zacky. Do you need a cough drop?" she asks so sweetly, Dr. K and I are at risk of getting cavities.

"No, I'm good." I clear my throat. "I just had a tickle."

"Are you sure? I also have bottled water. I'm sure we could find you some cough syrup too. We wouldn't want you to come down with something right before you have to give your big 'Welcome Back' speech." She bats her eyes. "I mean, I suppose I could cover for you if needed. We both know I'm good at picking up dropped balls."

"Really?" I feign astonishment. "I didn't realize you had regular access to balls. Good for you."

Her eye twitches ever so slightly. “If you gentlemen will excuse me, I need to make a call outside. My reception isn’t very good in here.”

If she’s anything like the girl she was in high school, that’s code for locking herself in the car for five minutes while she rage-screams along to whatever angry chick music she’s listening to these days. I’ll have to excuse myself to get in position to watch her meltdown. I’d hate to miss it.

There never was anything I loved better than watching Samantha get all riled up. Well, that and being the one to get her into that state.

This is a battle we’ve been waging for more than a decade. And I have her right where I want her.

Still, I can’t resist watching as she stalks out the door. Even with her rigid stance, there’s a gentle sway to her shapely hips. She was a curvy girl back in high school. While I might have pretended not to appreciate it then, I can admit now that I spent more than a few late nights tossing and turning remembering the way her prom dress hugged her ass.

I wonder what Samantha would have to say if she ever found out she’d starred in more than one of my spank bank fantasies back then.

I can’t help but smirk in appreciation, even as my hands turn into fists at my side. Shifting from one foot to the other, I tear my gaze away before I can embarrass myself by showing the world just how much I appreciate her ass.

“Sammy?” Dr. K strokes his chin thoughtfully. “Is she Samantha Ziegfield?”

“Wingfield,” I correct. I bet the lady in question would be furious if she knew he’d just botched her name.

“Of course. She was your class secretary.”

“Vice president.”

“That’s right. Now I remember.” Dr. K’s hand drops to his side and he chuckles. “The two of you were always neck in

neck in everything. Student council. Model UN. GPAs. Which one of you ended up first in your class?"

Now it's my turn to clench my jaw. "She did."

"Still a sensitive subject I see." He arches an eyebrow. "I dare say the competition served you both well. You're a partner in your father's investment firm, and she's... Well, I'm embarrassed to say I don't quite know where Ms. Wingfield landed."

"She runs a consulting company. Mergers and acquisitions. She..." I sigh, hating myself for knowing all of this off the top of my head. "Samantha has done well for herself. She's even had a couple of profiles written up about her in Forbes and The Wall Street Journal."

"Forbes." Dr. K releases a low whistle. "I should go look up those articles. It sounds like she's an alumna worth tracking."

I keep my mouth shut. I've probably already said too much on the subject. Anything more, and Dr. K will think I've been keeping tabs on her. The occasional social media scan and a Google alert hardly count as keeping tabs.

Besides, I'm just taking a page from my old man's books. He said the key to succeeding in business is knowing everything you can about your enemy. While Samantha and I might not be duking it out for class president or Model UN anymore, I always figured our paths would cross again one day.

I wanted to be prepared for anything.

Before I can respond to Dr. K, there's a slight scuffle accompanied by a light gasp. We turn to see a college-aged young woman balancing a plastic storage tub against her hip while juggling an oversized vase.

"What the..." I mutter. With a sigh, I give Dr. K a shrug. "I suppose that's my cue to get back to work."

"That's the Zack I know." He gives my shoulder another pat. "You always did have a strong sense of responsibility."

A wave of guilt washes over me. I've let Samantha take on more than her share of planning and pulling off this whole reunion weekend. Not that she seemed eager to let me help, based on the tone of the emails she sent me.

Still, as our class president, it is my responsibility. I should have made more of an effort.

The least I can do is lend a helping hand now.

I race to the door to help the young woman with her load.

"Oh, thank you." She flashes a friendly smile at me. "I'm here to help with the reunion set-up."

"I'm Zack Strovers. Class president." Narrowly groaning under the surprising weight of the tub, I return her grin. "I'm sorry, but I didn't catch your name. Have we met before? I can't believe I'd forget your face."

"Slow down, Romeo. You haven't met." Samantha gives me an icy glare before softening her expression. "We can take things from here, Allegra."

The young woman flashes a hesitant look my way. "Are you sure?"

"Absolutely. Now that the Class President has graced us with his presence" —Samantha's tone briefly turns frigid again, and I can't help but smirk—"you should take off and start your weekend."

"Well if you're sure—"

"I'm positive." Samantha's tone is nothing but gracious. "Thank you for everything."

I watch as Allegra leaves, still curious about the woman's identity. An elbow to my gut knocks the breath out of me.

"What was that for?" I gasp out.

"Don't leer at my assistant." Her eyes narrow. "She works way too hard, and is way too good, to have to deal with sleaze-bags staring at her."

"I'm not a sleaze-bag."

Rolling her eyes, Samantha directs me where to set the tub. I've barely finished when she barks her next orders.

Though it takes every ounce of my willpower, I resist the urge to ask who died and made her Queen of the Reunion. She's done all the heavy lifting so far, I remind myself. This is the right thing to do.

"What next?" I ask after helping her position a collapsible platform in place to serve as a stage for the festivities.

She purses her lips, and my stomach instinctively clenches. "No, it's not quite centered."

I grit my teeth. "How much does it need to be moved?"

"About this much." She holds her thumb and index finger a couple of inches apart.

"Is it really that noticeable?"

"I can fix it if you aren't up to the task."

I take another deep breath through my nose and lower myself to my knees. With a light grunt, I shove the platform, moving it almost exactly two inches. I turn to look over my shoulder, waiting for Her Royal Perfectionist to tell me I didn't do it right.

Instead, I find Samantha looking somewhere other than the makeshift stage. I could be wrong, but I don't think I am. I'd bet the commission off of my last deal that Samantha was just looking at my ass.

Her bright blue eyes lift up to meet my gaze. Her cheeks instantly flush at the realization she's been caught. I have my answer.

Holy shit. Samantha Wingfield was just checking me out.

I arch an eyebrow. "Problem?"

"Nope." Her cheeks turn an even darker, and all-too-appealing shade of pink. "No problem here."

"Because it seemed like you were trying to take a look at something."

Unable to resist, I stand and take a step closer to her. Her chest is rising up and down with her quick, short breaths. Her full lips are slightly parted. Practically begging to be kissed. By me.

I blink. Where did that thought come from?

Samantha has been a pain in my ass almost from our first day of high school. Kissing her has to be the last thing in the world I should do.

But—as my dad has so generously pointed out over and over again—I don't always do what's in my best interest.

And right now, I'd like to take another step toward Samantha. Then tug her into my arms to see if those lips of hers taste as good as I've always suspected.

“Zachary,” a familiar voice booms, making us both jump.

I groan inwardly as my dear old dad saunters into the gymnasium like he owns the place. I guess making the donation to resurface the floors and replace the bleachers gives a man that impression. Still, I wish he wasn't here.

“Dad.” I try my best to keep my voice calm, even as I feel the heat of Samantha's stare on the back of my neck.

Great. She probably thinks I invited him here. She always assumed I was the one asking for my dad's involvement—and interference—in everything. Like I had a choice.

I open and close my hands in fists at my side. “Dad, you remember—”

“Samantha Wingfield, of course.” He takes her hand. Instead of giving it a shake, he raises it to his lips. “The woman who always gave you a run for your money. I read a piece about you in Forbes just last month.”

Her cheeks flush again, and I'm struck by an instant, and almost overwhelming urge, to shove my old man away.

Giving his charming smile, my dad lowers her hand but keeps it clasped in his. “Is my son pulling his weight or is he getting in your way?”



She gives a light laugh, before assuring him I've been helpful. I frown. She never laughs at me like that. And... is her voice flirty? Is it possible she's actually buying my dad's bullshit act?

Fortunately, her phone rings—again—bringing a halt to whatever is going on between them right now.

“I'm sorry. I have to take this.”

“You're a busy woman.” Dad releases her hand with an arched eyebrow. “I like that.”

As she strides away, my gaze once again lingers on the gentle sway of her hips. Another jolt of guilt stabs me in the gut. I really have to stop looking at Samantha like she's a piece of meat. Whatever happened in our past, I owe her more respect now.

“Your rival grew up well,” Dad muses.

I lift a shoulder, not wanting to let him know how I feel one way or the other.

“She was always... spirited,” he says. “I bet she's every bit a tiger in the bedroom as she is in the boardroom.”

“Jesus, Dad,” I mumble under my breath. “Do I need to remind you that you're old enough to be her father?”

“That would make it all the more fun.” He winks at me and heads out the door, no doubt to schmooze with some other alumni.

I glare after him wondering what bothers me more. Is it the fact that my dad is the real sleaze-bag Samantha accused me of being? Or is it the fact that I'm jealous of the way Samantha acts around him?

# THREE

## SAMANTHA

I have just enough time to change my outfit and apply a fresh coat of lipstick before the school tour begins.

I'm nearly out of breath when I race to the commons area outside the school office where we're gathering beforehand. I ignore Zack's arched eyebrow and instead throw my arms around Kat and Molly. We were best friends back in the day, but I haven't seen either of them in longer than I care to admit.

Thank God for social media and group texting. Otherwise, I would've lost track of these ladies years ago. That would be a real shame.

At the front of the group, Mr. Matthews looks at the clock on the wall and clears his throat. That's one thing I always appreciated about our AP American History and Civics teacher/Model UN sponsor. He was always prompt.

"Welcome back, Wildcats," he calls out in his deep and soothingly familiar voice. "It's good to see so many of you again. And it's good to see I'm not the only one who has a few gray hairs."

"Oh, baby. Does he ever?" Kat lowers her glasses and peers over the dark rims. "Is it me, or did Mr. Matthews somehow get even hotter?"

I roll my eyes. "Don't be gross."

Though, she isn't wrong.

Mr. Matthews was always kind of cute. In that nerdy, earnest, “I care about history and government, and I want you to care, too,” way. And I’d be lying if I said I didn’t once have a dream where we made out. It made things pretty awkward for me in Model UN for a while.

“Nope.” Kat pushes her glasses back up the bridge of her nose and shakes her head. “There’s no doubt. He’s definitely gotten hotter. Don’t you agree, Molly?”

Molly opens her mouth but clamps it shut almost as quickly. Her cheeks flush brightly and she lifts a shoulder.

Well, well, well. It looks like someone never got over her crush.

“Don’t worry,” one of the guys near the back of the group calls out. “I hear you were still named the hottest teacher at Pac West in the fake superlatives.”

I narrow my eyes. “Is that…”

“Judd,” Kat answers. “Looks like our Class Clown is still yucking it up.”

“Only, isn’t he getting paid to make jokes now?” I tilt my head to the side to study him. “I feel like I heard he’s a TV writer.”

“That’s what Gabby said,” Molly replies.

“Gabby!” Another classmate I liked who I haven’t seen in forever. I glance at Judd again but don’t see her. That’s odd. Gabby and Judd were basically attached at the hip back in high school. Seeing him solo is like seeing Tom Selleck without his mustache. It happens sometimes, but it’s unsettling. “I thought she was coming.”

“She’s on deadline. But she’ll be at the bonfire.”

A sheepish-looking Mr. Matthews clears his throat before continuing on with his welcome speech. He motions for us to follow him down the hallway to see a new trophy case that was installed as last year’s class gift.

Kat nudges me in the ribs. “Do you think the Model UN plaque is there?”

“Maybe.” I try to play it off like I don’t care, but I arch my neck to look all the same. “It would be pretty gratifying to see it. Especially after I cleaned the floors with a certain class president in the final round.”

Zack scoffs over my shoulder.

I jump and press a hand to my chest. “Jeez. Stalker much.”

“You wish.”

“Oh, great. It wouldn’t be a Pacific West event if these two didn’t get into it.” Kat rolls her eyes at Molly. “Maybe you both should go find some secluded room to make out in.”

I gasp as Zack’s jaw drops.

“Yeah, right,” he says at the same time I say, “Gross.”

We both glare at each other’s response.

“What do you mean, ‘yeah, right’?” I ask. “Are you saying you’re out of my league or something?”

“Gross?” His brow knits together even more. “I’ll have you know I’ve dated models. Not one of them had any complaints.”

“Maybe not to your face.”

“At least I get action.”

“At least I—”

“Oh, come on!” Molly cries out. “Just get a room.”

We all turn to stare at her. Including the rest of the couple dozen people who have joined the tour. Poor Molly looks like she wishes the ground would open up and swallow her whole right about now.

Pressing her lips together and taking a deep breath through her nose, she turns her attention to Mr. Matthews. “Did I hear there’s a new row of lockers in the C Hallway?”

Mr. Matthews blinks, but eventually tears his gaze away from us. “That’s correct.” He clears his throat. “I can show it to you now. It’s just past the library.”

Sticking my chin up, I turn away from Zack and start to follow the group. He reaches out to grasp my elbow before I can take more than a step.

I glance down at his hand on my elbow, trying to ignore the tingling sensation that seems to radiate from his touch.

“Excuse me,” I say as coolly as possible.

“The last I heard, the Model UN plaques are in a case in the library.”

“And I would care, because?”

“We could settle this little argument of ours once and for all by seeing who came in first, and who came in second.”

I glance toward the rest of the group, which is now gaining some distance from us. “I don’t think that’s necessary.”

“Why not? Scared to discover the truth?”

I suck in a deep breath. “On second thought, it’s been forever since I last saw the library. I’d love to see if there are any updates or changes.”

With a smirk, Zack motions for me to lead the way. I stick my nose in the air and do my best to ignore him, or at least give the appearance of ignoring him, on our walk to the library. It’s easier said than done. Especially when his close proximity makes my skin tingle.

No doubt it’s tingling in disgust. Like the creepy feeling that you get at the notion of a spider crawling up your spine.

