



# Bookish Boys Don't Date Social Girls (Oak Grove High)

**Author:** *KE Strand*

**Category:** YA&Teen

**Description:** She's confident and outgoing. He's quiet and bookish. Can she bookworm her way into his heart and find happily ever after?

Serial dater Sam yearns for a lasting relationship. But her confidence takes a hit when she learns her practical one-two punch dating strategy has earned her a bad reputation at school. When she develops an unexpected crush on bookstore boy, Brent, her newfound fears threaten to root her in place.

Brent's life is books. Nothing about Sam's social lifestyle appeals to him, but the girl herself is another matter. So, why then, does he turn her down when she asks him out?

He's convinced he isn't experienced enough for Sam. She's convinced Brent has no interest in her. Will their story come to an end before it's even begun?

Bookish Boys Don't Date Social Girls is a light-hearted, clean, young adult romantic comedy. If you like confident heroines, down to earth heroes, and an improbable pair you'll love the second book in the Oak Grove High series

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# Page 1

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## Chapter One

How long am I required to sit and listen to my dinner date talk about pus and rashes before it's no longer considered rude to leave? I've had the pleasure of hearing about his little sister's skin condition with a ridiculously long name that he kept referring to as chicken skin. Of course, I have a chicken dish sitting in front of me, which I can't eat now. I do feel sorry for his little sister. Poor thing. But with my appetite ruined, "sorry" isn't what I'm feeling for her brother.

Especially after the mention of the garlic in my dish reminded him to tell me all about his dad's chronic bad breath and all the medical treatments he's attempted, which haven't helped. And then there's the nugget of information about how my date hasn't celebrated a birthday since he turned eight, when his cat chewed an electrical cord and got crisped at his party. Yes, he used the word crisp, which is also in the name of the chicken dish I can no longer eat.

I'm clearly not going to use my fork again, so I set it down and study the wallpaper. I've been here several times, but never really noticed the décor. The red velvet walls with elaborate gold designs seem extravagant for a small-town Chinese restaurant. Maybe even old-fashioned. I don't pretend to know the current trends in restaurant decor, but everything in this restaurant seems aged and worn. I chose it because I know they have good food and great service. At least I can enjoy the latter.

I tap my phone screen to check the time.

"Do you have a date?" Jimmy asks with a snort.

I narrow my eyes at him. “Isn’t that what you are?”

“It was a joke. Doesn’t anyone ever say that to you when you’re checking the time?”  
He pretends to check his watch. “What’s the hurry, Jimmy? Got a date?”

“Yeah...no one has ever said that to me before.”

Jimmy brightens. “But that reminds me of this one date I was on when...”

As my friend Ava would say, Kill. Me. Now .

Ava, our other friend Bek, and I refer to Jimmy as Hot Dog Cart Guy. I met Jimmy when I was on a date with Barista Boy. I knew pretty quickly that Barista Boy and I weren’t going to work out, but I remembered the attractive food cart vendor I enjoyed talking to during my second date with Barista Boy. I swung by the cart—by myself, of course—a couple of times and found Jimmy super easy to talk to. And he made me laugh, so I asked him out.

Not even an hour into the date and I want to stab my eardrums with an ice pick until they bleed. Except for the random one he just asked that made no sense, he hasn’t asked a single question about me. I find that strange. It isn’t like the date must be about me, but shouldn’t he at least want to know me a little? Standard questions about school, family, hobbies. Anything. I’ve stopped asking questions because the answers have all led to stories that involve something gross. Often involving blood, secretions, or weeping wounds.

I check my phone again and cringe when I see it has only been three minutes since the last time I checked it. I pick up my empty water glass and wave it in the air for our server, who I think is avoiding our table for the same reason I want to flee. These stories are not mealtime friendly.

“...so, then we had to scrape all the slime from the inside of the refrigerator before the party! Can you believe we made it on time?”

I shake my head. Remind me never to go to Jimmy’s house. I have no clue what he’s been talking about, but that sounded rank.

“So, how long have you worked for the hot dog cart?” I immediately bite my tongue. A self-punishment for asking another question.

“It’s my dad’s. So, forever, basically.”

My stomach roils. Though I wasn’t listening to know how the slime he mentioned got in his refrigerator, what if that same slime found its way to the hot dog cart? I ate hot dogs from his cart! I pray they are cleaner with the cart than they are with their personal refrigerator.

“I don’t mind the work though. I get to be outside,” Jimmy says. “And I get to meet amazing people like you.”

I smile. That was sweet.

The server materializes beside me to tip water into my glass. He tops off Jimmy’s and then asks me, “Are you still working on that?” We both look down at the plate still laden with fried rice and crispy garlic chicken. I say a silent apology to the delicious food for my loss of appetite and shake my head. I’m pretty sure the server gives me a commiserating look as he snatches my plate and leaves. I watch him go with envy.

“But boy do I have stories from working the cart!” Jimmy continues. Of course he does. And odds are I won’t like any of them. “There was this one time that a couple of dogs came out of nowhere and mauled a guy for the two hot dogs he’d just purchased. Man, there was blood everywhere. I swear, every dog in the park came

over, hoping to get their nose in it.”

My grimace doesn’t indicate to him that I don’t like the story. Though it should. I’m envious of the other patrons, laughing and engaging with one another, sharing stories that most likely don’t include blood or halitosis. Mom always taught me to exit an awkward or uncomfortable situation with grace. Squinting at Jimmy, I wonder if he would recognize grace if it hit him upside the head.

I catch the server’s eye again and make a motion in the air like I’m writing. He nods and I feel a sense of relief already. Turning my attention back to Jimmy, I find he’s talking about the time their family dog got maggots.

“Jimmy!” I breathe. “Seriously, that is just too much.”

He misunderstands me. “I know, poor Fluffer Nutter was miserable.”

“No, I mean it’s completely inappropriate to talk about that at dinner. Why would I want to hear about these gross things while I’m eating?”

Jimmy blinks at me. “Gross things?”

His expression is like a deer in the headlights, and I feel like an ogre for pointing out what I feel is obvious, but now that I’ve brought it up, I can’t back down. I soften my tone though, because I truly don’t think he realized what he’s done. “Skin conditions and bad breath aren’t too bad, but slime in refrigerators, bloody face maulings, and maggots are definitely not mealtime conversations.” Especially, on a first date, I think.

His gaze falls to the table. “Oh, so, the plane crash and the boat propeller were bad then too, huh?”

I hadn't even heard those stories. Man, I was tuned out. I tap my finger on the table. "Those would be good stories for around the campfire, I think."

The server sets the bill on the table, and I snatch it before Jimmy gets a chance. I hand a fortune cookie to him. And set mine aside. "I'll take care of this. And I'm sorry, but I really should get going. It's getting late."

He frowns and glances at the clock over the register by the doorway. "It's only 7:00."

"Oh, didn't I tell you? I have a thing in the morning. I need to get to bed early tonight."

I grab my purse and push away from the table. Jimmy follows me to the register.

"You don't have to pay for dinner," he says.

"I asked you out, remember?" I smile as I hand the bill and my credit card to the ancient Asian lady slouched on a stool behind the register. I add a tip to the slip she gives me and sign my name, before slipping my card and my receipt into my wallet and thanking her.

I push through the door, with Jimmy on my heels. "Thanks for coming tonight."

"It was fun," he says.

I don't want to agree and give him the wrong idea, so I just smile again. I walk to my car and unlock the driver's side door. We met here, so his car is somewhere else in the parking lot. It was nice of him to walk me to mine, though.

He opened the fortune cookie as we walked and now smiles as he reads aloud. "Your fortune is the people you surround yourself with."

“That’s a nice one.”

“What does yours say?” He looks at my hands as if he expects me to be holding it.

“I didn’t open mine.”

His face falls like I just knocked his ice cream to the ground.

“Well, maybe I’ll see you around, Jimmy. I’ll stop by to say hi if I’m at the park.”

“How about we go out again? Have you seen that new cops and robber movie that’s out? What’s it called?”

Great. More blood. “I don’t think so, Jimmy. Thanks, though. But like I said, I’ll see you around. Drive carefully!”

I slide into my car and breathe a sigh of relief when the door closes me inside. As I start the engine, my hands shake a little like they always do when I tell a boy I don’t want to see him again. Jimmy stands outside my window, staring at me with his mouth agape. Guilt worms its way through me even though I haven’t done anything wrong. We simply aren’t compatible, and it isn’t worth trying to force it. I should know. I’ve dated a lot of guys and I’ve learned if the first date is a dud, every date afterward will be too.

I back out of the parking spot, careful to make sure my front bumper doesn’t hit him. Then I wave as I pull away. Hot Dog Cart Guy stares after me, in shock.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 6:54 am*

### Chapter Two

“I’m sorry it didn’t work with Hot Dog Cart Guy.” Ava climbs onto my bed and sits next to me, crisscross applesauce, leaning against the headboard.

“I am too,” Bek says, from her favorite spot in the retro bubble chair. My dad bought it for me when I was twelve and going through a 70s phase, but really, it has always been Bek’s chair.

“It’s no big deal. I still feel sort of guilty that it took him by surprise though.” I pull up the app on my phone to order a pizza. I tap on our last order and hit the reorder button. Three more clicks and pizza is officially in our future. I lean back against the headboard, shoulder to shoulder with Ava, and soak in the comfort of the moment. Over the years, this scenario, with Ava tucked up next to me on the bed and Bek curled like a cat in her chair, has become my favorite of all scenarios.

“Maybe you have helped make him a little easier for future first dates by explaining that his topics of conversation weren’t appropriate.” Ava pulls my pink, furry heart pillow into her lap .

I love my two best friends more than anything in the world. Where Bek always sees the best in a person, Ava always sees the best in a situation. “Honestly, there’s probably a girl out there who would enjoy his stories,” I say. “He’s a good storyteller, I just didn’t happen to enjoy the content. He doesn’t have to change. He just needs to find a different first date.”

“That’s true, Sam.” Bek looks at me like I’m her best student. “Just because the two



of you didn't hit it off doesn't indicate that either of you is flawed in any way. Neither of you must change, you just need to look elsewhere."

Ava leans her head against the headboard, a contemplative expression sharpening her usually soft features. "You know who I think you should date?"

I look at her and frown. She's never played matchmaker before. "Who?"

"Brent Post."

"What?" I laugh. "That's so random and weird, Ava. Are you punking me right now?"

"Oh, he's so sweet," Bek says.

I side-eye her. "You think everyone is sweet."

"She doesn't," Ava wags a finger. "So far, she has only thought Dylan Scott is sweet, and look how right she was about that." Dylan and Ava are dating.

I admit, I'm envious of the way Ava's face lights up when she talks about her boyfriend. And of the devilish smirk he gets when he first sees her, like he can finally have fun now that they are together. They are a ridiculously happy couple. I think of Brent--tall, lanky, with glasses--and shake my head. "Brent Post is a nerd. We would have nothing in common. What would we even talk about?" I can't stop laughing at the thought of me sitting across a romantic candle-lit dinner table from an awkward Brent while he pushes his glasses up his nose every thirty seconds and says "um" every fifth word. He would probably wear a plaid shirt with a pocket protector while I'd be in Chanel and Dior.

"He was my lab partner," Ava says. "And he was so nice and super patient with me

all year. You can imagine how hard it would be to have clumsy me as a chemistry partner.”

I grimace. “Yikes.”

“Right?” Ava chuckles at herself. “And he isn’t a nerd. He’s more...bookish, I think.” She peers at Bek who nods in agreement. “He isn’t particularly scholarly or uber-smart, he just likes to learn. And he’s really cute!”

I give Ava an ironic look because my memory of Brent doesn’t conjure up cute.

Bek giggles and hugs herself. “He really is.”

“You should date him then.” My glare cuts to Bek. I don’t even understand why they’re suggesting this nerd for me. I need someone as outgoing as me, not someone who always has their nose in a book.

“Just think it over.” Dang, Ava is unusually persistent with this. “The more I got to know him, the more I liked him. I can’t believe I didn’t think to suggest him sooner. The two of you would get along great.”

“Now I feel desperate.” I bury my hands in my hair like I’m going crazy. “You’re pushing just anybody on me.”

Ava rolls her eyes. “Have you been listening? He isn’t just anybody. I actually got to know him and think he’s great.”

“He reads books, Ava. Have I ever read a book voluntarily?”

Bek chimes in. “I think it’s a good idea too. But we need to pick a show before the pizza gets here. You didn’t order anchovies, did you?”

I bite my tongue, close my eyes, and silently count to five. Bek drives me crazy with her paranoia that I'll order anchovies on the pizza. She reminds me every single time. Even if she didn't have a fish allergy, I would never choose anchovies. I throw my white, fuzzy bunny pillow at her and she catches it and tucks it between her cheek and the chair.

My irritation softens as I study her in the bubble chair. She is as opposite from me as it gets. She's petite, with short brown hair, delicate features, an airy voice, and an ethereal personality. I'm tall, with a curvy figure that carries about ten pounds more than the body mass index recommends. My stick-straight, white-blond hair falls to just past my shoulder blades. My face is carved from dramatic angles and my eyes are a pale, pale blue. My manner is always self-assured, even when I'm not sure. She's a flitty fairy princess and I'm the unshakable Ice Queen.

"Anyway, he works at the bookstore if you decide to reconsider," Ava says.

I grin. "Bookstore Boy!"

Ava, on the other hand, is somewhere in the middle of Bek and me in looks and demeanor. She's taller than Bek, but shorter than me. She has only enough curves to make her gender clear. Her hair is a rich chocolate brown to Bek's sun-kissed caramel. She is shy and reserved, less so now that she's dating Dylan, but I think Ava will always be the type to think before acting.

Hmmm.

I squint at her now and reconsider what she said. If she's recommending Brent Post, that means she's taken the time to think it through and has concluded that it's worth mentioning. I bite my lip and turn my attention to the television, where I'm supposed to be scrolling my streaming services to find something for us to watch. I try to pay attention to the titles and descriptions I'm scrolling through, but now all I can see is

Brent. With his floppy hair and glasses, I don't even really know what he looks like. Dismissing the suggestion, with a mental eye roll, I focus on choosing our evening's entertainment.

## Page 3

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### Chapter Three

Saturdays just aren't the same. Ava used to volunteer at the animal shelter, and I would pack her a lunch and drop her off. Then Bek and I would hang out together all day, shopping, doing our nails, or watching T.V. But at the beginning of summer, Ava and Bek both got jobs at the pet store, and they almost always work on the weekends, so now I'm usually alone.

Today, however, I am doing the unthinkable and dress shopping with my oldest sister who is getting married in just four short months. My mom is acting like a wedding coordinator from hell, and we haven't even left the house yet.

"I think you should dress nicer, Samantha. This is a special occasion, and you want to show your sister you respect it as such."

I look down at my jeans and blouse. "What's wrong with my outfit?"

"The jeans have holes!" Mother looks scandalized, though I know for a fact she owns several pairs in the same 'artfully torn' style.

"Mom, no one dresses up for stuff like this."

She arches an eyebrow and I know I will never win this argument. If, by some miracle, I was to make it out of the house in this outfit, she would play the guilt card the entire time we were at the dress shop and all through lunch.

I curl my lip at her before I stomp up the arching staircase to my room. Truth be told,

I have an adorable new dress that I'm excited to have an excuse to wear, but I'm not going to let Mom know that.

When I come back down, Mom is waiting with her purse over her shoulder and her car keys in hand. I do a dramatic model walk across the entryway, stop, turn, and model walk over to the entry hall table where I always toss my clutch. I strike a dramatic pose and look at Mom over my shoulder. "Better?"

"Perfect. That dress is adorable!"

I follow her into the five-car garage. I hang back because I'm never sure which car Mom will choose. She presses the button on the key fob she's holding and the old baby-blue, two-seater, convertible Mercedes chirps. I smile. My favorite of her cars. She and Dad are total car junkies. They have a separate storage facility where they keep the rest of their cars and cycle through them every few months.

I pat Sunny's hood as I stroll past. I imagine him frowning that we're taking one of Mom's cars and leaving him in the dingy garage on such a bright, balmy day. Sliding into the passenger seat, I pluck two scarves from the glove box, while Mom puts the top down. We both tie one over our heads to keep our hair in place. I slide my oversized sunglasses on and buckle my seatbelt as Mom pulls into the summer sunshine. My skin immediately warms, and I draw a deep breath of clean, fresh air. I love my Sunny with a passion, but I do wish he was convertible.

The bridal shop is downtown on the upper level of a five-story building. We tuck our scarves into the glove box when Mom pulls up to the valet station in the parking garage about a block down from the shop. We stroll the sidewalks, admiring the window displays we pass. Every display sparks a new idea Mom wants to suggest to Ines for either the wedding or the reception. My pulse starts to accelerate imagining the months to come and the battle of the wills that is sure to take place between Mom and Ines. They are way too much alike and always end up verbally sparring over who

is right.

When we step off the elevator, we find Ines and her best friend Gayle have already arrived. They hold champagne flutes filled with a bubbly golden liquid. White tulle poofs out from behind my sister's head, marking her as the bride. Mom hugs both girls and I tease Ines over her bridal style. The veil is in direct opposition to her ripped white denim capris and pink, cap-sleeved blouse. I turn to Mom with an arched eyebrow and point to Ines's outfit.

Mom sniffs snootily. "Because she's the bride, she doesn't need to respect the event. But it is good for you too."

Understanding dawns on my sister's face and she laughs. "If it's any consolation, sis, I had a moment of dress envy when you walked off the elevator."

I shrug with false modesty. Her compliment does make me feel better though.

Our store concierge hands Mom a glass of champagne and then hands me a flute as well. By the darker hue, I can tell it's sparkling cider. I frown at it.