I shiver.

“Hey.” Zack pauses outside the library door and takes my arm again to hold me back. “Are you okay?”

His low voice rumbles in my chest and sends a fresh ripple through me.

“I’m fine.”

“Because if you’re cold, we can—”

“I said I’m fine.”

His jaw ticks, and he keeps his gaze laser-focused on me for a few seconds longer. With a short nod, he releases my arm. “Well, okay then.”

I wriggle my arm as if that will erase the lingering warmth of his touch.

I need to change the subject. “It was nice to see your dad.”

If possible, Zack’s jaw clenches even tighter. “Yeah, well, he likes to be involved.”

“I remember. He was never far away from anything you were involved in back in high school.”

“Some habits are hard to break, I guess.”

It’s clear he doesn’t want to talk about his dad. Of course, that only makes me want to talk about him more.

“I have to say...” A slow, knowing grin spreads across my lips. “The gray hair really suits your dad. It makes him... more distinguished. More debonair.”

“Yeah, well, looks can be deceiving. He can be a pain in the ass.”

“I don’t know. Your father is a self-made man. As a self-made woman, I can appreciate the grit and determination it takes to build an empire.”

“Let’s just find the fucking plaque and get this over with.”

I start at Zack’s suddenly clipped tone. In all the years I’ve known him—in all the years we’ve fought against each other—he’s always kept things playful. He’s never snapped at me.

My belly flutters and I have to sigh at myself. What is wrong with me that I find his terseness oddly appealing?

On our way through the empty library, I make a few notes of the scenery. It’s amazing how much it’s changed in the past decade. There are more computers and kiosks with touch screens. They’ve also obviously repainted somewhat recently.

But there’s still the unmistakable feeling that was always there. When the library was my home away from home.

We reach the back wall where the trophy case should be and frown in unison.

The case is gone. In its place, there's a small sign that reads, "UNDER CONSTRUCTION! A new case is on its way courtesy of this year's graduating class."

"Well, shit." Zack shoves his hands in his pockets. "I guess we'll have to wait until our twenty-year reunion to settle this once and for all."

"Or we could see if our scores are still somewhere online."

"We could." He casts me a sidelong look accompanied by his signature smirk. "But what would be the fun in that?"

Apparently, Zack is over his little tiff, or whatever that outburst of his was. I fight the urge to smile in response.

Instead, I offer him my hand to shake. "So we meet back here in ten years to settle this once and for all?"

His dark eyes light up and he takes my hand, setting my heart to racing. "It's a date?"

I recoil, almost as if his hand has scorched mine, which, in a way, I suppose it has.

More to break the tension than anything else, I trail a hand over the nearby young adult section and murmur, "Hello, lovers."

Zack snorts.

"What?" I glare at him. "I suppose you're going to make fun of me or call me a nerd right now. Right?"

"Why would I ever do that?"

"Maybe because you never missed a chance to make me feel like a loser back in high school."

He steps toward me, pausing when there are only a couple of inches between us. Close enough for me to catch a whiff of his scent. It's... simpler. More musky and natural, like pine and sandalwood. Not the scent I would have guessed for a pretty boy like him.

Despite myself, my belly does a little somersault. I'm all too aware there are other things working in his favor that I didn't expect either. Like the fact that his shoulders are broader than I remember. As if he's added weight training to his rounds of golf.

His jaw somehow clenches harder too. Maybe it's an optical illusion courtesy of his tightly trimmed beard. And there's a twinkle in his dark eyes that makes me wonder what exactly is going on inside that pretty head of his.

I shouldn't find any of this appealing. He's still Zack. The bane of my existence. Just because he's kind of hot now, it doesn't change anything.

Swallowing hard, I focus on his neck so I won't be tempted to look at his lips.

He doesn't let me for long.

"Samantha?"

I swallow hard. "What?"

"Look at me."

"I am."

Chuckling lightly, he slides a finger under my chin. He gently turns it up until I meet his gaze. My breath catches in my throat as I do.

Damn my libido.

"I never meant to make you feel like a loser."

I blink at him. Is... Is he apologizing? "Oh."

So much for my powers of speech. They seem to have left me along with my ability to not be attracted to him.

He nods slowly, then his eyes narrow slightly. As if he's studying me like I'm the SAT prep book the day before test day. "Can I ask you something?"

I moisten my suddenly dry lips. "Sure."

"Do you get Botox?"



My spine straightens and I take a step back. His hand falls between us and I glare up at him.

I don't know why I'm surprised. "Some people never change."

Now it's his turn to look surprised. "What do you mean? It was a simple question."

"It was a rude question."

"I was paying you a compliment." He runs his hand through his hair and—for a second—I wonder if he really does feel bad.

Then again, he's Zack. He probably feels bad about being snapped at rather than offending me.

"Well." I fold my arms across my chest. "If that's your idea of paying someone a compliment, then it needs work."

"Forget it." He turns away from me. "Let's go catch up with the tour group."

"The sooner the better."

Shaking his head and mumbling something about headstrong women and responsibility, Zack motions me toward the exit door.

"Ladies first."

"So you're playing the chivalrous card now." My eyebrows shoot up. "Fascinating."

"I've never been anything but a gentleman to you."

I don't snort. But only because I want to prove that I'm better than him.

"True chivalry would be opening the door for me and then letting me walk out first."

Zack takes a deep breath through his nose. I bite back a grin as he clenches his jaw and gives a tight-lipped smile.

"Of course," he mutters. "How could I forget? You're the expert on everything."

"I'm glad you're finally catching on."

I can't be positive. But I'm fairly sure he growls a little as he reaches for the door handle. It doesn't budge.

"What the...?" His brows knit together, and Zack tugs again. "Well, shit."

I frown. "What?"

He turns and gapes at me, wide-eyed. "The doors are locked."

## FOUR

### ZACK

When I announce that the library doors are locked—and we’re stuck behind them—Samantha doesn’t gasp. Or groan. Both of which would be perfectly normal responses.

Instead, she does what she always does when I tell her anything. She gives an eye roll. One so epic, I’m almost surprised she doesn’t pass out from the effort.

“Oh great.” Her eyes are still rolling. Like they’re in slow motion in a movie. All that’s missing is the dramatic score behind it. “You’re making jokes now. Only, I see your sense of humor is as good as your negotiating skills were at Model UN.”

“I’m not messing around.”

I ignore the dig at my performance. I don’t have to explain myself to her. Besides, we have a much more pressing issue.

Like getting the hell out of this library before either of us commits a murder.

I pull and twist on both handles. Neither so much as wiggles. Using more force and with a greater sense of urgency, I try again. They won’t budge. Not even a little.

Holding back another swear word, because I’m not about to get a lecture on proper language from Ms. Perfect, I release the handle and run my hands through my hair.

“Who decided the library needed to be locked down like it’s Fort Knox? What do they have hiding in here? Gold

doubloons? A map to find the Declaration of Independence?”

“Gold doubloons is redundant.”

I shake my head. “What?”

“Doubloons are a former Spanish currency made out of gold. So calling them gold doubloons is like saying gold gold.”

“Okay.”

“And we don’t need a map to find the Declaration of Independence. It’s on display at the National Archives. Well, actually, one copy is on display. There are several.”

I just blink at her and turn my attention back to getting out of here. I have way too much going on in my life to end up in prison.

Stepping back a little, I study the doors wondering if there’s a way to pick the lock with anything we have. Back in high school, I may have snuck into my house plenty of times after curfew. But I never had to pick a lock.

Samantha taps me on the shoulder. “Are you sure you aren’t pulling when you’re supposed to be pushing?”

“I’m not an idiot.”

She says nothing, but lets her raised eyebrows do the talking. Their message is clear. She thinks I’m the world’s biggest idiot.

Just because I didn’t know that little factoid about the doubloons. Or the Declaration of Independence. Okay, I knew that one. I was too busy thinking about getting us out of here to bust out my trivia knowledge.

When I haven’t moved a moment later, Samantha shoves past me and reaches for the handle. “Let me—”

Her hand freezes on the handle. She attempts to wiggle it, but it barely moves. She tries again, biting her bottom lip and glaring at the doors.

She tugs then pulls then tugs again. “You have to be joking.”

I snort on a laugh, but—to avoid castration—I mask it as a sneeze. It’s more than a little gratifying to see her on the verge of losing her shit. And not just because seeing her wound up is one of my favorite things.

“Vindication,” I mumble under my breath.

“What did you say?”

I shake my head, no longer interested in egging her on. “You always did have to learn everything the hard way. Don’t you?”

“Shut up.” She waves off my remark and takes a deep breath.

Based on the way her lips are moving, I’m guessing she’s counting to ten. Knowing her temper, she should probably make it fifty. Otherwise, she might develop a hernia. Or punch me in the nose.

I can’t help but smirk at either possibility.

“Have you tried pushing?”

The fresh glare she sends my way breaks my resolve to remain sober. Tears are coming out of my eyes by the time I pull myself together.

Samantha folds her arms across her chest. “Are you finished?”

“Just about.” I release a final “woo” and wipe my eyes. “Okay, I’m done now.”

“Great. Any brilliant ideas, Mr. President?”

“Well, I don’t know, Madam Vice President.” Her cheek twitches, and I smirk. “Maybe we could try one of the other doors.”

“Sure. What a great idea. Let’s do that.”

My brow furrows. She agreed to that awfully fast. Maybe she knows something I don’t. Maybe she just really wants to get out of here. Or, maybe she’s finally accepted me as the pack leader that I’ve always been.

All the same, I should watch my back. I wouldn't put it past her to bash me over the head with Webster's Dictionary.

Only, I find myself watching something else as Samantha takes the lead. At some point, she changed from the business slacks she was wearing during set-up into a pair of jeans. Both outfits suit her. But the jeans mold to her behind like a second skin, displaying the ample curves of her hips and thighs.

Shapely thighs that would no doubt create a welcome cushion during the pushing.

"Are you looking at my ass?"

My eyes fly up to her face, which is now turned over her shoulder and glaring. Fuck. She caught me. I somehow manage to blurt out, "Nope."

"Hmm." Based on her scowl, she doesn't believe me. Not that she should. I was blatantly admiring her ass. And having thoughts that would no doubt earn me a swift kick to the dick if she ever heard them.

Thank God for an inner monologue. Not that I should be checking out her body. I don't even like her. My blood sugar must be low.

We reach one of the two emergency exits, and Samantha steps aside.

"Go ahead." She sweeps her arm, motioning for me to give it a try. "Be the hero."

I take it back. Samantha's ass is only good for one thing. Kicking.

Lips pursed, I stalk to the door and push the handle. It doesn't move.

"What the..."

Not waiting for her to respond, I race to the other side of the library to try the other exit. Nothing.

"Emergency exits my ass. What if there was a fire?"

"The school is closed for the summer."

I eye her suspiciously. “You knew these doors would be locked.”

“I had an inkling.”

“Yet you let me run around like an idiot without saying anything.”

“Oh, you pretty much look like an idiot most of the time.” She flashes a bright, overly cheerful smile. “With or without my input.”

I clench my teeth. “Do you have any brilliant ideas on how we can get out of here?”

“So you admit it. I have brilliant ideas.”

Trying to ignore the growing sense of doom or the way my dick twitched just now when she arched an eyebrow at me, I motion at the wall of windows. “Maybe we should try the windows.”

“We don’t have time to keep dicking around with the doors and windows. The bonfire is starting in a couple of hours.”

“Well, I’d love to hear how you propose we get out of here.”

“It’s easy.” She pulls out her phone. “We’ll just have to call someone to let us the hell out.”

I clench my eyes shut and grimace. I’m a fucking idiot. Of course. We could just call someone. Why didn’t I think of that?

Then again, it’s always been hard to think around Samantha.

I open my eyes in time to see her stare at her phone in horror as she unleashes a loud expletive. Despite the precarious situation we’ve found ourselves in, I can’t help but chuckle.

Her eyes narrow into slits. “What could possibly be so funny right now?”

“Your vocabulary. I had no idea it was so... colorful.”

“There’s a lot you don’t know about me.”

Clearly. Though, I’m inclined to think I know her better than she’ll ever concede. Even after all this time.

I guess I don’t have to worry about curbing my own language. Not when Samantha has it in her to curse like a sailor.

“So.” I look at her expectantly. “What’s the problem?”

“I don’t have any bars.” She turns her phone for me to see. “Supposedly the best cell phone service in the world, but I can’t get any bars in this damn place.”

“No problem. We’ll just use my phone.” I smugly pull out my phone but wince. “Fuck.”

“Let me guess? Your service isn’t any better?”

“They really have turned this place into Fort Knox,” I mutter. “Doors that automatically lock. Cell phone blockers.” I glance around. “Do you think we could send an email out from one of the computers? Or maybe there’s a phone in the librarian’s office?”

Samantha opens her mouth as if she’s about to tell me my ideas are ridiculous. But after a second, she just sighs. “You try the computers, I’ll try the phone?”

“Deal.” I hold out my hand to shake on it.

She stares at my hand like I’ve offered her a plate of lizard tails or canned beets.

“Come on, Sammy.” I extend my hand even closer. “You’re a woman of the business world. You know how to do it.”

It takes her another long moment until she begrudgingly accepts my hand. A jolt of electricity shoots through me as her palms touch. Her eyes widen and, taking a step back, she drops my hand. She must have felt it too. Weird.

“Phones and computers?” she says.

I nod and swallow past a lump in my throat. “Phones and computers.”



We reconvene several minutes later, both of us disappointed—and more than a little pissed off—with our inability to reach the outside world.

“I don’t get it.” I ball my hands into fists at my side. “I get that there have been budget cuts, but do they really save that much money turning off the phones and Internet for the summer?”

She lifts a shoulder. “I hate to say it, but I think our only choice is to get comfortable and wait for the janitor to come in tomorrow morning.”

“You mean, we’re stuck here all night?”