The elevator slides open behind us and Bridget stumbles into the shop, looking disheveled and harried, as usual. And definitely not respecting the occasion with the appropriate attire.

"There you are, darling." Mom hugs her last daughter to arrive before my sister has a chance to straighten herself. "How's my girl of fire?"

Our names were chosen by our parents based on what was going on in their lives when we came to be. They were in Spain when they conceived Ines. Ew. And Mom had raging heartburn during her entire pregnancy with Bridget. They did a nationwide tour of motivational speakers the year I was conceived. Ew, again. I hate thinking

about my parents doing the nasty. So gross. Anyway, Mom and Dad often use the motivation behind our names as little pet phrases for us. Mine usually only comes up when I'm doing the exact opposite, such as, "Now, Sam, you're supposed to be the one who listens," or "Pay attention, Samantha. You're not living up to your name."

"Sorry I'm late." Bridget's voice is muffled against Mom's shoulder. "I got caught up in a sculpture."

I don't know why she bothers to apologize anymore. We all know she's going to be late and that it will be because of her latest art project. She isn't a professional artist, yet, but she's good enough to one day be one. She made a bust of me a couple of years ago. It looks nothing like me, but somehow captures the very essence of me at the same time. It's my favorite thing in my room.

"It's fine, dear. We haven't even started yet." Mom replies first, though I see Ines snap her mouth shut to stifle whatever her response would have been.

An employee hands Bridget her own flute of suspiciously dark liquid and she and I clink our glasses together. She's nineteen, a year and a half older than me, so she's still underage as well. Ines is the oldest of the five of us siblings and at twenty-five, seems like an old maid to me. That might just be her serious personality, though. Her husband-to-be, Lincoln, is super fun. Very outgoing. Pulls everyone into whatever he's doing. Whether it be a card game or a DIY project, he wants anyone around to be involved. He's always smiling and laughing and trying to get Ines to relax and be happy too. He's good for her and I'm glad she found him .

"Let's start with the bridesmaid dresses," Mom says to the attendant.

Ines clears her throat. "I've already given Kyla the dresses I want the girls to try on as well as the gowns I want to try on after that."



Bridget and I arch eyebrows at each other. Preventative strike by Ines.

Mom smiles but raises her nose in the air as she follows Kyla back to the dressing rooms.

There are long gowns in varying shades of blush hanging outside two of the dressing rooms and moss-colored gowns outside a third. The green dresses must be for Gayle who is my sister's maid-of-honor, so I pull open the door to a room with the blush-colored gowns, and Bridget steps to the room next to it.

Kyla hurries over to hand us the first dress to try on. I enjoy dressing up, so I'm excited about the fashion show we are about to give, but I know Bridget hates anything that isn't leggings and an oversized t-shirt.

"Don't come out until everyone is ready!" Ines says, as we disappear into our changing rooms. She and Mom sit on chairs at the edge of a stage that the changing rooms are on, sipping their champagne.

When I get the first dress on, I curl a lip at my reflection in the mirror. The dress clings to my hips more than I like. The material pulls across the front of me, making my hips and thighs look larger than they are. The draping neckline is flattering but the color washes out on me, giving the illusion that I'm naked at first glance.

I turn to the door and wait for permission to exit the room. Then I realize no one knows I'm dressed and waiting, so I call out, "Ready?"

When a chorus of "ready" rings out, I swing the dressing room door open and step out.

Of the five siblings, Bridget and I look the most alike with the washed-out coloring we inherited from dad. She is shorter than me, but just as curvy, and the dress pulls in

the same place on her as it does on me. We share a look that says neither of us like the dress before we turn our attention to a gushing Ines, who only has eyes for her best friend, a willowy figure with skin a few shades darker than ours and chestnut-colored hair. The sage green looks spectacular on her.

Mom sits next to Ines with a curled lip as she examines Bridget and me. “That style doesn’t suit your sisters’ figures, Ines, dear.”

Ines finally looks at us and her face falls. “No, it doesn’t.”

The attendant reminds everyone that the dresses will be made to fit like a glove, and I snort as I turn back to my dressing room. “I think she’s saying we have big hips, Bridge.”

“You think?” Bridget and I grin at each other.

Kyla hands us our next dress, and I disappear into the room again to slip it on. This one is very low cut, exposing the strapless bra I’m wearing. The back is low too. I feel naked and hate it immediately. The hip area has a more generous cut, so the material doesn’t pull, but it has a mermaid hem that is not flattering on a hippy girl. The blush color is a couple shades darker, so doesn’t wash out, but still isn’t flattering.

Bridget calls, “Ready?”

Gayle and I agree, and we step out. Again, Gayle’s tall, thin figure looks spectacular in the dress, and Ines is immediately captivated by her while Mom arches an eyebrow at Bridget and me. Ines sighs when she sees us, and we disappear into the room to try on the third option.

As I dress, I hear Kyla assuring Ines that they have many more dresses she can bring

for us to try if this one doesn't work. As soon as the dress falls into place, I know it's the one. The blush color is a shade pinker than the other dresses and compliments my super white skin. It's a strapless dress with a sweetheart bodice wrapped in organza, and the skirt flows to the ground from just under the breasts. It reminds me of something a Greek Goddess would wear. I spin and turn and look at the dress from all angles. It's lovely.

Gayle calls, "Ready?" I think I hear excitement in her voice.

We step out and Ines and Mom exclaim at the same time. Mom is grinning and nodding. Ines has a hand clapped over her mouth and her eyes are shimmering with tears as she tries to take us all in at once.

"Turn around," Mom commands.

The three of us spin, sharing excited smiles with one another.

"That's the dress!" Ines calls. "That is perfect on all of you."

Mom is still grinning. "Do you girls like it?"

The three of us chorus our acceptance at once and Kyla calls over two more employees to get our measurements. We must put a rush on the order because Ines and Lincoln decided to get married so fast. I wonder if that's why we have so many people helping us, or if that's normal in a bridal shop. Mom is going to be spending a lot of money, so my guess is that has something to do with the excellent service.

When we are finally done, I change back into my street clothes and take a seat on the other side of Mom from Ines. As Bridget and Gayle finish, Kyla and another attendant walk up with two wedding gowns. Kyla puts the gown she's carrying directly into the dressing room and the other girl hangs the second one outside the

room.

Ines leaps from her seat and disappears into the dressing room. It's the most excited I think I've ever seen her. Her face glows with anticipation. Happiness transforms her, making her look her age instead of like an uptight thirty-something. It takes her a while to get dressed, but when she comes out, my breath hitches.

My sister is a bride!

It's a simple dress with spaghetti straps and a v-neckline. The white satin skims her curves—not as pronounced as Bridget's and mine—and the hem floats just over the floor. Now I see why Ines took extra care with her hair and makeup today. She's stunning.

"I don't like it," she says. "Too simple."

"Agreed." Mom sips her champagne.

I slam my mouth shut. But Bridget leans over and whispers, "I think it's lovely."

I nod and shrug. We both know there is no changing Ines's mind, so why bother sharing our opinion?

The next dress is the exact opposite of simple. It's an hourglass figure with a lot of lace and cutouts and it's far too busy for Ines to carry off. Thank goodness she agrees. The attendants bring more dresses while Ines changes. The third is a beautiful ball gown with a wide bell skirt. It has long lace sleeves and a crew neck, that doesn't suit Ines.

Mom considers Ines and says to Kayla, "Let's try a ball gown with the same strapless, sweetheart neckline as the bridesmaid dresses."

The attendant nods and scurries away.

Luckily, Ines didn't hear Mom giving instructions, or she might hate the dress on principle. The attendant is back in a flash with the dress and puts it into the room immediately, by-passing the four hanging outside the room. Ines shrugs at her reflection. "I like it, but something isn't right."

Mom smiles and nods. "Yes, something is off."

When Ines disappears into the room to try the next dress, I wrap my hand around Mom's and lean my head on her shoulder. I'm so proud of her for not being the know-it-all, even though she is, totally, a know-it-all. She kisses the top of my head, and we sit like that until Ines comes out of the room with a huge grin on her face and tears in her eyes.

I sit up and slap my hands over my mouth. Bridget and Gayle both exclaim and clap like they are at the circus and the trapeze artist just landed a particularly difficult trick.

"I feel like Cinderella." Ines examines herself in the mirror and we all sing praises for the dress. Gayle snaps pictures. The attendants bring several choices of veils, and Gayle snaps more pictures. The attendants take measurements and make fitting appointments. And finally, we spill into the elevator to head to lunch, Ines still proudly sporting the tuft of white tulle on the back of her head.

The image of Ines in the gown won't leave my mind. Even though she's been out of the house for years now and she acts like a stodgy old lady, it's still hard to accept her as grown up enough to be married.

She's glowing. I take Bridget's arm and whisper, "Do you think we will ever be that happy?"

Bridget studies Ines. “Sure. I just never thought she would.”

I laugh because I must agree. I think of my serial dating ways and frown. I know, I’m only seventeen, too young to worry about settling down, but it worries me that I can’t seem to find a guy worth dating more than twice. Why do I always find a reason to break up with him? I tell myself it’s to avoid hurting his feelings later, but secretly, I wonder if I do it to avoid me getting hurt later when he inevitably leaves me.

When the elevator doors open, I follow everyone out of the building and onto the sidewalk and push my negative thoughts from my mind.

### Chapter Four

Bek works on Monday, but Ava has the day off, so she comes to hang out by the pool with me. A slight breeze helps to take the edge off the temps, but the summer humidity is in full force.

Because my skin is so fair, I shade myself with a big umbrella, but I still like to pretend to be laying out as if I'm soaking in the sun's rays. Ava is in the sun with one of my huge, floppy sun hats on and SPF one million slathered all over her. She's positioned so that the misters along the edge of our patio get her when the wind blows.

"Where's your hunky bf today?" I ask.

"Working."

"How's your mom doing?" Ava had a pretty crap-tastic home life. Her mom and grandma were always screaming at each other and slamming doors. Ava's mom used to work the graveyard shift and would go into a tirade if Ava or her brother ever walked too loudly past her bedroom during the day. Then her mom got sick. She had a couple of brain tumors the doctors removed. Her recovery has been slow, but the illness and a support group helped her to stop drinking. Ava says there is less fighting at home now, which is fantastic for her, since her brother will be moving out in a couple of weeks.

"She's doing good. Her new job is a struggle for her. She's never done office work before, and she comes home stressed. I worry she'll start drinking again."

“Why didn’t she get a job in retail? She would have been more familiar with that, right?”

Ava adjusts her bathing suit like just lying on the chaise made the top shift and reveal too much. “The office job pays more. She hasn’t said so, but I think she wants to move out.”

“What?” I sit up.

“Oh, I mean after I do. Maybe. I think Joel moving out and me getting a job made her realize that we won’t be around forever. I don’t think she wants to live with Grandma.” Ava frowns and looks up at the sky. “There’s a really dark story in their past that neither of them cares to talk about. I don’t think they will ever really get along. I’m just thankful the fighting has lessened, and the screaming has stopped altogether. They mostly avoid each other.”

I settle onto my chaise again. “It’s at least better at home now, though. Right?”

“It is. I’m cautiously optimistic that the next year won’t totally suck.”

“Doesn’t your mom own the house?” I ask. Ava’s grandma moved in with them when we were in second grade, I think.

“Technically, yes,” Ava says. “But I’m pretty sure Grandma has paid the mortgage payments since she moved in, so I don’t think mom will fight her for it.”

I sit quietly for a bit, contemplating if I want to ask the question that has been burning in my mind since dress shopping with my sister. Ava picks up her book and I know it is now or never .

“Ava?”



She looks up and makes a humming noise.

“Do you think I have...” I can’t even say it. What is wrong with me?

“Chicken pox?” Ava jokes. “Bad breath? Have what, Sam?”

I slam my eyes closed, though she probably doesn’t know that because of my big, dark glasses. “Commitment issues?”

Instead of responding, Ava is quiet. For so long, as a matter of fact, I open my eyes to make sure she hasn’t left. She has a far-off, contemplative look on her face that I can’t read.

“I don’t know,” she finally says. “I never thought of it before, and now, thinking back on your relationships with that in mind, I’m still not sure that’s the motivation behind your one-and-done or one-two punch dating style.”

I flop my hands on my thighs. “One and done, Ava? Really?”

She chuckles, but her expression softens. “I really think you’re simply a realist. Would you have me and Bek as lifelong best friends if you had commitment issues?”

I shrug. “I mean, it’s different. Friendship versus dating.”

“Ahhh, not really,” Ava says. “Both relationships require an emotional investment for them to last.”

I gnaw on my lip, considering that.

“It isn’t like you are from a broken home that has created a fear of abandonment.” Ava points to our house. “You have the most loving family I know.”

I squint. “There may be some abandonment issues. My parents are rarely home.”

Ava swings her legs off the chaise and sits sideways facing me. She rests her elbows on her knees. “Do you feel abandoned by your parents?”

I love that she is both serious and concerned. She isn’t making fun of me or judging me. I could tell her I saw a UFO fly over our house, and she would launch an investigation to find it and see if it is anything we need to be worried about.

“No,” I acquiesce. “I don’t feel abandoned. They’re always available, even when they aren’t home.”

“What brought this up?” Ava tucks her legs sideways on the chair and lounges facing me. The pose is so similar to how we’ve laid in bed together our entire lives, sharing secrets and dreams, that I immediately feel at ease.

“Ines.” I let my head fall against the chair. “She was radiant on Saturday.”

“She’s going to be a beautiful bride.” Ava’s far-off expression tells me she’s imagining what my sister will look like on her wedding day. “But, Sam, she’s what, eight years older than you?”

“I know. But neither of my sisters are serial daters like me. Ines and Lincoln have been together since their first year of college. Bridget and Cara dated for almost two years, and she hasn’t dated since breaking up with her.” I rub my eyes. “I don’t know why Ines’s happiness made me second guess my motivation. It just did.”

“Cisco is a serial dater.”

My immediate reaction to her mentioning my oldest brother is a grin. I’m pretty sure Ava has always harbored a small crush on him. But as I consider Cisco’s dating

habits over the years, I realize it's true. He could be categorized as a serial dater right along with me. Occasionally, he sees a girl three or four times, but mostly it's only once or twice like me. "Oh my gosh. He is, isn't he?"

"Do you think he has commitment issues?" Ava asks.

"You stole that smirk from your boyfriend!" I laugh. "No, Francisco doesn't have commitment issues. He's just practical."

Ava turns so that she's lying flat on the chaise. She stretches her legs out and drops her head back, eyes closed, face tilted up toward the sun, even though the floppy hat shades it completely. "I rest my case."

A tickle of pleasure runs through me as I stare at my friend. She is so good for my self-worth. I, too, close my eyes and let my body relax into my chair. If Ava says I'm okay the way I am, I'm going to believe her.

### Chapter Five

“Sam, dear.” Mom grabs a set of keys from a dish on the table in the entryway. “I’ve got something on hold at Beckett’s downtown. Could you pick it up for me, please? Dad and I are going out after work, and I won’t be able to get there before they close.”

“Beckett’s?” I’m not familiar with the store.

“Yes, it’s next to the old theater.”

“Sure.” I like having an excuse to go downtown. Especially since both Ava and Bek work today, so I’m on my own again.

“Oh, and be available Saturday. Ines has invited us to visit the caterer and the baker to taste test food for the reception.”

“I’m totally in for that!”

Mom laughs and pats my cheek. “I knew you would be, dear.”

For the first time, I notice lines stretching out from the corners of Mom’s brown eyes and parentheses around her lips. I’ve never noticed them before, but I’m pretty sure she has always had them. “You’re so beautiful, Mom.”

She pauses and cocks her head. “Thank you. But what brought that up?”

“I think the wedding has given you as much of a glow as Ines.”

Mom draws a deep breath through her nose before answering. “I can’t lie, being the mother of the bride is as lovely as it is terrifying.”

“Terrifying?”

Mom shifts her weight from one high heel to the other. “Though I love Lincoln, I’m still Ines’s mother, and I worry about her making such a commitment. It also makes me feel old to have a child old enough to marry.”

I laugh. “You’ve been old enough for that for a while now, you just haven’t had anyone marry yet.”

“Technically that is true.”

I tilt my head. “Is the age thing the terrifying part?”

“No.” Mom takes my hand and squeezes. “Each step you children take away from us is more terrifying than the last. Your father and I have tried to raise independent, compassionate, problem-solving young adults, and I think we’ve done well. I’m so very proud of the people each of you are. But the less control I have over your happiness, the scarier it is.”

I squeeze her hand back and say in a loving tone, “Control freak.”

We laugh together and she kisses my cheek. “Have a good day, my love.”

“You too, Mom.”

I putz around the house until almost noon when I hop in my car and drive downtown.

I find a spot for Sunny in the cool shade of the parking garage and walk toward the old theater, hoping Beckett's is easy to find. It's strange that I don't recognize the name of the store since I shop downtown all the time.

There's no hurry, so I slow my pace and enjoy the window displays. A heart-shaped, red satin purse makes me detour into a clothing store to make a quick purchase. Then, a block down, I halt and gape at a sign over a pink door. Beckett's Book Shop and Café. No wonder I didn't recognize the name. It's a bookstore. I chuckle to myself as I step forward to pull the door open.

A bell tinkles overhead as I enter. The rich aroma of coffee pairs enticingly with the sugary scent of pastries, and the dry papery scent of books. The store has a cozy feel, with hardwood floors and soft lighting. Sitting areas of loveseats and armchairs are surrounded by bookshelves to the ceiling. I want to grab a mocha, find a seat, page through a magazine, and maybe never leave. Why have I never been in here before? Oh yeah, I don't read.