She tilts her head to the side. “Unless you want to try your hand at breaking out a window.”

We both know how well that would go over. The glass is probably double—no, triple-paned. “The janitor will be in tomorrow?”

“That’s what I said. I don’t know why you have to question everything I—”

“It’s summer. I thought it was a fair question.”

“Oh.” She purses her lips like she’s just taken a bite of a lemon. Clearly, she doesn’t appreciate it when I’m being reasonable. Or unreasonable for that matter. “Yes, the janitor will be in tomorrow to help prepare for the pancake feed.”

Clenching my eyes shut, I pinch the bridge of my nose in anticipation of the headache that will undoubtedly begin to form. “When will the janitor be in tomorrow?”

“What makes you think I’d know something like that?”

I let my hand fall to my side. “We both know you probably have the janitor’s schedule—and personal phone number—on a spreadsheet somewhere.”

She blinks at me. “He’ll be in at six.”

“A.M.?”

“I said they’d be here in the morning.”

That she did. Fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck. This whole situation, it's just... Fuck.

“So.” I fold my arms across my chest. “What do we do?”

You could start by pushing her back against one of the bookshelves and kissing her.

What the... I frown at the voice inside my head. I am most definitely not going to do that. Even if it would shut her up for more than two minutes together.

Not to mention it would satisfy a question that's been weighing on my mind for more than a decade now. Just what does Samantha's smart little mouth taste like?

I clench my jaw tighter, trying—but failing—to dismiss the thought from my mind.

Eyeing me closely, unblinkingly, Samantha straightens her spine and shoulders. “What we've always done.”

“Battle to the death?”

Her lips twitch, and I can't help but smirk. I almost got her to laugh there. It's almost as satisfying as making her rage-sing in her car.

“I was thinking something more along the lines of dividing the library into two halves.”

I frown. “What for?”

“So you can stay on your side, and I can stay on mine. That way we don't end up killing each other.”

I chuckle at that. I'm not the only one who has had murder on my mind throughout this whole exchange.

“Okay.” I motion for her to begin. “Let's hear your starting offer on how to split the territory.”

If her negotiations now are anything like they were in high school, I'm in for an annoying—though, exciting—half an hour. Oddly enough, I'm looking forward to it.

# FIVE

## SAMANTHA

Thump. Thump. Thump.

I tear my eyes away from the YA fantasy novel I've been skimming to search for the source of the sudden noise. I hope the library's ceiling hasn't suddenly sprung a leak. Or that—worse—some sort of critter hasn't snuck its way into the air ducts.

We have enough problems on our hands without having to deal with another disaster.

Thump. Thump. Thump.

With a sigh, I close the book and set it aside. I can't see anything from my vantage point, tucked behind a bookshelf. So I rise to my feet and pop my head over the stacks.

Thump.

My gaze lasers in on the source of the noise. Zack. Of course, it's Zack.

“What are you doing?”

He turns toward me from where he's sprawled on the ground, facing the wall of windows. “What do you mean, what am I doing?”

I press my lips together and take a deep breath in through my nose. We still have twelve more hours left stuck in here. Alone. If I spend every second of it furious with him, I'm going to give myself an ulcer.

“I mean”—I say slowly, through clenched teeth and a fake smile that I’m desperately trying to keep in place—“what are you doing to make that noise?”

“What noise?”

My eye twitches. “The thumping noise.”

“Oh. That.” He holds up a tennis ball. “I found this in the teacher’s desk in the little classroom. Want to play?”

“Thanks, but I’ll pass.”

“Suit yourself.”

He goes back to bouncing the ball against the window. I stand there staring at him, not sure what bothers me more. The noise, or his blatant disrespect for property that isn’t his.

“Aren’t you even just a little bit worried about breaking one of the windows?”

“Nah. I tested the windows earlier. They’re thick and sturdy as shit.” He bounces the ball again. “Worst case scenario, my strength is too much for it, and it breaks.”

“Right. And you would be okay breaking a school window.”

“It might mean us having a way out.”

“Because we’re going to climb through a tiny hole surrounded by shattered glass.”

He scoffs. “Don’t be dumb.”

Before I can object to him—of all people—calling me dumb, he holds up a hand to silence me. That might be even worse than saying I’m being dumb.

“We wouldn’t climb out of the window,” he says. “We’d call for help out of it.”

“And you think someone would hear us?”

He lifts a shoulder. “Maybe. The bonfire isn’t that far away.”

The bonfire. I check the clock, and my heart sinks a little. I hope the other volunteers were able to get everything set up. If

they follow the list of instructions I emailed them last week, it should be fine.

Oh, I hope they remembered to get enough ice to keep everyone's drinks cool. And the hot dogs! I hope there are enough stakes for cooking the hot dogs and marshmallows over the bonfire.

My lips curve down.

Barely sparing me a look, Zack asks, "What's wrong?"

I swallow past a lump in my throat. "Who said anything was wrong?"

"You look like someone threw your favorite stuffed animal in the trash before telling you there's no such thing as Santa." He goes back to bouncing the ball. "You might as well admit it. Something's wrong."

Sighing, I rest my cheek against the side of the bookshelf. "It's nothing, but... I can't believe I'm going to miss the bonfire."

"Yeah. It's a bummer."

"Out of everything I planned for this weekend... It's what I was most excited about."

Zack snatches the ball as it bounces back to him and sets it on the floor before jumping to his feet. He strides toward me until he reaches the row of desks that represents our barrier.

"Really?"

My frown deepens. "Why would that surprise you?"

"No offense—"

"Why do people always say no offense before they're going to say something offensive?"

He carries on without acknowledging my question. "No offense, but you've never particularly struck me as the outdoorsy type."

I humph. "I'll have you know that I go hiking every weekend."

“Yeah, you and every other so-called outdoorsy girl in Los Angeles who goes for walks in Runyon.”

Okay, so maybe Runyon Canyon isn't the most rustic of locations, but it's no walk in the park.

Or, a walk on a golf course for that matter.

“I've climbed El Capitan.”

That seems to capture his attention if his slacked jaw and wide eyes are any indication. “Seriously?”

I slip my phone out of my pocket and scroll through my photos. Once I find the one I'm looking for, I hold it up.

“There. That's your proof.”

“I can't see the photo from there.”

Once again clenching my jaw, I push away from the shelf and join him at the border of my territory.

“See.”

He takes my phone and releases a low chuckle that resonates in my chest and stirs something inside me. “Well, would you look at that? I guess you're outdoorsier than I would've guessed.”

“Yeah, well.” I can't help but raise my chin smugly. “I guess you should never judge a book by its cover.”

He swipes his finger on the screen, and his eyes grow even wider. “You're also bendier.”

He flips the phone around to show a photo of me striking the uttanasana pose. I suck in a breath and swipe it out of his hands.

“I don't believe I said you could go snooping.”

“Now I'm going to spend the rest of the night wondering if you can put your foot behind your head.”

Maybe I should tell him that I can, along with any other number of poses. But I don't know if I want Zack to think about me in varying bendy positions.

“I'd rather you didn't think about me at all.”

“That’s going to be hard considering we’re roommates.”

I scowl. “More like cellmates.”

He laughs again at that. I try not to notice the way it sets my heart fluttering again.

“You can see the bonfire from your windows?”

“Yep.” He gestures over his shoulder. “It’s not HD quality or anything, but you can still get a decent look while it’s light outside.”

I chew on the inside of my cheek. “Maybe you’d let me come take a look for a few minutes.”

His eyebrows shoot up. “Are you saying you want to fraternize with the enemy?”

Now it’s my belly fluttering. Something about his tone—not to mention that smart-ass, signature smirk of his—is really doing something to me.

“Of course not. I just thought maybe we could... give each other temporary visas to visit.”

He folds his arms across his chest. “What could you possibly have on your side that I’d want?”

“The librarians’ lounge.”

“And what do they have in there? *Dewey Decimal for Dummies?*”

I give a short laugh, but mask it with a cough. “Actually, I thought you might be getting a little hungry by now.”

As if on cue, his stomach growls.

“Okay, you’ve got me.” He drops his arms to his side. “What? Are there some leftover apples from the school year or some moldy cheese in the fridge?”

“I have two words for you.” I plant my hands on my hips. “Vending. Machines.”

Now it’s his turn to gasp. “You’ve been holding out rations on me?”

“You’ve been holding out bonfire views.” I haven’t even told him about the bathroom yet. Which, come to think of it, I should have. I’d hate for him to designate a pee corner.

We glare at each other for long seconds. It takes all my power not to slip and grin.

“Twenty minutes in enemy territory each?” he asks.

“Fifteen.”

He holds out a hand. “Done.”

I shake it, and a fresh burst of heat shoots through me from his palm. “Done.”

I quickly drop his hand and stride toward his side of the windows. He doesn’t waste time disappearing into the librarians’ lounge.

Once I reach the window closest to the bonfire, I lean as far as I can over the wide window ledge to see it. Squinting, I can just barely see people milling about the large pile of wood. It looks like they lit it about twenty minutes ago, which means it should be perfect by sunset.

I narrow my eyes even more. Is that Molly huddled up next to Mr. Matthews? No. It can’t be. I need a better look.

My feet slip, trying to find traction while I push myself closer to the window over the high, wide ledge.

Who decided to make these ledges so tall and wide? Besides architecture, what possible purpose could it serve but to make non-tall people like me have to work to look out.

“Here.” Zack suddenly reappears at my side.

“Let me help.” He steps forward and places his hands on my hips.

A jolt of electricity shoots from his hands up my spine and I instinctively step away.

Shocked by my physical reaction to his touch, I go on the defensive. “What the hell was that?”

“I was going to give you a boost up.”



“Why?”

“So you can see better.” His brow furrows. “Hey, are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” I say, just a little too fast. “Why wouldn’t I be?”

“Because your face is looking a little flushed.” He lifts his hand. Before I can step away, he presses the back of his hand to my forehead. “You feel a little warm, but I don’t think you have a fever.”

I jump on that excuse. “I am a little warm. There isn’t a lot of air circulation in here.”

“I know what you mean. I worked up a bit of a sweat trying to open up the windows earlier.”

Visions of Zack working up a sweat flash through my head like a flip book.

Zack chasing a ball back and forth across the tennis court in white shorts that show off his calves and thighs.

Zack running on a treadmill and lifting the hem of his tank top to wipe his face. Flashing his rock-hard abs.

Zack rolling up his sleeves to do something helpful, like hang that painting I’ve been meaning to display in my dining room.

What is it about a guy and his forearms that’s so... sexy? Something about the way they roll up their sleeves does something for me. Maybe it’s the way it makes them look like they’re so in charge. Like, “I’m here to conquer.”

I shiver.

Before he can question my health again, I say, “Just a little chill. Probably from overheating without the air.”

“It’s a good thing we aren’t stuck here during the heat of the day. Or we’d be toast without that air conditioning.” He shakes his head. “It must be one more service they’ve cut off for the summer. Though, I suppose it makes sense. What with people not being here all the time.”

“Yeah. It makes sense.”

Unlike the way I’m finding myself increasingly drawn to Zack and his broad shoulders and strong jaw. Was he always so... sturdy? Or is this another benefit of growing up?

Either way, I’m clearly losing my mind. I must be developing Stockholm Syndrome. Or maybe there’s a gas leak somewhere in here. There has to be a logical reason—something beyond my control—that’s making me look at Zack like he’s a piece of meat.

A delicious, savory piece of meat that I’d like to nibble on slowly. Paired with a nice merlot.

Shit. I really am losing my mind.

Zack steps toward me again, and I catch my breath. “Did you want me to give you a boost so you can hop up on the ledge?”

My gaze drops to his lips. I unconsciously rub mine together, which draws his attention. For a moment, time seems to stop. The air grows even more still. As if we’re two magnets that have finally been turned in the right direction after facing opposite ends, we lean toward each other.

My lips part as I feel his breath whisper across them.

I don’t know what we’re about to do. But I can’t seem to ignore this sudden pull toward him.

## SIX

### SAMANTHA

My eyes flutter shut. The air around Zack and me seems to sizzle and snap. This time, it isn't from lobbing barbs back and forth. Each of us trying to leave a mark on the other with every verbal lash we make.

It's an entirely different kind of tension. One that is purely carnal and surprising in the fact that it doesn't feel as surprising as it should.

Has this been the source of every argument in this ongoing war between us? Have we exchanged harsh words instead of hot kisses? Can this decade-long feud really be chalked up to something as simple as... lust?

Only, there's nothing simple about the desire burning inside of me. Embers that have sparked into flames even brighter and hotter than the ones from the bonfire blazing outside.

It's so consuming that I can hardly think straight. Which is saying something. My mind is pretty much racing from the moment my eyes open in the morning until my head hits the pillow at night.

We aren't even touching. Not yet. But the want is so strong—the need is already so firmly in place—my body is already tingling. It's as if his fingers and lips have already traced paths over every inch of my skin. Leaving no part untasted. Teasing and tempting, bringing me so close to the brim of passion it could boil over at any moment.

Is it the same for Zack? Could he... want me? Or is this a case of proximity and convenience?

As Zack's lips lower to mine, a cold shiver runs up my spine. It isn't enough to completely douse the desire inside of me, but it does put a damper on it. Enough that I can think about the consequences of what would happen if I narrow the physical distance between us until it's gone.

My eyes fly open. "What are we doing?"

Zack opens his eyes more slowly. "What do you mean?"

His mouth is still close to mine. So close I can feel the way his lips curve into that infuriating, yet oddly sexy smirk. It's so close, I can feel every one of his words on my lips even more strongly than I can hear them.

My heart pounds a little faster. Even as a voice in my head screams, "Seriously, what the hell are you doing?" it's tempting to tell it to shut up and give into my baser desires.

But the voice of reason is just loud enough to hold me back. But not loud enough that I pull away completely.