I wind my way to the register, which is also where you order your drink. I scan the handwritten menu hanging over the small glass display and see they offer simple sandwiches also. I'm falling in love with this place and considering taking up reading in order to hang out here.

"Can I help you?"

My gaze drops to the person who stepped up to the counter, and my smile freezes on my face. Brent Post eyes me suspiciously. I totally forgot he works here. My cheeks flush with embarrassment, as if he knows that Ava and Bek suggested I date him. His suspicion tells me he might. Panic floods me and I consider fleeing. A rather alien response for me, which leaves me even more unsettled.

"Can. I. Help. You?" He says it slowly, but not like I'm daft. More like he's

wondering if English isn't my first language.

"Oh, yeah, um. My mom has a hold. It must be a book."

"Ah, that makes more sense." He walks to a waist-high bookshelf behind the counter.

"Amanda Jones?"

I nod. How did he know? I roll my eyes. Same way I know his name, duh. We've been going to school together our entire lives .

He pulls the book from the shelf and saunters back to the counter. I'm drawn to the way he moves. He has a certain predatory grace. A stalking panther. The male lead in a ballet. "Here you go."

The book he sets in front of me is a guide to planning a fast wedding. I laugh when I see the title. Ines will somehow find an insult in this, I'm sure. I pull my wallet from my purse.

"It was paid for online," Brent says. "You're good to go."

"Oh." When I meet his gaze, I totally understand Bek's giggle that night when Ava said Brent is good-looking. His eyes are deep emerald pools, and suddenly I'm breathless from drowning. His glasses are his camouflage, to keep predators like me at bay. "Um, maybe I'll get a coffee. A mocha actually."

An eyebrow twitches, like he wants to question my decision, but he asks, "To go?"

I scan the store and shake my head. "For here. I'll take a chocolate-filled croissant, too."

"Our pastries are from the local bakery, Rise." Brent grabs tongs and places a

croissant on a small plate. “Heated?”

Yes, I am , I think when his questioning gaze meets mine. “Please.”

He puts the plate in a toaster oven and spins a dial before moving over to the coffee station to make my mocha. I’m enthralled by his lithe movements. My memory described him as lanky. What was I thinking?

“How long have you worked here?” I ask. I’m just going to act like we know each other well enough for small talk.

“Only a couple of months.”

I raise my eyebrows at his comfort with the complicated coffee maker. “Do you have previous barista experience? Because you sure know your way around that machine.”

He flashes me an ironic look. Even the arch of his eyebrow is elegant and draws me toward him ever so slightly. “Quick study, I guess. ”

I sigh inwardly and rock back on my heels. He must not have picked up on my sarcasm. I told the girls we wouldn’t have anything in common.

He sets the coffee mug in front of me and grabs the croissant from the oven. “Making mochas is a nuanced skill that I’m thrilled to be learning at the tender age of seventeen. It will take me far in life.”

I let an appreciative grin spread slowly across my face. An unexpected thrill of pleasure shivers through me at his return sarcasm. “You might be the first celebrity barista of our class if you keep this up.”

“A guy needs goals.”



I glance at the total on the register and hand him the appropriate cash. He hands me back my change and I place it in the tip jar. Tucking the book under my arm, I pick up my coffee and plate. “Magazines?”

“Far back corner.”

“Thanks.” My blood buzzes from our little exchange.

At the back of the store, I discover a tall magazine rack stretching across an entire wall. This might be our small town’s most comprehensive periodical selection. If only I’d known sooner. I set my stuff on a table and browse the racks until I spot a favorite magazine of mine that I never find on a magazine rack.

“Oh my gosh!” I exclaim to no one in particular, snatching a copy from its holder and plopping into the cushy armchair. I haven’t read this magazine in over a year. I’m so excited to know I can find it here at the bookstore. I flip a few pages to scan the table of contents. An interesting title catches my eye, and I turn to the story in the magazine. A lovely black and white illustration accompanies the piece. I study it for a bit to see what sort of clues it offers about the story, but I’ve never been good at picking out subtleties. Bek is excellent at it.

I’m engrossed in the story when I bring my croissant to my mouth and bite it. Chocolate squeezes out the back and I lunge forward so it won’t fall onto my white blouse. Luckily, the dollop of chocolate ends up in my palm. I carefully place the croissant back on the plate and eat the chocolate off my hands. I realize I have nothing to clean my hands with, so I wind my way to the front of the store, hands in the air to avoid touching anything.

Brent sees me coming and arches an eyebrow. A single eyebrow. It’s a sexy look and makes me blush. I can’t believe this bookish boy can make me blush, and I want to burst into a fit of giggles. Instead, I explain my approach. “I forgot a napkin.”

He leans across the counter and tugs a couple from the dispenser, handing them to me as soon as I'm close enough.

"Thanks." I wipe my hands as I walk back to my spot. How have I not noticed how cute Brent is before? I think about the few times I remember seeing him around school or at football games, and I don't remember seeing him with a girl. Maybe I'm not the only one to have overlooked his adorableness.

About twenty minutes later, he wanders to the back of the store and picks up my now empty plate. "Would you like another mocha?"

"No, thank you."

He points to the magazine open in my lap. "Great taste."

"Oh my gosh, I was so excited to see you guys carry this."

"I asked the owners to bring it in. I got hooked on it in Mr. K's Lit class, sophomore year."

"Me too!"

"Next month's edition comes in early next week."

I hug the magazine to my chest. "I'm so excited. I'll be back for that, for sure. I totally would have bought this one even if I didn't get chocolate on it."

He laughs and oh. My. Heart. Stoppage! His smile is the sunshine. My mouth hangs open as I stare up at him and my pulse carves a "B" on the wall of my heart.

"Are you always such a messy eater?" he asks.

“No. I suspect you sabotaged my croissant.”

“Darn it. You found me out.” He grabs my mug and turns toward the front of the store.

“What did you mean?” I blurt. “When you said, “that makes sense” earlier?”

He stops and narrows his gem-colored eyes at me. He shakes his head.

“When I first got here, you seemed dubious. Then when I asked for this,” I place my hand on my mom’s book, “you said, “that makes sense” or something like that.”

He shifts his weight and again, I’m drawn to the graceful way his body moves. It’s all I can do not to sigh from the pleasure of watching his fine art performance. He’s tall and lean, with just the right amount of muscle tone to not be considered scrawny.

“You never struck me as a reader, but clearly I’m wrong.”

I frown. “Oh, you’re not wrong. I haven’t finished a book in years. I don’t even read the required reading for school.”

He lifts a brow. “That sounds like information you might not want to share so freely. What if I decided to rat you out?”

I cross my arms over my chest. “Would you?”

“I don’t have any reason to now, but you’ve handed me blackmail material.” He waggles his eyebrows, making me chuckle. Then he points to the magazine lying in my lap. “And you do read.”

“This is a magazine. This isn’t reading.”

Brent tilts his head. His gaze is laser-focused on me. “It’s a socially responsible literary magazine that highlights the plight of underserved people and communities.”

My eyes grow wide. “Oh no! Are you telling me that I’m reading something responsible and educational?”

“I’m afraid so, Samantha.”

A chill races through me when he says my name. It rolls over his tongue like it belongs to him.

“Please don’t tell anyone,” I beg. “I have a reputation to uphold.”

His expression clouds over. “Yes, you do.”

He walks away and I feel like something went very wrong. I can’t put my finger on what happened, but I’m left feeling rejected or dismissed. Perhaps it bothers me so much because I’ve never felt this way before. Regardless, I contemplate the conversation again and again but, in the end, I’m unable to determine what soured the tone.

When I stop at the register to buy the magazine on my way out, a woman helps me. I scan the store, but Brent is nowhere to be found. I’m equally relieved and bummed that I won’t see him again before I leave.

“Next month’s copy should be here next week,” she says, as she counts out my change.

“That’s what I hear. I’ll definitely be back.”

Not just for the magazine, I think.

## Page 6

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### Chapter Six

It's Bek's turn to hang out poolside with me. Ava and Dylan are volunteering at some ranch for old dogs, or something. I'm in the shade of the umbrella, but I'm totally envious of Bek, who has taken up residence on a pool raft. A leg dangles over the side of the raft into the water and the hand not holding her non-alcoholic umbrella drink, trails through the water as well. I would be burnt to a crisp in five minutes flat if I did that, but little pixie Bek never even seems to tan, let alone burn.

"We should start a book club," I say.

Bek sits up, almost toppling off the raft. "Excuse me?"

"There are so many good books to read, and if we did a book club, it would keep me accountable so that I read. Like homework, right?"

It looks like Bek might be squinting at me as she studies me, though it's hard to tell behind her sunglasses. Then her eyebrows lift from behind the dark frames and her mouth opens in astonishment. "You went to the bookstore."

She has uncanny people skills for such a flighty girl. That didn't even take her thirty seconds to figure out. "I actually ended up there on accident. Well, without knowing I'd end up there. And you two are right. Bookstore Boy is pretty great."

Bek relaxes back on her raft with a contented smile. "He is. You talked to him then?"