"You know what I mean." I swallow hard, pretending not to notice how loud my heart seems to be pounding in my ears. "What are we doing?"

"Well, I'm not an expert in kinesics, but it seems to me we're just two people. Standing here talking."

Never mind the fact that we're two people talking with their lips barely an inch apart, if even.

"I'm surprised by you."

"Oh?" The single word from Zack comes out as a long, warm breath that sets a fresh flutter through me. "How so?"

"I had no idea you had such a good vocabulary. Kinesics?"

He chuckles, and the low rich sound rumbles from his chest into mine. I squeeze my thighs together and nearly gasp at the warmth pooling between them.

"Well..." Zack rubs his lips together, and I can almost feel the movement on mine. Just a few millimeters closer and I

would. “As you pointed out earlier, there’s a lot we don’t know about each other.”

This should be weird. We’re having a conversation without raised voices or tempers. And, we’re essentially speaking into each other’s mouths. Sharing the same air. There’s no his. No mine. Just ours.

For some reason, it isn’t weird. I really must have Stockholm. If you can develop Stockholm in only a few hours.

“Maybe it would be better if we keep things that way. Leave things mysterious.”

“Hmm.” He purses his lips, and this time it’s enough. It’s enough for his lips to touch mine. All either of us has to do is move our lips again or angle our heads and we’ll be kissing.

I’d be kissing Zack Strovers. And I still can’t decide if that would be the smartest or dumbest thing to do at this moment.

Outside the window, there’s a loud crack followed by peels of laughter. I jump, bumping my nose on Zack’s chin.

“Ouch,” I hiss through my teeth and clutch my nose with my hands. “I guess that’s one way to use a chiseled jaw.”

And, great. Now he knows I’ve been thinking about his jawline enough to call it chiseled.

“Sorry about that.” He reaches for my elbows, concern written on my face. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine.” Still clutching my nose, I take a step back. I can’t believe what almost happened. I can’t believe I even considered letting it happen. “I should get back to my side of the library.”

He frowns, but remains standing in place, his hands still outstretched toward me. “We still have five minutes.”

“And you’re welcome to use yours in the librarians’ lounge.” I take another step backward and bump into a globe perched on top of a table.

I swirl around quickly enough to keep it upright. I keep my gaze averted from his. “I... I... I’ll see you later.”

“Don’t you want to get a better look?” he calls after me.

I pretend not to hear him. I’m too busy mentally kicking my own ass for that momentary lapse in judgment. That was a close call. Way too close.

\*\*\*

Plink. Plink.

Oh, jeez. What now? I push myself up from the little nest I’ve made for myself next to the wall of biographies and memoirs with the blazer I was wearing earlier. A sweatshirt would’ve been much more useful—not to mention comfortable—for a night spent in the library.

That’s what I get for choosing appearances over comfort. That would probably be the most accurate title for my memoirs: Appearances Over Comfort. I’d rather it was something cooler, or more inspirational. But I’m nothing if not brutally honest.

Though, maybe, not always to myself. But that can change now.

The noise continues as I make my way toward the border between my half of the library and Zack’s. No doubt, it’s just him creating some new form of mischief.

Not that I didn’t play my part in the most recent bit of mischief. It takes two to almost kiss. I may have put a stop to it before it could happen. But only just barely.

My cheeks burn as I try my best not to think about the way his scent enveloped me as we stood close, almost kissing. I figured he’d still be taking baths in Axe body spray, the way he and the rest of the guys in our class did back in high school.

Instead, Zack’s scent was muskier and earthier than I expected. Masculine. Intoxicating.

A fresh tingle runs up and down my spine, and I shiver.

Plink. Plink.

The sound grows louder the closer I get. And sure enough, through the shadows I can make out Zack's broad-shouldered figure. He's seated at one of the tables not far from our border. Every so often something small flies from his hand and bounces off the table before landing in a cup.

He lifts his hand to bounce once more.

"What are you doing?"

He turns to me, mid-boss. This time there isn't an accompanying plink.

"Oh man." Zack heaves a heavy sigh. "You made me miss. I was undefeated."

"Against who?"

"Myself." Chuckling, I can just make out the shake of his head in the dark. "I hadn't missed all night."

"What are you playing?"

"Quarters." He rises to his feet and meets me at our makeshift border. The pale light from the moon shining in through the windows crosses his face. Instead of anger or annoyance at his interruption, there's the hint of a smile playing on his lips. My heart flutters again against my will. "I found a couple of coffee mugs and some loose change while I was in the librarians' lounge."

"So you took them?"

"Borrowed them. I'll put everything back where I found them before we leave." He makes an X over his chest. "Cross my heart."

I narrowly resist the urge to smile back at him. Instead, I fold my arms across my chest as if that will somehow protect me from melting a little more in his presence. With every hour we're stuck here in this library, it's getting harder and harder to keep my hatred for Zack alive.

But... I'm not ready to let go of it. Not yet.

“Well...” I shift from one foot to the other. “As long as you put everything back. I suppose it’s okay.”

“Thanks, Mom.”

I roll my eyes, and he chuckles at my response. I can’t resist giving the slightest hint of a smile in return. I’m not made completely out of stone.

Zack clears his throat and holds out his hand. “Want to play?”

I shake my head. “No, I... no thank you.”

“Why? Afraid you’ll lose?”

I narrow my eyes. “You think I’m scared of losing to you?”

“It’s the only reason I can think of you backing down from a challenge.”

I suck in a breath, all of my earlier feelings of harmony—or, at least, lust—cleared from the table. “I have never backed down from a challenge. Especially not where you’re concerned.”

“Then why won’t you play?”

I’m about to tell him that I don’t want to play with him because I don’t want to spend another second in his presence. But that’s not true. Not any part of it. As irritated as I am with him at the moment, as much as I’d like to flick him in the nose, I still feel drawn to him.

Like a fruit fly to vinegar.

There’s also the other reason I don’t want to play. And one that is much safer to admit. “I’ve never played before.”

“Oh.” He blinks in surprise. “Well that’s okay. I’ll show you.”

Before I can protest, he takes me by the hand. My heart pounds erratically in my ears as he leads me back to the table on his side of the border. He pulls out a chair and, releasing my hand, motions for me to sit.



Eyeing him suspiciously, I check the seat—half expecting to find a whoopee cushion or at least a snack cake that will stain my jeans.

“I promise, no dirty tricks,” he says.

Taking him at his word, I sink into the chair. He pushes me into the table before taking the seat next to mine.

“Right, so here’s how you play.”

For the next several seconds, I watch Zack demonstrate the basics of the game. Or, at least, I watch as closely as I can with only the moon and the light from the emergency exit signs glowing around us.

After I watch him a few times, I take one of the offered quarters hesitatingly. Moistening my lips, I try not to feel the heat from Zack’s stare as I make my first attempt.

The coin hits the table and flies off to the side.

I wince. “Crap.” I go again with similar results.

Wrinkling my nose, I shake my head and offer the coins back to Zack. “It’s no use. I’ll never figure it out.”

“Oh, come one. We both know you aren’t ready to give up now. You just need a little coaching.”

Rather than taking the coins, Zack springs out of his seat to stand behind me. “You just have to get the flick of your wrist right.”

He takes hold of my right hand, and a jolt of desire hits me right between my thighs. I take a few short, shallow breaths.

Apparently unaware of the effect he’s having on me, Zack places a quarter between my fingers. “Line up your shot. Keep the mug in your sight.”

Easy for him to say. He isn’t the one having the back of his neck tickled by someone’s warm breath.

Swallowing hard, I do my best to take his advice, focusing on the cup and ignoring the sensations warring inside of me. I take another breath, this one deep to fill my lungs. And I take my shot.

The quarter bounces off the table and plops into the cup.

I gasp. Eyes wide and jaw dropped. I turn to Zack. “Did you see that?”

He’s watching me closely, his lip curved up on the side. “See, you’re a natural.”

“Let me try it again.”

Grasping the quarters, I go again and again and again. I still miss every third or fourth shot, but I get better.

Zack sinks back into his seat, watching me with amusement plainly written on his face.

“Thank you for showing me how to play. This is... Nice.”

He smirks. “Don’t get used to it. I promise to go back to being an ass tomorrow.”

“I have no doubt.”

But I am doubting my ability to resist him and his charms. Whether or not he’s an ass to me. Which is bizarre. I swear, the second I’m out of here, I’m calling my therapist for an emergency session.

“You know...” He cocks his head to the side. “There is one thing that would make this game a little more official.”

“What’s that? A timer? Because I’m sure we can use the one on our phones.”

“No, not a timer. Booze.”

I pause before taking another shot. “Booze?”

He nods. “Quarters is a drinking game after all.”

Now that he mentions it, I know he’s right. That would explain why I’ve never played before. Not because it involves alcohol. But because I never frequented the kinds of parties in high school or college where drinking games would’ve been played.

I was too busy spending my weekend nights working on my college application essays and studying for tests. I was

always so busy worrying about my future that I didn't give myself time to be a kid.

I just judged people like Zack for enjoying their youth while I sacrificed mine. Not that I regret it. I got where I am today because of my hard work. But...

Maybe it wouldn't have killed me to loosen up every once in a while to enjoy myself.

At least there's something I can do about that now. Especially with the knowledge I gained from spending so much time here in this library.

"We need booze to play?" I ask.

"If we want to be official." His eyebrows shoot up. "Don't tell me you're carrying a flask."

"No, I'm not that cool." I wait for him to say I'm nowhere close to cool. But he doesn't take the bait. "But I do have an idea."

"Should I be scared or excited?"

A slow smile spreads across my face. "Oh, if I were you, I'd be afraid. Very, very afraid."

## SEVEN

### ZACK

Holding back giggles like a pair of teenagers, Samantha and I tiptoe toward the small classroom that's tucked away in the library. I always thought it was a strange placement for a classroom. Especially because the only way in was through the library.

"You know, you're pretty lucky," I stage whisper.

"Why's that?" she stage whispers back.

"Because I'm letting you hang out on my side of the library without making you give me more time on your side."

"Desperate times..." She shakes her head. "I suppose there isn't much point in keeping those boundaries in place anymore. Is there?"

I can think of a few other boundaries I wouldn't mind seeing going away tonight as well. But after the way she pulled away from me earlier, it's probably best that goes unmentioned. She clearly didn't want to kiss me, and I have to respect that.

No matter how much I might like to ask her to reconsider.

"No," I whisper. "There isn't."

Samantha opens her mouth and promptly closes it. Pausing at the doorway to the classroom, she cocks her head to the side and studies me. "Why are we whispering?"

I start to frown, but end up bursting into laughter. “I don’t know. I guess it feels like we’re doing something naughty. And we’re about to get caught.”

“If only, right?”

“Yeah, right.” Only, as I say it, I’m not sure I mean it. Strange as it sounds, I’m having a really good time with Samantha.

Clearing my throat, I flip on the classroom’s light switch.

“Do they ever even have any class in here?” I ask at a regular volume.

“Of course.”

“Which one?”

“Research methods.”

I make an O-shape with my mouth. “That would explain why I never had a class here.”

“That would do it.” Samantha clicks her tongue at me in mock dismay. “If you’d taken the class, then you would’ve known about this.”

“About what?”

“Mrs. Winters’s secret stash.”

“Her secret—” I cut myself off as Samantha slides open a desk drawer and removes a dictionary.

I raise my gaze to her expectantly. “What? Is that a hollowed-out book or something?”

She lifts a shoulder. “Take a look.”

Sparing her another glance, I slide the book in front of me and flip open the cover. “What the...?” I frown and flip a few more pages. Then a few more before lifting the book and shaking it. “It’s just a dictionary.”

“Now you have your answer.”

“But...” I shake my head. “You said there was some sort of—” I can’t help but whisper—“alcohol in here.”

“So I did.” With a little smirk, she lifts a thin piece of particle board the same color as the desk and motions toward it theatrically. “I give you Mrs. Winters’s secret stash.”

Jaw slack, I lean forward to study the contents. It’s a smorgasbord of sin. There’s a vape pen containing God knows what, an open package of Belgian chocolate truffles, and a framed photo of a well-known Hollywood silver fox.

And there, in the middle of Mrs. W’s secret stash of sin, is an open bottle of vodka.

“Whoa.” I arch an eyebrow at the still smug-looking Samantha. “Isn’t most of this illegal to have on school grounds?”

“Teachers work hard. Don’t you think they deserve to cut loose from time to time?”

“Yeah, but...” I can feel my cheeks flush at the thought of Mrs. Winters cutting loose with any combination of these items. “It’s... against the rules.”

“Are you saying you’ve never smuggled contraband on campus?”

I pull a face rather than answer. Point to Sammy. Still... “She’s a teacher.”

“So? Do you think teachers plug themselves into the wall and go into hibernation mode after the final bell rings for the day.”

I sigh. “Don’t you think she’ll notice if her vodka goes missing?”

“Oh, definitely. But if one of us sneaks back in here before school starts in the fall...” Samantha wiggles her eyebrows in that way that always makes my gut clench a little. “And replace it with something better, I think we’ll be forgiven.”

Say less. “Should we go grab more cups from the lounge?”

She shrugs. “We can drink straight from the bottle. I don’t see the point in creating more dishes than necessary. Not unless you do.”

I release a low whistle. “Every time I think I’ve figured you out...”

The smirk is back and my heart skips a beat. Where was this Samantha back in high school? Oh, there were signs of her. She was always tenacious and brilliant and beautiful. All that was missing was this playful side.

Then again, maybe it was always there. I was just too wrapped up in my own life to notice what was under the surface.

That’s a shame. A damn shame. Maybe we could have been friends all this time.

Something must register on my face because Samantha pulls back and the smile slips from those increasingly tempting lips.

“Come on.” She snags the bottle and saunters out the door. “Let’s live a little.”

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A couple of hours—and countless rounds of Quarters—later, Samantha and I are both feeling loose. So loose, we’ve sprawled out on one of the library tables with a nearly empty bottle of vodka between us.