I tell her about our conversation and about how it ended so abruptly.

She purses her lips. “I wonder what that was all about.”

“I get to go back next week to get the new copy of a literary magazine that I like, but I need another excuse.”

Bek flicks water in my direction, but it falls short. “You don’t need an excuse, Sam. Just go buy a book. Any book. A gift. Ava loves historicals. Get her one.”

I consider that. “That’s a great idea. How long do you think I have to wait before I go back?”

Bek slides her glasses down on her nose and peers at me over the frames. “Is that a serious question?”

I look around as if there is someone who can share a confused look with me. “Of course it is. I asked it, didn’t I?”

Bek sits up, letting both legs hang into the water on either side of the raft. It’s only because she’s as light as a feather that she doesn’t tumble over the side. I could never move around on a pool floaty like that without taking a dunk. “Sam, what is going on with you? You’ve never asked advice on how to talk to boys before.”

I stare at her, my mouth flopping open. “Oh, my goodness. You’re right. What’s happening to me?”

Bek continues to stare at me as she floats in the center of the pool.

“Brent has me completely flustered. I think...” I pause and mull it over further before speaking again. “I think I must care more about this or something. With all the other guys I pretty much just thought, “What’s the worst that can happen? He’ll say no!” But with Brent, I only want to hear a yes.”

Bek relaxes, laying back against the raft, and pulling a leg back up to rest on top. “You’ll be fine, Sam. Of course, he’ll say yes. They always do.”

Maybe I’m being extra sensitive, but her saying that makes me feel, I don’t know, cheap somehow. ‘They always do’ indicates there are many. Which, I guess there have been, but something sounds wrong about it.

“I think you can go tomorrow,” Bek says.

“Tomorrow’s good.” I drop my head to the chaise and smile. “Thanks, Bek.”

The next day, I take extra care to get ready. I wear my favorite coral and white sundress and put my hair back with my favorite headband, so that it falls straight down my back. I just used an expensive hair treatment, so my hair has a silk-like sheen to it that makes me feel like a million dollars. I slip on my pretty gold sandals, and even take the time to grab the matching clutch. Studying myself in the mirror, I’m pleased with what I see. I look summery, and it doesn’t look like I’m trying too hard. Even though I am. I really am.

Uncharacteristic butterflies churn in my stomach as I stare at my reflection. Brent might not even be working today. This could all be for nothing. Well, not for nothing. I literally have nothing else to do, and a trip downtown is a great filler for a day alone.

I take a deep breath and march out of my room.

My VW Beetle sits in the driveway, eager for me to roll the windows down and let the wind flow through it. I swear I’ve had a connection with Sunny since my parents pulled the blindfold off my eyes on my sixteenth birthday. They led me out of the house onto the driveway, so I’d already figured out what the surprise was, but as soon as I saw Sunny smiling up at me, a huge white bow on his roof, I was completely

smitten. He's been an excellent car, and I know when he wants to stretch his tires—like he does today.

Wind streams in through the open windows as I cruise down the long circular drive. The music queues up from my phone, playing the song I'd interrupted when I finished getting ready. I turn it up louder to hear it over the rush of wind I know is coming when I accelerate to top speed on the street. In this moment, I feel so carefree and happy. I sing at the top of my voice as I direct the car toward downtown.

But after coasting into a parking place only a block away from the bookstore, my stomach is in knots. I remind myself that Brent might not even be there and that even if he is, he won't know I'm there to see him. Unless I stutter and blush the entire time I'm talking to him. Then he might figure it out.

I pause over window displays for too long as I make my way to Beckett's. When I catch myself eyeing kitchen implements in the window of an upscale home store, I know I'm just stalling. In what world have I ever cared about spatulas and mixers? I refocus my efforts and march to the bookstore without dawdling further.

The cheery bell announces me as I enter through the charming pink door. The aroma of fresh-brewed coffee fills the air. A few nearby patrons glance at me as I enter, but then return their attention to their browsing. A twenty-something guy taps away on the keyboard of his laptop at one of the small tables. His coffee is cooling beside him. A clutch of women occupies a loveseat and a couple of chairs at the center of the store, knitting and gabbing merrily.

My gaze darts to the coffee bar further back in the store, and I'm relieved to find Brent holding an empty plate and wiping down the counter. With nervous energy buzzing through my veins, I head toward the register side of the counter, rehearsing my question in my mind.



When he sees me approaching, he gives me the same furrowed-brow look he greeted me with the first time I came in. That's not good. I force a smile on my face and don't have to work too hard to look unsure as I greet him. "Hey, Brent! How are you?"

He scans my outfit, and the doubt in his expression stays rooted. "Good, Sam. What are you doing back so soon?"

"Right. Well, do you know my friend Ava? Ava Landry?" My voice shakes a little. I'm so nervous that I'm having a difficult time getting a breath. I've never felt this way around a boy before.

His eyes narrow. "Yeah. I know her."

"Well, she's recently done a huge favor for me, and I wanted to get her something as a thank you gift."

Brent blinks at me.

"Seeing you the other day made me think of her obsession with historicals. I totally want to get her a new one. Can you help me with that?"

Now that I've gotten the question out, I feel much more relaxed. I've established that I have a legitimate reason to be there, and he no longer needs to be suspicious.

"Sure." He shifts his weight like he's about to turn, but then stops. "What kind of historicals does she like?"

"Kind?" I stammer. "There are different kinds?"

Panic floods me. I have absolutely no clue. And suddenly I feel like my sham is so obvious. He's going to know I'm only here to see him. But don't the boys I visit

always know it is specifically to see them? Why am I suddenly self-conscious about it? Why does this boy matter so much? He flicks his head to get his long bangs out of his eyes, and even that simple motion sets a kaleidoscope of butterflies loose in my belly. I can't help the responding smile that curves my lips, but it falls away when his eyebrow arches in response.

“Historical fiction? Historical romance? Historical nonfiction? Do you by chance know any of the titles of books she's read?”

I sigh and shake my head. “She's only ever referred to them as historicals.”

“You could get her a gift card.” He points to a rack next to the register with a selection of plastic cards to choose from.

I consider it. This is all a farce anyway. I'm only buying Ava a book for an excuse to be here. But now that I'm here, I want to get her a real book, dang it. “That's pretty impersonal. I'd rather not. Shoot. Maybe this won't work after all.”

Brent spins on his heel and comes out from behind the counter. “Not necessarily. Let's go look at some of the books and maybe you'll recognize the genre based on the covers. I'm assuming you've seen some of her books at least.”

I nod and follow him to the stairs, happy to watch him climb to the second floor ahead of me. His jungle cat grace makes me gulp. My fingers tingle to touch him and see if his lean muscles are as taut as they seem.

“Just from knowing Ava, I'm guessing she will like fiction or romance over nonfiction. Would you agree?” When he looks over his shoulder and finds my mouth hanging open, he clarifies further. “Do you think she's reading about World War II or the Great Potato Famine or a real event like that?”

“Oh, no. That all sounds way more depressing than she’d want to read.”

“Right. So, our historical fiction books are over here.” He points to a section of books in the corner. I see there is a very helpful sign immediately above the bookshelf that says HISTORICAL. I scan the wall to see signs identifying other fictional categories, MYSTERY, WESTERN, YOUNG ADULT. “Do these covers look anything like the books you’ve seen Ava carrying around?”

I scan the books on the shelf and bite my lip. I have no idea.

“Or,” Brent walks across the room, the floor boards of the old building squeaking under his weight. “Our romance section is over here. Everything else is alphabetical, but we have romance separate because it’s one of the most popular genres for our clientele.”

The romance section takes up the entire wall. I see covers with bare male chests, covers with quaint country houses, covers with beautiful young couples, and I’m immediately overwhelmed. Am I supposed to recognize her books from within this huge selection?

Brent steps to the left and points to a label on the edge of the shelf that reads SMALL TOWN. “The books are shelved by sub-genre. Here are the historical romance books.” He shifts down the wall a bit. “Do these covers look more familiar?”

I feel better when I see that most of the women on these covers look like they belong in the show Bridgerton. “No, that is most definitely not what she’s been reading.” I wander back to the first section he showed me and study all the covers. I shake my head. “These are all so different from one another. It’s so hard to say.”

“There is a lot of history to read about, that’s for certain.” Brent crosses his arms and taps his mouth with a finger. He looks so cute, I’m not about to interrupt him. He

squints to the corner of the room and nods. “You know what?”

I follow him to the section of books labeled YOUNG ADULT.

“If I were a betting man,” he says, picking up a book from the shelf and handing it to me. “I would guess that Ava would like this book. It’s a pretty new release, so the chance of her having read it already is slim. It’s historical fiction set in 1989 Romania. About a spy network that helped topple a dictatorship. I’ve read it and loved it, and even if it isn’t what Ava reads regularly, I think she’ll enjoy it. If she’s absolutely not interested in reading this book, she can come exchange it for another book.”

I look at the cover of the book, which holds absolutely no interest for me. I flip it over and skim the back jacket but can’t even keep my attention on it long enough to finish three sentences. “You’ve read this?”