At some point, we gave up playing Quarters and turned to another drinking game popular with high school and college students looking to get blitzed.

“Okay, okay.” Samantha taps the tabletop while pursing her lips thoughtfully. “I’ve got it. Never have I ever... gone skinny dipping in the Pacific West swimming pool.”

“That was one time.” Groaning, I push myself up to a seated position and raise the bottle of vodka to my lips. “How did you even find out about it?”

“Everyone knew.”

My eyes widen. “Even the teachers and Dr. K?”

“Especially the teachers and Dr. K.” She narrows her eyes at me playfully. “I heard your dad made a call to sweep it under the rug. As usual.”

“That was a cheap one.”

“And yet still perfectly accurate.” She nods at the bottle. “Go on. Rules are rules. Drink up, Rich Boy.”

I do it with a shake of my head. Rules are rules, as she pointed out. It’s funny how a few hours ago her calling me Rich Boy would’ve set me off. Then again, hours ago, she would have said it with more venom in her tone.

Wiping my lips with the back of my hand, I set the bottle back down between us. “You know, I never asked my dad to call in favors like that.”

Samantha’s eyebrows shoot up. “Oh?”

“I wish he hadn’t. I know that probably seems easy for me to say now that it’s done. But I didn’t want my dad making my path any easier than it already was.”

She pushes herself upright so we’re both facing each other, legs criss-cross applesauce. “I know this is going to sound bitchy—”

“Something I’ve never heard from you before.”

She snorts. “If you didn’t or don’t want your dad’s help, then why do you accept it?”

“What? Am I supposed to tell him to fuck off?”

“You can choose whatever words you like.” She studies me in that piercing way of hers that could make a lesser person shrivel up under its heat.

It’s a good thing I’m not a lesser person. I’m Zack fucking Strovers. And that... Well, at one time, that meant something in these hallowed halls.

“But I suppose I shouldn’t have taken a job from my dad. Right?”

“It’s your life.” Samantha lifts a shoulder. “But it seems to me that if you didn’t want to have your dad breathing down



your neck all the time, you might step away from him.”

“You mean, I should get out of his shadow.”

“You’re not in his shadow. You’re just... not standing completely on your own.”

“Samantha Wingfield. Here to drop another truth bomb.” I rest a hand on her knee to soften my delivery. “I know what you mean, though. Poor little Rich Boy.”

“I know no one has it perfect.” Samantha pulls herself up so we’re facing each other. “But from where I was sitting—a mom working overtime to scrape together rent money, a dad who couldn’t be counted on to send child support, and me flipping burgers when I wasn’t studying my ass off to save money for college—your life seemed pretty close to perfection.”

The picture Samantha paints of her high school looks so different now through that lens. I always remember her hustling. But I never gave much consideration as to why she did. I knew she lived in a little two-bedroom apartment with her mom, but I didn’t think about how hard they both worked to pay the rent.

“You must have thought I was a spoiled asshole.”

She starts to speak, but I hold up my hand before she says anything. I don’t need her to placate me by softening the truth.

“In comparison, I had everything handed to me. Private lessons. A country club membership. Admission to some of the best universities. An instant job offer from one of the top real estate firms in California.” I scratch the back of my head. “All signed, sealed, and delivered by Papa Strovers.”

“But I suppose having an overbearing dad who was trying to control your life might not be much better than having one who didn’t care if you aced your classes or won Model UN negotiations.”

I give a half-grin at that. “You mean coming in second place.”

She rolls her eyes. “One of these days, we’re going to find that plaque and settle the issue once and for all.”

We fall silent as we both seem to take a moment to consider the weightier subjects we’ve just discussed. The only sound is the ticking of the oversized clock hanging over the circulation desk. Counting away the seconds that pass. Each second brings us closer to the moment the janitor will come and let us out of here.

Samantha’s shoulders rise and fall as she takes a deep breath. “For what it’s worth, I always thought you were smart.”

“You just thought I had it easier than you.”

She presses her lips together and gives a short nod.

“That’s fair.” I pull my legs up and rest my arms across my knees. “For what it’s worth, I don’t know if I would’ve worked half as hard as I did if I hadn’t been competing with you.”

“That’s something we have in common then.” She gives a sheepish grin. “I sometimes feel like I’ve still been competing with you all this time. It’s probably why I was so obsessed with making this reunion weekend as perfect as possible.”

“To prove once and for all that you were better than me?” I chuckle. “If you only knew.”

“Knew what?”

Part of me wants to tell her that I always knew she was better and more deserving of praise than I was. But admitting that would probably lead to me admitting to something else. Something I don’t think she’d thank me for telling her.

A loud thud makes both of us jump. Samantha gives a little yelp and moves closer to me. I instinctively wrap my arm around her. My pounding heart eases slightly knowing that—no matter what—I have her close, so I can protect her.

“What was that?” she whispers. The trembling in her usually confident voice makes my chest ache.

I shake my head and lean to the side, trying to listen more closely. We aren’t left waiting long. Another thud rings

through the library. This time, it's accompanied by the faint blowing of air.

We both look up at the vent overhead.

I rub her arm but don't release my hold on her. "I guess they didn't turn everything off completely for the summer."

"It's probably on a timer to keep the humidity from ruining the furniture and books." She takes a deep breath. "I suppose we should try to get some rest."

"I suppose so."

Taking the hint, I let my arm drop. I wait for her to slide off the table and go back to her side of the library.

Instead, she lays back down on the table. She pats the empty space next to her. "Come on. I'd hate for you to miss out on your beauty sleep."

"Are you saying I need it?"

She just arches an eyebrow in that way of hers. I'm still grinning as I settle in beside her and close my eyes. It isn't long before her breathing slows into a deep, even pattern.

It takes me longer to fall asleep. My mind is racing with everything that's happened tonight and everything that's changed.

One thing is clear. I like Samantha. A lot. I always have. I was just too stubborn and stupid to admit that every one of our arguments was the equivalent of me pulling her hair on the playground.

The question is, how does Samantha feel about me? Have I done enough to change the way she sees and thinks about me? Or will I always be the poor little rich boy she's racing to the finish line?

I must fall asleep at some point. Because the next time I open my eyes, a faint pre-dawn light glows through the windows. But I don't look outside or even past the other side of the table. I can't see past the mess of Samantha's thick blonde hair.

Sometime during the night, we moved closer to each other. Now, she's curled up against me. Her back to my chest. Her head resting on my outstretched arm.

And her soft, luscious ass is pressed squarely against my painfully hard cock.

## EIGHT

### SAMANTHA

Before I even open my eyes, I sense that I'm not alone. My spine tenses and my eyes fly open.

In the soft pre-dawn light, I see the Pacific West library. I remember. I was stuck here overnight when the door somehow locked. I wasn't stuck here alone.

And a certain part of my overnight cellmate's body is making its presence known right now.

For a brief second—and just one second—I consider pushing my behind back into Zack. I could always pretend I was stretching and forgot where I was and who was lying beside me. But considering that we ended up not only sleeping next to each other but snuggling, that's probably more than enough shock for one morning.

Besides, who knows how everything will be between us in the cold light of day? Our temporary truce from last night could be over.

After our time together, after the way he opened up to me more last night, it's hard to think that we could go back to the animosity of before. I, for one, feel like we buried a lot of demons.

It doesn't hurt that he acknowledged how hard I've worked for everything I've had.

"Samantha," his deep, low voice whispering my name sets my heart to fluttering. "Are you awake?"

I swallow hard. “Yeah.”

“Could you do me a favor?”

“What is it?”

He chuckles, and my pulse speeds up even more. “I should’ve known better than to ask you to do something without spelling out the specifics first.”

“I’m still waiting.”

He sighs, but it isn’t long-suffering, like the ones I’m used to him giving. It’s easier. More playful. Maybe the truce from last night will be more long-lasting.

And maybe—just maybe—it’s up to me to decide whether or not it lasts forever.

For the first time, I realize his arm is wrapped around my waist. As if he’s been protecting me all night. It’s a sweet thought that makes my throat ache. Instead of waiting for him to tell me what he wants, I turn to face him.

In the pale light, I see his formerly well-groomed light beard is looking a little worse for the wear. But his eyes are bright and his lips curve up into a half grin upon seeing me. He’s never looked better.

“Well?” I ask, my voice cracking ever so slightly, betraying my attempt to play coy. “You have my attention now.”

“Do I?”

I return his grin. “You have my undivided attention.”

“Good.” His hand strokes my back gently, and goosebumps pop up on my arms. Then he slides his arm out from around me, leaving me cold and oddly naked. “Because there’s something I’ve been wanting to do. Before we get out of here and have to face the real world.”

“What’s that?”

“First things first.” He cups my cheek and my breath quickens. “Are you awake?”

I nod.

“And clear-headed?”

I rub my lips together. “Yes.”

“Good.” His thumb slides along the curve of my jaw making my heart pound faster. “Because I want both of us to remember this.”

He leans forward, and I move instinctively toward him. We’ve been tip-toeing around doing this all night. Heck, we’ve probably been dancing around this since the first time we debated in Model UN or put up our campaign posters during the student election.

It’s like this has been inevitable all along. I can’t think of a reason to stop. At least not a good enough reason.

When our lips are about to touch, Zack pauses. He closes his eyes. “Samantha?”

“Yes?”

“If you don’t want me to kiss you, I need you to tell me now.”

“Okay.” I moisten my lips. “Zack?”

“Yes?”

“I need you to kiss me. Now. Before I change my mind.”

His eyes pop open, and his grin is back. “Thank God.”

Zack slides his hand to cradle the back of my head, his fingers sliding into my tangled mess of hair. Every inch of my body is aware of every inch of his as anticipation races through me.

At the first touch of his lips, I close my eyes and sink into their firm strength. We’re touching, just barely, and already I feel as though I’m moments away from coming apart.

His thumb strokes the side of my face, while his other arm pulls me closer. I’m helpless to resist as every inch of my body screams to be even more intimately acquainted with him.

I'm not just tired of fighting this latent pull toward him. I'm eager to explore.

So I kiss him back. I apply more pressure, allowing my own fingers to lace in his hair and dig into his side.

He makes a low sound. Almost like a gasp or a groan. It's music to my ears.

Correctly reading my cues, he deepens the kiss. Our lips move against each other. Softly nibbling and gently encouraging each other to keep exploring.

Somewhere in my head, I can't believe this is happening. That Zack Strovers is kissing me. That I'm kissing him. But with every second and every touch, it's a voice that's getting quieter. Especially when nothing has ever come close to feeling as good or right as this right now.

I don't want this to end.

On that, I part my lips slightly so I can nibble on his bottom lip. This time, there's no doubting his groan. He grips my ass, pulling me even more closely against him as his tongue touches mine.

Everything is a blur. A sweet, intoxicating blur. I'm used to having a thousand thoughts flying through my head all the time, but right now they're silent. There's only us and this kiss and the sense of peace and contentment it brings.

Peace and contentment from Zack. Who would have guessed?

As our kisses become more passionate and intense, I find myself on my back. The discomfort of the hard, wood surface of the library desk is forgotten as the delightful pleasure of feeling Zack's hard body over mine takes control.

Why have we been fighting this for so long? Why have we just plain fought? Was it always both of us hiding our real feelings for each other? It's hard to say. But the physical and emotional barriers we've always erected between us are long gone now.



I slide my hands under Zack's shirt. The muscles of his back contract under my fingers as he trails kisses along my jaw. My body is fluid with desire, I can't resist pushing my pelvis up slightly so I can feel even more of him.

I don't just want to feel more of him. I want to feel all of him.

We're so consumed by the kiss and each other's touch, that we don't hear the sound of the library door unlocking or it creaking open. It isn't until the jingle of the janitor's keys grows louder that we both freeze.

"Shit," I whisper.

"Shit," Zack says back.

He rolls off of me, and I push myself upright. I run my hand over my hair, hoping to smooth it down with little success.

At least we aren't still about to dry hump each other as the janitor rounds the corner.

"Whoa," he calls out. "What are you doing here? No, don't move."

There's a click and he pulls up a flashlight. Zack and I groan in unison as we cover our eyes from the blinding light.

"It was a mistake," Zack calls out. And I hope he just means us being stuck here. Not what we were doing. "We were with the reunion group on the tour and we got locked in here overnight."

"Hmm." The janitor lowers the light, and I'm still seeing stars for a few seconds. "That's funny. We don't usually lock that door during the summer. I wonder how that happened."

"Your guess is as good as ours," I grumble.

Zack gives a low chuckle, and we exchange a sidelong glance. The twinkle in his eyes nearly takes my breath away. I don't think I have to worry about him thinking our kiss was a mistake.

“If you wouldn’t mind giving us a few minutes,” Zack says, turning back to the janitor, “we’ll pick up our things and be out of your hair.”

The janitor gives a short nod and mumbles something about kids playing pranks as he walks back out of the library. While I retrieve my blazer from the stacks, Zack picks up the quarters and coffee mug from our game.

With the library back to how we found it—or mostly back in order—we stare at each other for long moments. For one of the first times in my life, I’m at a loss for words.

Zack clears his throat. “Are you bringing anyone to the reunion party tonight?”

I blink, startled by the question. “No. I mean, I told my assistant she could come, because she did so much work on it. But no, I’m not bringing a date.”

I really hope that doesn’t sound pathetic. Then again, we were just making out. Oh, God. What if he was planning on bringing someone tonight? What if he has a girlfriend? I keep tabs on his social media and Google alerts, of course, but that doesn’t mean I always know how serious he is with the women he’s photographed alongside.

“Good.” He takes a step closer to me. “Would you like to have a date?”

My belly clenches. “Maybe. What did you have in mind?”

“How about I pick you up at 6:30?”

An influx of joy flows through me. “Maybe you should make it 6. In case there are any last-minute things to do. Table arrangements to fix. Bar tabs to open.”

“Good call.” He leans forward and brushes his lips over my forehead. I nearly pool into a puddle at his feet. “It’s a date then.”

## NINE

### SAMANTHA

When I step out of the hotel, I still can't quite believe Zack is waiting for me. Waiting to take me to our ten-year class reunion. As his date.

With the way he's dressed in a suit, complete with polished shoes, and leaning against his shiny black Mercedes, it looks more like he's taking me to the prom than our reunion.

Still, a date is a date. And he's mine for the night. Barely twenty-four hours after his mere presence felt more like torture than temptation.

As I approach him, Zack's lips part and he gives me a slow once-over. I can practically feel the heat of his stare as it roves over every inch of me from head to toe.

"Looking good, Ms. Wingfield."

A tingle runs up and down my spine, and I shiver.

"Sorry, it must be a little chilly out here." He pushes away from the car and presses his palm to my lower back, sending fresh shivers through me. "I'd be remiss if I didn't get Cinderella to the ball on time."

He opens the car door and helps me in. Chivalry from Zack Strovers. I never would have expected that. Then again, I wouldn't have expected most of this.

After he settles in the driver's seat and buckles up, Zack reaches for my hand. I flinch a little out of habit.

“Is this okay?” He rubs his thumb over the pulse on my wrist.

“Yeah.” The single word comes out breathy.

“Are you sure? Because it seemed like you—”

“I was just surprised.” I shift my body slightly so my legs and body are facing more toward him. “Every time I think I have you figured out, you do something so unexpected.”

“Good. I’ve been trying to catch you off guard for years now.”

“Well, your practice is paying off.”

He smirks at that.

We arrive at the school in almost no time at all. He casts me a sidelong glance.

“Back to the scene of the crime.” His brows knit together. “No, that’s not quite right. What was it Mr. Matthews used to say to us before our Model UN events?”

I cock my head to the side. “Into the breach?”

“That’s right.” He raises our linked hands to his lips. “What do you say, Sammy? Will you head into the breach with me?”

I take a shaky breath and nod. “Let’s do it.”

He’s still holding my hands as we enter the school. Though we’re the first of our classmates to arrive—of course—there’s a light flurry of activity as the caterers and bartenders hired for the evening finish setting up. I spot my assistant, Allegra, talking with one of the vendors.

I squeeze Zack’s hand and he looks at me, his eyes dark and dreamy. Need pools between my thighs. If he keeps looking at me like that, I don’t know how I’m going to get through the night without pushing him against a wall and making out with him.

“What’s up?” he asks, reminding me that I drew his attention for a reason.

“I need to go check in with my assistant.”

He nods and winks at me. “Hurry back.”

My knees only wobble a little as I cross the room. Allegra flashes me a bright smile as I reach her. “You look gorgeous, Ms. Wingfield. And if you don’t mind my saying”—she lowers her voice conspiratorially—“your date doesn’t look so bad either.”

I glance back over my shoulder and grin at Zack, looking impossibly handsome as ever and every bit as at ease in a suit as he was in his jeans.

“Yeah, he’s not so bad.”

She gives a little giggle, that reminds me that despite her almost scary efficiency and maturity, she’s still a young woman. “How did the two of you end up here together? I got the impression you weren’t the best of friends.”

“That’s a great question with a not-so-simple answer. We’ll have to grab a drink when all of this is done.”

“Ooh, a storytime. I love it.” She gives me a light nudge in the ribs. “Now, go on. Enjoy yourself tonight. I have things covered here.”

“And here I was thinking I was your boss.” I give her an affectionate squeeze before leaving to take her advice.”

“Hey, you,” Zack grins at me. “Everything good?”

“Everything’s great.”

“I’m glad to hear it, because...” He laces his fingers with mine. “I was thinking...”

“Those are dangerous words.”

“You have no idea.” He raises our linked hands to his lips and brushes his lips over my knuckles, sending a ripple of excitement through me. “I was thinking it’s a shame we didn’t get to finish what we started in the library.”

My belly clenches. “Did you have something in mind?”

“I have lots of things in mind. But first, how about we reconvene somewhere more private?”

He trails his lips to the inside of my wrist.

“Where?” The word comes out breathy. It’s no wonder. It’s only through sheer willpower that I stay standing on both feet with the havoc he’s wreaking on my senses.

“Come with me.”

Looking over his shoulder—as if he expects a security guard or one of our former teachers to pop out and reprimand us—he races down a hallway, taking me with him. My heart pounds in my chest, and my cheeks ache from smiling.

Zack stops suddenly outside the door of the classroom where we used to meet for Model UN. With his free hand, he tries the handle and it turns. “Excellent. I was worried it might be locked.”

“I’d say we’ve had our share of locked doors this weekend.”

“And I’ll say we’ve done enough talking this weekend.”

I give a little yelp as he pushes my back against the door. But then his lips crash against mine, and I melt into him and his touch.

He captures my bottom lip between his teeth and a jolt of pleasure rushes through me, settling deep in my core.

“Fuck me,” he hisses, nibbling on the edge of my mouth. “You’re even more delicious than I remember.”

“Mmm.” I slide my hands up his chest and over his shoulders, clinging to him. “I thought you said we were done talking.”

“Maybe I changed my mind.” He peppers kisses along my cheek, and my toes curl in my shoes. “Maybe I want to do a lot more talking.”

He cups the side of my breast and I gasp at the fresh wave of delight. “What should we talk about?”

“Politics.” He grazes his teeth along the line of my jaw. “The economy.” He takes a nip at my neck. “How fucking sexy you are, and how crazy these curves of yours make me.”

He pushes his hips against mine to illustrate the point and my eyes roll back. Through my dress and his pants, I can feel every inch of his hard length. I can't resist pushing myself even closer to feel more of him as he recaptures my lips. We moan into each other's mouths at the sweet, delectable friction.

Angling my head to deepen the kiss, I slide a hand down to cup Zack's behind, grinding against him.

He hisses again through his teeth. “Hell, I have half a mind to have you right here.”

“I wouldn't argue with you.”

“That would be a first.” He playfully nips my lip and groans regretfully. “Unfortunately, I didn't come prepared to party.”

I huff in disappointment, though I have to appreciate his honesty. And responsibility. Old me would have assumed Zack would still try to talk me into having his way with me. Protection be damned. But I would have been wrong. So wrong.

And for that, I'm grateful. I've never been happier to be mistaken.

“Maybe we can sneak out of here early,” I suggest as I kiss my way across his jaw. “The bed in my hotel room is comfortable. And big.”

“You want to leave the party you planned early?” He slides a hand down to mold the curves of my hips and behind. “I never thought I'd live to see the day you'd pick distraction over duty.”

“You're a pretty good distraction.”

He chuckles. “Well, when you put it like that, yes. Let's leave early. But first.” He moves his hand back down my hip and under the hem of my skirt.

I tense even as fresh desire ripples through me. “What are you doing?”

“Just because I can’t fully distract you, it doesn’t mean I can’t give you a taste.”

My next words for him die on my lips and flee from my head as he slips a finger under my panties to trace the seam at the apex of my thighs. I cling to him as he suckles on my neck and the exposed skin of my décolletage all while exploring me with his fingers.

He strokes and teases, stirring the desire in me with an expertise I can’t help but appreciate. Especially as it arouses me to greater levels with every passing second.

My breaths grow shorter. More urgent. They turn into pants as he stirs a need inside of me as old as time.

“Are you going to come for me?” He captures my earlobe in his mouth, adding a new level of ecstasy. “Are you going to scream my name when you do?”

He applies more pressure to my nub and gets his answer. I cry out for him as I fall over the edge and into a deep pool of pleasure.

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Smoothing down Zack’s lapel while he straightens his tie, I bite my lip to keep from smirking.

He arches an eyebrow. “What’s that look about?”

“I was just thinking.”

“Uh oh.”

I roll my eyes at him, but this time it’s with a grin. “I was just thinking what a difference a day makes.”

“Indeed. Though, for me, it’s more like years and a day.”

I frown in the middle of smoothing my hair back so it has less of a we-were-fooling-around look to it. “What do you mean?”



“I mean...” He wraps his arms around my waist and pulls me closer. “That’s how long it took for me to make you like me.”

“You didn’t care if I liked you then.”

“Actually, I cared more than you’ll ever know.” Face sober, he brushes his lips over mine. “You were worth the wait.”

Throat tight, I can’t muster up any words. So I lean up and pull him in for another kiss. I have to fix my lipstick—and hair—again when we finish.

“Come on,” Zack takes my hand with that smile of his that now makes my heart race. “Let’s go turn some heads.”

The reunion is in full swing as we return to the gymnasium. As we pass under the “WELCOME BACK, WILDCATS” banner, Zack brings his lips close to my ears.

“You were right. It does look perfect now that it’s a quarter inch to the right.”

I bump back into him, my behind rubbing against his hips. Just missing a crucial part of his anatomy.

“I can think of something else I’d like to see a quarter inch to the right.”

I move myself against him again, but he grabs my hips to still the teasing motion. “Careful there. If you keep that up we’ll end up missing the whole reunion.”

“Maybe that wouldn’t be such a bad thing.”

He all but growls at me through clenched teeth. I’m giggling as he grabs my hand again and walks with more urgency.

We do draw plenty of looks and more than a few wide-eyed stares as he pulls me onto the dance floor. Chuckling, he rests one hand low on my back while the other holds one of mine close to his chest.

“You’d think they’d never seen two people dance,” he says.

“More like they’ve never seen a cat and a dog quit fighting long enough to make nice.”

“Am I the cat or the dog in this situation?”

“If you even have to ask—”

He cuts me off by spinning me around until I’m laughing every bit as hard as him. Our current argument is forgotten, or at least settled, he slows us back down so we’re swaying in time with the music. He rests his chin against the side of my head and for the moment, I’m perfectly content. I close my eyes and grin at myself, savoring everything about where I am and who I’m with.

There’s nothing—not a thing—that could spoil my happiness at this moment.

“Excuse me.” My eyes fly open. Zack and I both freeze in place and turn our heads as our former teacher, Mr. Matthews, approaches us.

There’s no denying the surprise on his face and my cheeks flush.

Zack just grins. “Was there something you wanted, Mr. Matthews?”

“I was going to remind the both of you that this is a high school dance, and we do have rules.” He holds his hands about a foot apart.

“I’d like to see you enforce that rule.” Zack laughs and strokes his thumb over my knuckles. “No one followed those rules even when we were in high school.”

“Fair enough. Besides, it’s so good to see the two of you getting along, I suppose I can let it slide this time.”

“Good.” Zack tightens his hold on me and starts moving again to the music.

“Trust the two of you to still keep each other on your toes all these years later.” Mr. Matthews grins good-naturedly. “Frankly, I’m surprised the two of you are even still speaking together.”

“Well, we’ve come a long way.” My heart skips a beat as Zack squeezes my hip.

“I can see that.” Mr. Matthews shakes his head. What he says next knocks the breath clear out of me. “You know, Zack, if you’d just turned in that one case study at the end of the semester, the valedictorian spot might have been too close to call.”

## TEN

### ZACK

Samantha stiffens in my arms, and I wince. Fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck.

“It’s not what you think,” I blurt out and immediately wince.

She blinks rapidly, further proof I’ve said the wrong thing. As if I needed it. Taking a slow step back from me and shaking my hands from her shoulder and waist, Samantha looks as if she might bolt at any second.

From his spot beside us, Mr. Matthews pulls a face. He looks as if he’s about to apologize when our former classmate Molly suddenly appears at his side and pulls him away. It’s for the best. The fewer witnesses we have for this conversation, the better.

Noting the curious glances we’re once again drawing, I take hold of Samantha’s elbow and guide her to the side of the dance floor. She’s still staring at me in silent stupor, she follows along. I grab a glass of punch from the refreshment table and hand it to her in another attempt to make our audience lose its interest.

Absently, Samantha raises the glass to her lips and takes a sip. I watch her closely. I can take care of this. I can still make this work.

“Samantha, it really isn’t as bad as it sounds.”

Her eyes flash back up to greet mine. “Isn’t it?”

“Well, I—” Shit. I don’t know where to begin.

Samantha eyes me suspiciously.

“I need you to answer a couple of questions for me.” Her words are slow and measured, a sure sign she’s trying to keep her calm. Which isn’t necessarily a good thing. Sometimes she’s like a storm. Calm and eerily quiet before it wreaks havoc.

“Of course.” I moisten my lips. I wish I could pull her back into my arms. To soothe us both. To remind her that—no matter what the answers are to her questions—I’ve always had her best interest at heart.

Because I’ve always cared about her. Always. I had a dumbass way of showing it. Like the cliché of the boy on the playground pulling the little girl’s hair. I fought with Samantha, because arguing with her made me feel more alive than anything in my life. Her fire and passion added color to my otherwise beige existence of Saturday mornings golfing at the country club.

“Okay.” She takes a deep breath, her eyes unblinking. “Did you or did you not fail to turn in your final assignment to Mr. Matthews class?”

I swallow hard. “I didn’t turn it in.”

She nods. “And did you not turn it in knowing it dropped your grade?” Before I can answer she holds up a hand. “To clarify, did you know it would drop your grade so your GPA would technically be weighted lower than mine?”

“I couldn’t know exactly how much lower it would be. But I assumed it would be enough.”

Her face crumbles. “Oh my God. I’m such an idiot.”

“No.” I shake my head emphatically, staring into her eyes. Silently pleading her to believe me, even if it’s hard for her to hear my words.

But she covers her face, hiding her eyes. Hiding the crumpled expression of disbelief and disappointment. And hurt. It’s the hurt that knocks the air out of me.

“I can explain. I—”

“No.” She drops her hands to her sides. Her face is pale and her eyes are red and shiny. As if she’s trying her best to hold back tears.

“Samantha, I—”

“No,” she says again. More emphatically. “There’s nothing you could possibly say—no explanation—that will make this okay.”