“I’ve read all the books by this author. She’s excellent.”

There is a hunger in his expression that entices me. Like he can’t wait to devour the next book this author releases. I wonder how I can get him to look at me that way. “And she can exchange it if I’ve gotten it all wrong?”

“Yes, or if she’s already read it. I’ll include a gift receipt to make it easy for her.”

I smile down at the book, knowing as soon as Ava sees the book receipt, she’ll know what I’ve been up to. I nod. “I’ll take it.”

“Great. Do you have more browsing to do? Or would you like to hang out and have a coffee?”

My heart skips a beat when I think about sitting at the coffee bar and visiting with

Brent for a while. But just as I think it, I see him raise a finger to another customer. “No, I think this will be enough for me. I saw that you had some cool bookmarks downstairs. I’ll go browse those while you help that person.”

Brent smiles. “Callie will probably be able to help you downstairs.”

“Oh,” I try not to let my disappointment show. I didn’t realize there was anyone else working in the store. “Um, thanks for your help then.”

He smiles politely. “I hope Ava likes the book. ”

I watch him approach the other customer with the same polite smile he gave me and my heart sinks. I have absolutely no impact on him whatsoever. I think of Barista Boy and Hot Dog Cart Guy and Yoga Boy. They would all brighten when they saw me coming. Brent scowls. Any conversation I started with those other boys soon turned flirtatious. With Brent, it remains one hundred percent on the topic of books and reading. Brent leads the customer over to another section of books. He leans down to pluck a book off the shelf, and he hands it to the man. Everything he is doing now is the exact same way he did it with me.

Could it be that Brent Post doesn’t find me attractive? I turn away and head down the stairs to buy my book from Callie. My thoughts are a fog of confusion. If Brent doesn’t like me, I’m not sure I know how to change his mind.

### Chapter Seven

I contemplate Ines and Lincoln across the table. They've pulled their chairs close so that their shoulders rub as they sit. Lincoln's hand rests in Ines's lap, their fingers entwined. They are both glowing, and I don't think it's just because of the propane fire crackling merrily in the center of our table. I look at Bridget and rethink it. She looks rather glowing too. Maybe the firelight is complimentary.

It's a warm night. The fire is set on the lowest setting, barely giving off any heat. It's basically a huge candle in the middle of the dining table of the rooftop restaurant where we've gathered. We sit under the stars, ready to taste-test food for the happy couple's wedding reception. I'm so hungry, I want to tuck my napkin into my collar and hold my utensils like I'm going to stab someone if they don't serve me soon.

The caterer and her assistant bring out our first selections. Plates are set in front of each of us with five choices of appetizers.

"You will be choosing three appetizers," the caterer explains. She tells us what each of them is and gives details about the fancy ingredients or preparation that is involved in each of them.

My stomach growls loudly, and Bridget snorts and pushes me. I open my mouth widely and pretend I'm going to eat the entire plate in a single bite, which makes my sister snort a second time. Mom lifts an eyebrow at us, but I see the side of her lips twitch. She's fighting a smile and is probably as hungry as I am.

We're finally allowed to eat. I scarf down all five choices, barely taking time to

notice if I like them or not. Let's be honest here. It isn't like I have a discerning palate. I'm just here to enjoy the food. This is totally up Mom's and Dad's alley. I'm pretty sure that's why Ines and Lincoln invited them both. Lincoln's mom is here as well. She might be the sweetest mother ever in the history of the world. I totally get why Lincoln is so fun and easy-going. I have zero complaints about my parents, but that doesn't mean I don't admire qualities other parents have that mine don't, and Lincoln's mom's sweet, nurturing way is definitely enviable to a girl raised by parents who considered her independent and capable by my second birthday.

Mom asks the caterer a question about the mushroom stuffed pastry – which has a much fancier name than that. It's one of those questions that makes Bridget, Ines, and I exchange a look that says, "What the heck is she even talking about?" However, I'm surprised when the caterer doesn't do a back flip, she's so excited to share the answer with Mom. The entire conversation is over my head, but Mom is duly impressed by whatever it is the caterer is going on about. Mom's eyebrows are arched, her head is cocked, and she's nodding. All strong acceptance cues from Amanda Jones, restaurant connoisseur and foodie. Dad is explaining some of the nuances of each appetizer to Ines, Lincoln, and his mom. Bridget and I giggle when Ines looks at us as if to say, "Save me now."

Next, we are served plates with an arrangement of three different salads. I scowl at it and Bridget snorts again. Her fork is already poised and ready to stab the lettuce on her plate while I'm wondering if it would be insulting for me to pass altogether.

Something the caterer says catches my attention. "Wait, did you say there are anchovies in one of these salads?"

The caterer nods.

I look at Ines. "Please don't pick that one. Bek probably won't even walk into the room if she knows there is an anchovy under the same roof. She has a fish allergy and

she takes every opportunity to remind me.”

Ines squints. “How often do you eat anchovies?”

“Never. I don’t even know what they taste like, but for some reason, that little fish is a trigger for her.”

“Is Bek still as flighty as she was when she was little?” Ines asks.

Dad snorts and says, “More so, I think.”

“Dad!” I scold.

Ines grins and looks up at the caterer. “Which one has the anchovies?”

The woman points.

“Please make note that we won’t be choosing this one and that there cannot be any anchovies in the building the night of our wedding.”

The caterer nods. “Then you’ll choose one of the remaining two, or I can prepare the third without the anchovy.”

She leaves and I thank my sister. I think it’s super sweet of Ines and Lincoln to be inviting our best friends to the wedding too. She knows Cisco’s and Justice’s friends better than mine because Ava, Bek, and I were only ten years old when she moved out. Bridget doesn’t even have the same friends she had then, so Ines doesn’t know them at all, but she’s including them anyway.

I sigh and decide to at least try a bite from each salad. It’s official, anchovies are disgusting. When I’m finished, I shrug and swap my plate with Bridget’s empty one.



She grins at me and scarfs up my salad as well.

Next, we get to try the main dishes. I'm in heaven as I eat my way through the filet mignon, chicken marsala, butternut squash ravioli, and the seared scallops. We've already ruled out the seafood dish, though it was scrumptious. When Ines and Lincoln can't decide which dish not to offer, Mom tells them to choose them all and ask people to RSVP with their meal choice. The caterer confirms they can accommodate that and explains what that does to the price structure, but Mom and Dad both wave that concern away.

"Your lovely dishes need to be enjoyed, dear." Mom pats the caterer on the arm. "If you can accommodate it then so can we."

"Thank you so much, Mom and Dad," Ines gushes. "That will be so nice to be able to offer such a strong selection of foods."

Bridget leans toward me and pitches her voice low. "Are you bringing a date to the wedding?"

I look at her. "Can I?"

She sits up. "Ines, are we allowed to bring a date?"

Lincoln answers. "Absolutely. Your friends can as well."

An image of Brent wearing a suit forms in my mind and will not go away. Oh, my goodness-golly, I can only imagine what it would feel like to be on his arm when he's dressed up. I picture us entering the reception hall, him gliding like a panther.

Bridget clears her throat. "Does that look indicate a yes?"

“What look?” I make sure my expression is all innocence when I meet her gaze.

“You were definitely thinking of someone just then. It looked like you wanted to pounce.”

I sigh. “Oh my gosh, Bridge. I’m developing a huge crush on this guy, and he doesn’t even know I exist.”

“I have a hard time believing that.”

“Well, he knows I exist, he’s just not the least bit interested in me. I have no idea how to get his attention.”

Bridget taps a finger on the table as she contemplates my situation. “What is he into? Have you tried showing interest in it?”

I close my eyes and nod, then tell her about the visit to the bookstore for a book for Ava.

I brighten. “But I get to go back this week to pick up a copy of a magazine he and I both like. So maybe that’ll help?”

“Start a conversation with him this time that doesn’t have to do with books.”

“Like what?” I slap a hand on the table, rattling the silverware. “I told the girls that Brent and I wouldn’t have anything in common, and I was right.”

Bridget cocks her head. “Really? It doesn’t sound like you know that yet. You need to get him talking so that you can discover what you do have in common.”

I nod. “Okay. I’ll try. Thanks, Bridge.” Then I ask hesitantly, “Are you seeing anyone

new?”

Her smile is sad. “Not yet. But I can feel that I’m getting closer.”

I squeeze her hand. “I’m glad. You deserve happiness.”

“Thanks, sis. You do too!”

“Do you think Justice or Cisco will bring dates?”

“Justice might. He’s been seeing Layla for a couple months now. But Cisco?” Bridget makes a funny face. “He’d have to pay for her airfare to get her here, and I can’t see him doing that for someone he’s only been on two or three dates with.”

She’s right. It’s hard to imagine a serial dater having anyone to bring to the wedding. I bite my lip. She might say the same of me though. But, if I get to see Brent in a suit, maybe I’ll finally be willing to go past that second date.