“But—”

“Don’t you get it?” Her voice breaks at the end, piercing my heart with the shards of it. “We spent four years of high school competing with each other. And you always won. Always. The class presidency. Homecoming royalty. Even the damn Model UN competition.”

“I thought the jury was still out on that.”

Her eyes go practically glacial. It’s almost a relief. As much as I hate her hating me, selfishly I’d rather she be full of rage instead of pain. I’m used to the rage.

“But graduating at the top of our class. Being the valedictorian was the only time I beat you. The only time I won. The only time I could prove that I was as good as the rest of you, even if I didn’t have designer jeans or a fancy car.”

Her bottom lip trembles before she catches it. She takes a deep breath through her nose. I’m barely able to breathe. The guilt weighing on my chest is so heavy. It’s suffocating.

More composed, she says, “That one victory, and everything it represented, gave me the drive to keep working my ass off in college. It gave me the confidence to start my own career. But now... Now I find out it was all a lie.”

“Not necessarily.” I start to reach for her, but she takes another step back. I ball my hands into fist at my side to keep from trying to hold her again. Even though it’s killing me. “You still might have finished first in our class.”

“Maybe.” She lifts her chin a little higher. “But we’ll never know. Will we?”

“Samantha...”

“Stop. Please. I—I—I need to get out of here.”

Spinning on her heel, she leaves me on the dance floor. I want to go after her. I want to tell her that we can put this behind us. That it’s in the past.

But I know Samantha well enough to know that if I follow her now, there will be no chance of a reconciliation. It’s best if I give her time and space while I try to figure out some way to make this up to her.

If I can make this up to her.

I start to reach for another glass of punch, but head to the bar instead. I’m going to need something stronger to get through the rest of the night. Now that I’ve driven Samantha out of the party she worked her ass off to put together, I at least owe it to her to make sure things run smoothly now.

“I really am a piece of shit,” I mumble into my glass of bourbon.

“That’s an interesting pep talk you’re giving yourself son.”

My spine stiffens as my father orders a bourbon for himself. Glass in hand, he raises it to me in a mocking toast.

“Then again, considering you drove your dance partner off the floor, I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised.” He arches an eyebrow.

“What are you doing here?”

“Just checkin in. Our company did pay for the open bar.” He glances around the room. “Any chance that little spitfire friend of yours with that curvy ass is coming back?”

“No.” I clench my jaw. “I don’t think so.”

“That’s a shame. I was hoping to buy her a drink.”

“It’s an open bar.”

“I meant later. Somewhere more private.”

Seething, I suck in a breath through clenched teeth. “You’re unbelievable.”

“What? Just because you weren’t able to seal the deal, you expect me to step aside?” Dad scoffs. “Believe me, if she wanted you, she’d be with you.”

“And you think she’d rather be with you?”

“What can I say? Some women prefer a real man when they can have one. And I can safely say that young lady saw it in me. She can smell it, the way lionesses can pick up on an alpha.”

“That’s where you’re wrong.” I shake my head. “Samantha has your number, and she’s not impressed.”

“By you or me?”

“Either of us.” I take another slow drink of my bourbon, allowing the heat from it to warm my belly. “But there’s one big difference between you and me.”

“Which is?”

“You look at everything—every person—in life as a challenge to be won.”

“Everyone likes winning.” His eyes narrow. “I seem to recall that you claimed a few victories thanks to my help.”

“But I didn’t want your help. I never asked for it.”

“I was just trying to make things easier for you.”

“I didn’t want things to be easier.” I shake my head. “That’s the difference between us. You see life as something to gamify.”

“And how do you see it?”

“I know there’s more to it than winning.” I drain my glass and set it down. “So much more.”



## ELEVEN

### SAMANTHA

“Hey, what gives?” Kat nudges me before reaching for one of the bottles of syrup in the middle of the table. “You look like someone told you the Pancake Gals ran out of baking powder or milk.”

“I’m pretty sure they use a pre-made mix.”

Besides, there’s no concern of us running out. Allegra, my assistant, triple-checked that the crew has enough pancakes to go around if the last ten graduating classes all arrived. She did it without asking, proving she truly is a rock star.

One of these days, Allegra will realize she’s way too talented to be my assistant. I’ll miss her when she’s gone. But I’ll do everything I can to give her the support she needs to take the next step in her career.

Assuming I still have any sway over those kinds of things. Now that I know my first great achievement—and everything I built from it—never really happened. Or, at least, it maybe wouldn’t have. Not if a certain nameless man hadn’t made that decision for both of us.

I sigh. This time there’s no avoiding Kat’s concerned stare. Barely holding in another sigh, I lift my shoulders.

“I think I’m having a bit of an existential crisis.”

She arches an eyebrow. “Over pancakes.”

“I wish it was just over pancakes.” I shake my head. “Have you ever felt like everything you thought you knew is wrong?”

And now nothing makes sense and you have no control over anything in your life?”

“All the time.”

I blink in surprise. “What was that?”

“I said I do. All the time. Everyone does.” She gives a short laugh. “If you’re just now realizing that, you should probably fire your shrink.”

Slightly recovering, I lift my shoulder. “What makes you think I have a shrink?”

“Let’s see. Your dad left when you were little. Your mom—wonderful as she is—was hardly around, because she was always working multiple jobs to support the two of you. You spent most of high school and the years after hating the guy you secretly had a crush on.” Kat taps her fingers as she lists each item. “You make bank now. Plus, we’re California women. You obviously have a therapist.”

As usual, Kat hits everything a little too well on the nose. It would be pointless for me to try to dismiss any of her suggestions. Not when we both know she’s right.

“I didn’t hate Zack.” I press my lips together to keep them from quivering. “He was just my rival.”

She snorts. “Rival. Person you hate. Is there really much difference? Besides, I think we both know that no matter how you felt about him in high school, you see him completely differently now.”

“I don’t know. I think he might be exactly who I thought he was all along. Entitled. Spineless. Manipulating.”

Her eyebrows shoot up. “Spineless and manipulating? That’s a pretty impressive accomplishment for one person to achieve.”

“Yeah, well, Zack is nothing if not impressive.”

“I’m glad you think so.”

My spine stiffens as Zack’s words roll over me. My lower belly also clenches. Even after last night’s big reveal, I can’t

deny that he still has an uncanny ability to stoke my libido.

I turn slowly to face him and stare at his chin. Not daring to lift my gaze to his eyes.

His lips quirk into a half grin. “Hey, Samantha. Kat.”

“El Presidente.” Kat gives a dramatic bow. “What a surprise to see you. I didn’t take you for a pancake feed kind of guy.”

“It was on the official schedule Samantha sent out.”

“And you’re someone who sticks to other people’s schedules?”

“I used to be.” His lips curve down. “I used to go along with one person’s schedule and plan for my life completely. Not because it was the right thing to do. But because it’s what I was expected to do. I let that person make decisions for me. I let them take control of everything I did. I let him use his money and influence to make my life easier with private coaches and tutors. I didn’t bat an eye until I realized he was also using that money and influence to give me accolades I didn’t deserve. Like the class presidency.”

I suck in a breath and meet his gaze then. “Your dad really did fix the elections?”

He nods, his eyes growing impossibly sad. “I didn’t find out until the end of our senior year. I overheard him bragging about it to one of his golf buddies. So the next day, I ‘forgot’ to turn in my final assignment for AP American. That knocked my A down to an A minus.”

“Thus ensuring our friend Samantha finished first in class?” Kat asks.

“Exactly.”

“So you did it to piss off your dad?” I ask.

“No. No.” He shakes his. “No, that wasn’t why I did it.”

“Then why?”

“I did it because I realized if my dad had greased some pockets to get that outcome, he probably did it for others too.

How could I be sure I earned any of my grades based on my own merit and not because he was paying for it?"

"You earned good grades because you were smart."

"I earned them because I wanted to keep up with you." He takes a step toward me and after hesitating a moment he reaches for my hand. I let him take it. "Almost from the moment we met in our Honors English class Freshman year I felt drawn to you."

"Really?"

"Really." He squeezes my hand. "You started arguing with the teacher about the reading list for the class."

"Yeah, I remember that reading list," Kat scoffs. "They were all written by dead white dudes."

At both of our glances she pulls a face. "I think I see someone across the room that I should talk with. I'll see you later."

Once she's gone, I face Zack again. This time it isn't with trepidation or anger. But I'm still too confused by the complete change in everything I thought I knew to feel settled.

"You were drawn to me?" I ask.

"Completely." His grin is back and my heart flutters. "Of course, you wouldn't give me the time of day. So I had to do something to catch your attention."

"Is that why you started competing with me on everything? Because you wanted to get my attention?"

"It seemed better than pulling your hair."

I chuckle at that. "And all this time, I thought you did it because you believed you were better than me."

"It's something I meant to tell you last night." He cups my cheek, and my pounding heart speeds up. "You never had to prove you were better than me. I always knew."

The last of my resistance slips away. While our history is more convoluted than I could have ever imagined, it also isn't as bad. In a way, it's kind of funny. It definitely isn't boring.

I suppose that bodes well for our future.

Our future. Yes, I suppose I do see a future for us. One that will undoubtedly be filled with teasing and competing but equally full of love and laughter.

It'll be surprising and interesting. And there's only one way to find out exactly what will happen.

I link my fingers with his. "Would you want to grab some pancakes? With me?"

"Actually..." He leans closer, moistening his lips. "I was thinking I might like to taste something a little sweeter."

I'm smiling when he pulls me into a kiss. I'm vaguely aware of gasps and one clear cat call, undoubtedly from Kat. But I barely notice it. I'm too busy enjoying the delicious taste of my greatest victory yet.

Somehow, I've captured the heart of the big man on campus. And he's well on the way to stealing mine.

We break apart at last, both of us gasping for breath. Zack presses his lips to my forehead before resting his head against mine. He pulls me closer.

"I know we still have this pancake feed that you've organized, but would you mind if we got out of here?"

I wrap my arms around him and lean against him. "Did you have anywhere special in mind?"

"Actually... Did you drive here?"

"Yeah." I lean back to eye him curiously. "Why?"

"Because I've always kind of had this fantasy." He gives a sheepish look. "I used to see you angry singing in your car in the school parking lot."

"Oh God." I gape at him. "You saw that?"

"Yep."

"More than once?"

"Definitely."

I cringe. "How embarrassing."

“Actually, I found it endearing.” He gives me a squeeze. “Anyway, seeing you be so passionate and fiery in your car, well, I always wondered what it would be like to be in there with you. Having some of that passion unleashed on me.”

My embarrassment slips away. “Why, Mr. Strovers... Are you saying you want to make out in my car?”

“At least to start.” He arches an eyebrow. “And maybe we can see where it goes after that.”

Another jolt of desire pings inside of me. The idea of fooling around in my car with Zack like we’re two teenagers is... well...

“Let me grab my keys.”

## TWELVE

### ZACK

I slide into the passenger seat of Samantha's car and reach for her. After the way things went last night, I wondered if I'd ever get the chance to hold or kiss her again.

I don't want to waste a second of the fresh chance she's given me.

Before I can press my lips to hers, she places both hands on my chest to hold me back.

"What's wrong? Did you change your mind?" My brows knit together and ice floods my veins, carrying panic with me. "We don't have to do anything. We can—"

"I can't believe *I'm* the one saying this to *you*, but calm down." She grins, and relief washes through me. "I was just going to suggest that maybe we move the car to another location."

"Oh." I blink. "Okay."

"It's just that we're sitting in the school's parking lot. I can't help but feel like having Dr. K or Mr. Matthews walk by might kill the mood a little."

The thought of our principal or teacher walking by is almost enough to put a damper on my libido. Almost. "Good call."

"Plus, we never know if your dad might pop by."

"That's not going to happen."

“Oh?” Surprise registers on her face. “Did he have something else going on?”

“I told him to stay away.”

The surprise slips from her place and is replaced by something akin to approval. “Well done, Zack. I always knew you had it in you.”

She moistens her lips, and I no longer care about the potential for an audience. “Fuck it.”

I cup her cheeks as my lips crash against hers. She starts, but only for a moment. Her lips go soft as she clings to my shoulders. Gripping me more tightly as our lips and tongues move in unison.

I slide a hand down the side of her neck and along her shoulder, coming to rest on the side of her breast. She moans into my mouth as I swipe my thumb over her nipple.

It’s all the invitation I need. I move my hand under her shirt and shove the lace of her bra aside so there’s nothing between my fingers and her smooth, sensitive skin. I roll her nipple between my fingers, and her moans turn into breathy gasps.

“God that feels so good.” She grabs my shoulders as I suck on the side of her neck and continue my teasing.

“Just tell me what you like.” I scrape my teeth along her skin and she gasps again.

I want to make her feel good. I need to make her lose control. To show her with my touch exactly what she means to me.

I need to hear her call my name again as I make her come.

I start to reach for the waist of her jeans but she bats my hands away.

“No.” She smirks. “You’ve already had a chance to explore the goods. This time, it’s my turn.”

Before I can protest—or ask what she means—she’s flipping the fly of my jeans open. “Samantha, you don’t have



to—”

The words die on my lips as she slides her hand under my boxer briefs to grip my cock. “Holy fuck.”

She trails her thumb up the length of my shaft, along the almost painfully bulging vein to circle around my tip. Pleasure wracks through me, and I lean my head back against the headrest as it grows.

Samantha wraps her hand around me and pumps her fist up and down. The ebbs of pleasure grow, and I can’t take my eyes off of her as she strokes me again and again.

“That feels so good,” I say.

“I wonder how this might feel then.” She licks her bottom lip and lowers her head.

“Jesus,” I suck in a breath as she takes me in her mouth.

I watch in fascination, sliding my fingers into her blonde curls, as I watch her head bob up and down. Taking more and more of me into her mouth.

It’s an ecstasy, unlike anything I’ve felt before. And it’s too much for me to stand long.

“Baby, hold up. I’m about to come. I can’t hold on much longer.”

Rather than heeding my warning, she twirls her tongue around my tip and tightens the grip of her lips around me. It’s more than I can resist.

My cock jolts in her mouth and a hot stream of cum flows out of me as she sucks me dry.

I once again collapse back against the headrest, taking deep breaths to calm my pounding heart.

She raises her head and wipes her lips. They’re still swollen and glistening from giving me my release.

She’s never looked more gorgeous. Or more tempting.

“That was... incredible. You’re incredible.” Even though she’s just given me the best head of my life, I eye her with a

fresh hunger. “But I really do think we should get out of here now.”

“Oh?”

I nod slowly. “Because now I need to fuck you until the neighbors call in a noise complaint.”

Her eyebrows arch. “That sounds like a challenge.”

“Baby...” I trail my thumb over her full bottom lip. “It’s a promise.”

By some miracle, we make it to Samantha’s hotel room at record speed and without getting pulled over. We board the elevator and she hits the button for the top floor and swipes the card granting her private access.

I release a low whistle. “The penthouse. Very nice.”

“I’ve certainly come up in the world.”

“I guess we won’t have to worry about noise complaints from the neighbors.”

“True.” She cocks her head to the side. “I suppose we’ll have to try harder.”

The doors close behind us and we come together again. My fingers dive into her hair. She presses her hips against mine. Our teeth clink as we devour each other as if this is our last meal.

But we’re only getting started.

When the doors open into the foyer of the penthouse suite, I waste no time peeling her PACIFIC WEST HIGH SCHOOL shirt over her head and tossing it aside. My eyes feast hungrily on the swell of her breasts, still covered in white lace.

“Are you just going to keep staring?” she asks.

“Are you always going to give me a hard time?”

“Probably.”

“Good.” Then I press her back against the wall to nibble on the skin above her lace. I suck and tease, savoring every

taste. Knowing how long I've wanted this without ever believing I'd be here.

I pull back only long enough for her to remove my shirt. I don't remember us moving to the bedroom, but somehow I land on my back in the center of her bed.

Never tearing her gaze from mine, she unbuttons her jeans and shimmies out of them. She loops her fingers through the sides of her panties and starts to pull them down.

"No." I reach for her. "Let me."

Switching places, I press her down into the bed as I sample every inch of her skin with my fingers and tongue. She's practically demanding I stop teasing by the time I slowly peel the panties down her hips.

"Damn it, Samantha." I slide my thumb through her curves, along her seam, making her suck in a breath. "You really are spectacular."

Not waiting for a response, I lower my head and my lips join my fingers. I slide my tongue through her folds, and we moan in unison.

"Oh, Zack," she sighs, clutching the back of my head, her fingers weaving through my hair. "I had no idea..."

I hum in amusement, which she seems to like, based on the way her thighs clench against my head. Rather than reciting the ABCs like an amateur, I whisper all of the reasons I've been virtually obsessed with her for the better part of fifteen years into her, applying more pressure with my tongue as I do.

Her gasps turn into pants and her pants turn into demands until she buckles up against me, screaming, "Zack, Zack, Zack," louder than bleachers full of people cheering me on.

I keep it up until she falls back against the bed, and her breath returns. Lifting my head, I meet her gaze.

"So, what's the verdict? Do I get an A in oral?"

She answers by pushing me onto my back and straddling me. I greet her lips eagerly, groaning when her bare, hard nipples rub against the hair on my chest. Appreciating the way

her curvy behind is pressing against my cock, which is once again standing at attention.

“Condom?” she asks.

“In my wallet.”

She nods and disappears for a second. In a flash, she’s back on the bed, ripping the wrapper open and tossing the foil aside. Taking me in her hand again, she slides the condom down over my length.

Then she climbs on top of me, positioning herself so I’m pressed against her entrance.

“Are you ready?” she asks.

It’s all I can do to nod, and my lips part in wonder as she slowly lowers herself onto me. Taking more and more of me inside of her. Her eyelids flutter and her mouth forms an ‘O’ as she does.

I hope it feels as good to her as it does to me.

Once she’s taken all of me inside of her, she opens her eyes again. Both of us grin, as if to say, “Can you believe it?”

The funny thing is, while I always wondered if I’d ever get to know Samantha like this, I never gave up thinking about it or hoping.

Now that it’s here—now that we’re here together—it’s better than anything I could have imagined.

Planting her hands on my chest, Samantha starts rocking against me. Nearly overcome by the movement, I grip her hips, raising my own to meet her movement for movement.

Samantha rides me, taking command of me like she always has. But she’ll get no complaints from me. It’s a pure joy to watch her lose herself and come undone on my cock.

Her movements become more erratic. She digs her fingers into my chest. And with another cry, I feel her come around me. I hold back on my own release, savoring the feel of hers.

As she comes down, I flip us over, lifting her leg so I can drive into her.

“You.” I pump again. “Feel.” I angle my hips. “Like home.”

“So do you.”

I lose myself then, emptying myself and all of the feelings I’ve carried for so long. I collapse on top of her, resting my forearms along both sides of her so I won’t crush her as we both try to catch our breaths.

This, right here, is better than anything I’ve ever experienced in my life. And it’s all ours.

“I love you,” I say, easing out of her. Pulling her into my arms, I kiss her forehead and her cheek, then the side of her neck. “I’ve loved you for so long. I can’t believe you’re mine now.”

She pulls back slightly to arch her eyebrow in that way that’s always driven me crazy. “I’m yours?”

“Yep. And I’m yours.”

“I have no say in the matter?”

“Not really.” I give her a goofy grin, practically brimming over with happiness. “There’s no getting around it now.”

“Well if it’s settled—”

“Believe me, it is.”

“Then I suppose I have no choice but to accept that you’re mine and I’m yours.” She snuggles closer to me. “Who would have thought?”

“Probably no one.” I wrap my arms more tightly around her. “Then again, Kat didn’t seem so surprised.”

“Kat thinks everyone who bickers is secretly in love with each other.” Samantha chuckles lightly. “It’s like something out of one of Gabby’s romance novels.”

“No shit?” I blink in surprise. “Gabby, the girl who used to write scathing editorials that put the school administration on notice, writes romances?”

“Mmm hmm. And she’s amazing at it.”

“Steamy ones?”

I can feel her lips curve up against my neck. A fresh jolt of desire shoots straight to my cock. “Very.”

Something about the way she says it piques my competitive streak. “Steamier than what we’ve done?”

“That’s subjective. I mean, I can’t remember if any of her characters have been finger-banged in a classroom. That was pretty hot.”

I sputter and nearly choke on my own tongue. Samantha strokes my chest soothingly while I catch my breath. But her gentle touch doesn’t do anything to calm me. If anything, her caresses—and the memory of our interlude before the ill-fated reunion party—are only getting me more hot and bothered.

Much as I’m enjoying it, I cover her hand to still the motion. I can’t have her touching me like that if I’m going to keep carrying on a conversation.

“Speaking about things people never expected,” I get out at last. “I never would have imagined that Ms. Samantha Wingfield would ever say something like ‘finger bang’.”

“Why?”

“You just always seemed so prim and proper.”

“Right, because prim and proper ladies get into arguments with boys who have memberships to country clubs.”

“Boys whose fathers have memberships to country clubs and forced them to attend.”

She nods as if conceding the point. “Still, arguing isn’t prim or proper.”

“Maybe not. But you were usually right.”

“So are you finally admitting I won the Model UN championship senior year.”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa. Let’s not get crazy. Especially about facts.”

“Which are?”

“That I won.”

She rolls her eyes. “Any other facts you’d care to share?”

“Maybe a few.” My lips curve up. I could get used to spending every day of my life like this. Sure, we’re still lobbing arguments back and forth. Only, now we’re striking to tease instead of burn. Plus, we’re both naked. That’s a definite improvement. “Here’s a fact for you: You, Samantha Wingfield are the most amazing woman in the world.”

“Stop it. You’ll make me blush.”

“You are.” I nibble on her chin. “You’re the smartest person I know.” I kiss her nose. “You’re the hardest-working person I’ve ever met.” I brush my lips along the corner of her mouth. “You’re... the whole package. It’s no wonder I fell in love with you.”

“I still can’t believe you love me.”

“Well, you better get used to it. Because I plan to spend the upcoming decade until our next reunion showing just how much I do.”

Her eyebrows shoot up. “Only the next decade?”

“That’s just the starting point.” I kiss her again. This time capturing those sweet lips of hers fully. She meets me kiss for kiss until we’re both once again breathless. “What do you say to that?”

“I’d say you strike one hell of a bargain, Zack Strovers.” Her eyes light up and my heart thuds even harder. “What do you say we celebrate the terms of our agreement?”

“What did you have in mind?”

She tugs her hand free from mine and lets it trail down my chest and abs. I suck in a breath when she grips me in her fist.

“You always were a natural-born leader, baby,” I hiss. “Lead the way.”

# EPILOGUE



TEN YEARS LATER...

### SAMANTHA

“It has to be in here, right?” I whisper as Zack and I sneak into the Pacific West High School library.

Our twenty-year class reunion is in full swing. While our former classmates are busy drinking and showing off pictures of their kids, we figured no one would miss us while we settle an old score. One twenty years in the waiting.

A score for a score, if you will.

“I mean, we’ve waited long enough.”

“Don’t worry.” Zack squeezes my hand. “Dad says the new principal assured him the trophy cases are all repaired and fully stocked. Including the nerdy one in the library.”

I arch an eyebrow. “Was that the principal’s words or your dad’s?”

“Who do you think?”

I roll my eyes, but can’t quite keep myself from grinning. Some things will never change. And while Mr. Strovers—who I still don’t quite feel comfortable calling dad even after nine years of marriage to Zack—has come a long way in some regards, he still has his moments of ridiculousness.

At least now instead of using his money to try to pave the way for his son—or grandchildren—now he’s just giving money to the school out of the goodness of his heart. Or so he assures us.

Besides, it's not like it would do him much good to line any pockets now that Zack, our kids, and I are all happily settled in the Bay Area. Mr. Strovers had balked a little when Zack left his real estate firm. But I know he's proud of everything Zack has built in his own business.

"And you won't be mad, right?" I ask, gripping his arm with my free hand.

"Mad?" His brows knit together, making him look even sexier. Especially now that the first strands of gray are starting to work their way into the hair at his temple. "What would I be mad about?"

"When you see the evidence, once and for all, that I won Model UN our senior year."

"Technically, I think it's called placing first. And no. I won't be mad when we see the results." His lips twitch. "Especially because I know I'll be the winner."

"Ugh!"

We bicker back and forth a little as we continue our walk through the library, but it's all in good fun. We may be in love and married with a family, but the two of us are who we are. It would be boring if we agreed on everything.

I'm just teasing him about the time he went into a meeting with an important investor without looking in the mirror—and ended up pitching with breast milk on his shoulder from burping our first child—when we reach the "nerd" trophy case.

Narrowing my eyes, I search the case.

Zack sighs. "Baby, I told you to bring your glasses. You'll give yourself a headache trying to read all of those names without them."

"I will not." I wave off his remark. But mostly because... "I don't see it."

"That's why you need your glasses. The doctor says—"

"No." I tug on his hand and point at the case. "I don't see the Model UN plaque."

“No shit.” He lifts his shoulder. “What are you going to do?”

I narrow my eyes. “Why do I have the suspicion you’re behind this?”

“Are you accusing me of theft? Burglary is a steep charge, Ms. Wingfield-Strovers.”

I shake my head. “You’re unbelievable. You really didn’t want to be wrong.”

“Maybe I was trying to save *you* from being wrong.”

I frown. “Did you come and see it without me?”

“Of course, not.” He cups my cheek with his free hand. “I’d never go behind your back like that.”

“But you would ask a friend to make off with it?”

His lips twitch. “Maybe.”

“Zack Strovers.” I shake my head. “You are—”

A loud creak rings through the library as the main doors close shut. It’s followed immediately by the unmistakable sound of a lock turning.

I suck in a breath. “Oh my God. Did we just...”

“Get stuck in the library. Overnight. Again. Only this time our kids are staying with your mom. And we’re all alone.” He shrugs. “Like I said before, what are you going to do?”

My lips curve up. “You really are diabolical sometimes.”

“I learned from the best.” He raises our linked hands to his lips to brush a kiss over my knuckles. “So, what do you think? Should we raid the teacher’s desk for booze or play a round of quarters first?”

“Actually,” I slide a hand up his chest suggestively. “I had something else in mind.”

Then I lean up on my toes and kiss him. I suppose we’ll just have to wait till the next reunion to figure out who really won. Tonight, it doesn’t matter. Tonight, we’re both winners.

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For more banter and fun from Samantha and Zack, [click here](#) for more FREE bonus content. Check out the next story in the Curvy Girls' Class Reunion series, [\*The Wallflower and the Class Clown\*](#).

Want to see what happens when Samantha's assistant Allegra St. Clair and her sister Aurora inherit a Christmas shop? Read [\*The Grinch Around the Corner\*](#) and *The Grinch Next Door*.

Thanks for reading!

# ABOUT KATE TILNEY

**Kate Tilney** is the author of more than 100 steamy romances. A Midwest girl whose heart is in the mountains, her stories almost always include a curvy heroine finding true love and a happily ever after with a mountain man or firefighter.

When she isn't looking up pictures of bearded men in flannel shirts (all for research, of course), Kate can be found making TikToks or curling up with one of her cats in front of a fake fireplace, pretending she's in a cabin.

[Join Kate Tilney's Mountain Man \(Etc\) Fan Club](#), her private reader group and follow her on [TikTok](#) for more fun content.



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**Lana Dash** writes short and steamy romances filled with heart, humor, and happily ever afters that will leave you swiping for more. From blue-collar bad boys to rugged mountain men, you will find a book boyfriend to swoon over in the span of your hour-long lunch break.



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