A selection of desserts is set in front of me, and I squeal. “My favorite part of dinner.”

My sisters chorus at the same time, “Dessert!”

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 6:54 am*

### Chapter Eight

“Gotcha something.” I hand Ava the wrapped book. I figured since I got it for her, I might as well present it like a gift. I chose pink wrapping paper decorated with heart-shaped bubbles. The bow is also pink.

Summertime is the best because Ava and Bek can spend the night even though it’s Sunday. They both work tomorrow, but I’ll drop them off together. I miss having them around on the weekends. Responsibility sucks!

“What is this for?” Ava eyes the package suspiciously.

At first, her caution irks me, but when I think back, I realize I don’t give presents often. Especially when there isn’t a holiday or birthday.

Bek giggles. “Just open it.”

I give Bek an appreciative smile while Ava carefully tears the paper open.

“Oh my god, Sam. This is amazing. How did you know?” She looks at Bek. “Have I said something about this book, or something?”

I perk up. “So, it’s a good choice?”

“Yeah, it’s great!” She fans through the pages. “I don’t get it...”

She comes to the gift receipt stuck into the book at the beginning of chapter one,

along with a bookmark for Beckett's. And she grins. "Oh my gosh, Sam. You went to see Bookstore Boy!"

I bury my face in my hands and squeal. "I've been twice."

"What!" Ava cries. "Why am I just now hearing about it?"

I slap my hands into my lap and whine. "You've been so busy!"

"Hello. Text." She waves her phone in the air.

There's a knock on my bedroom door just before Mom and Dad push through.

"There was a pizza delivered for you." Dad holds the box over his shoulder, balanced on the tips of his fingers like a waiter with a tray.

Mom carries an actual tray laden with three tall glasses filled with ice and sparkling water. From the fruit garnish, I'm guessing they are raspberry-flavored waters.

"Very fancy, Mrs. Jones," Ava says. "Thank you."

"There aren't any anchovies on that pizza, are there, Mr. Jones?" Bek asks.

I point at Bek and look at Mom with wide eyes. She chuckles.

"Never, Bek. No anchovies can enter this house. We had a special anchovy ward installed years ago by a local wizard when you discovered your fish allergy."

"You did?" Bek's eyes are wide with wonder.

Indecision crosses Dad's face and I laugh out loud. "We did, Bek."

She looks at me. “Why didn’t you ever tell me?”

“Uhhhh...” I shrug.

Now Ava, Mom, and Dad are laughing too.

Bek looks at Dad in all seriousness. “Thank you, Mr. Jones. That means a lot to me.”

His laugh fades into an unsure smile. His brow is knit. He clearly has no idea if Bek is serious or not. Welcome to my world, Dad.

Mom unloads some paper plates and napkins from the tray. “We’re going out with the Houstons tonight. We’re trying that new Asian fusion restaurant.”

Dad looks at Bek. “They definitely serve fish there.”

She shrinks into the ball chair like he held an anchovy in front of her face. “I won’t be visiting that place, thank you.”

“Girls?” Mom looks from Ava to Bek. “Do you have anything to wear to the wedding? It’s formal, you know.”

Bek nods but Ava bites her lip.

“I realize it’s still months away, but if you’d like for me to take you shopping, I’m happy to,” Mom offers.

Her generosity makes my heart swell. But the shuttered expression on Ava’s face makes me bite my lip.

“I can’t take you up on that, Mrs. Jones,” my friend says. “Thank you, though.”

I look at Ava. “You should wear one of my dresses. I have so many and honestly, I’ll never wear them again.”

“That’s a wonderful idea, Sam,” Mom says.

Ava nods. “Thanks, I would love to do my part in making sure your wardrobe is used sufficiently.”

I can see the wheels in Mom’s head turning, trying to figure out how she can pay to get the dress altered to fit Ava without offending her. I catch her eye and wink, letting her know I’ll help her out. She relaxes and turns toward the door. “You girls enjoy your evening.”

“You too,” we chorus together.

Dad winks and waves.

As soon as they pull the door closed, Ava pounces on me .

“Tell me all about Brent. What did you think? Is he totally smitten? Oh my gosh, you two would have beautiful babies.”

“Gross, Ava.” I laugh.

Bek pauses in her quest for pizza and looks at Ava with concern. “I’m not sure I agree with that. What color would their hair end up? Would it be somewhere between his brown and her blond? What if they got his square jaw and her prominent cheekbones? Would that make their features too sharp to be appealing?”

My mouth hangs open. I can’t believe she’s talking about how our kids might be ugly. Ava has the same shocked expression on her face as I do.

Then Bek's breezy smile lights her face. "Just kidding."

Ava and I make noises of protest at the same time.

We crawl off the bed to get our own pizza. Ava's foot tangles in the bedspread somehow and she falls forward onto the cushy carpet.

"You okay?" I ask, offering her a hand.

"Of course." She sighs.

When we're seated again, I tell Ava about my first visit and then tell them both about my second.

"Bridget says next time I go in I should talk to him about things that aren't book related to see if we have anything in common."

Bek leans her head back against the bubble wall and stares up into its black depths. "That's a good idea. Even though he seems suspicious about you suddenly showing up, he likely hasn't considered it's because of him."

Ava nods slowly. "Why don't you just ask him out? Isn't that what you've done with the other boys?"

I wag a hand back and forth. "Kind of. They showed interest, so it didn't seem strange for me to ask them out. Brent is giving me nothing."

"When do you plan to go back? "

"This week. The new copy of that magazine we both like will be available."



“Oh, that gives you something to talk about,” Bek says.

“But it’s reading. So, it isn’t telling me anymore about him than I already know.”

“Oh, that’s true.” She sounds like a fairy who lost her wings.

“At least it could get a conversation going, though,” Ava says. “And from there, maybe you can ask what else he likes to do when he isn’t reading or selling books.”

I brighten. “That sounds logical.” I pound the back of my head against my headboard. “Why am I having such a difficult time talking to this boy?”

“It sounds like he matters a little more than the others.” Ava’s expression questions if that’s true or not.

I rub my lips together. “I don’t know if it’s the challenge of getting him to show interest in me, or the fact that you suggested him in the first place, or what, but I get tongue-tied and giddy when I’m around him, and it isn’t like me. I don’t like it!” Mostly. But I don’t want to admit that a part of me enjoys the challenge and the thrill of anticipation.

“You’ll figure it out, Sam,” Bek says. “I believe in you.”

I look from Bek to Ava, and I realize they both believe in me. I take a deep breath and nod. “I believe in me, too. Now, what do you want to watch?”

I pick up the remote and start browsing.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 6:54 am*

### Chapter Nine

After changing outfits half a dozen times, I scold myself for putting far too much thought into what I'm going to wear to the bookstore. I purposefully choose simple summer clothes, white shorts, a blue sleeveless top, and strappy sandals. My hair is even in a ponytail. Everybody knows that a girl isn't trying to impress anyone when she's wearing a ponytail, right?

I hop into my car and head downtown. As I approach the bookstore, my mouth is already dry. I wish I understood why Bookstore Boy is so different from the other boys.

As I push through the door, I'm momentarily distracted by how empty the store is. There are usually at least a couple customers browsing and others seated, but today, there is a single gal sitting at a table typing furiously on her laptop. She has big headphones on that I'm guessing have something to do with the speed at which she's typing. I turn my thoughts to the front counter and freeze in my tracks when I find Callie there. She looks up and smiles, so I stumble into action again as if my forward progression will somehow cover up the fact that I am there to see Brent. I mentally scold myself to relax. There is no way she would know my true reason for being in the store.

Suddenly, I don't know what to do. I can't buy the magazine if he isn't here. Then I would need to make up another excuse to come to the store and it would become obvious, wouldn't it? I'm confused and don't know what to do, so I end up standing in front of the counter like a lost lamb.

“Can I help you?” Callie says.

“Um, yeah. I think I want a mocha, please.” What the heck. I’m here. I can sit and enjoy a coffee at least. I plop on a barstool.

“Whipped cream?”

“No thanks.” I pick up a cute little pocket travel guide of our hometown and start paging through it. Our town is microscopic, so it makes sense that the guide is minuscule as well, but I’m surprised to find a write-up on the annual ghost tour they host at Halloween time and instructions on how to access the local’s menu at the café on Third Street.

Callie sets my mocha down in front of me.

“This is adorable.” I wave the little book.

“I know,” she enthuses. Then she tips her head back. “Turn to page thirty.”

Page thirty is almost at the end of the book. The chapter heading is Celebrity Lineage. I arch an eyebrow at Callie, and she nods knowingly. I skim the page, but I’m quickly tripped up by seeing “the Post family” mentioned. I return to the beginning and read from the start.

Our little town of Oak Grove has a lineage involving the local Post family that most people don’t know about. Our very own Aiden Post is the great-grandson of one of our town’s founding fathers, Earnest Post, a publishing magnet at the turn of the century. Earnest Post was editor-in-chief at the esteemed Steamer Press. His son, Truman Post, gained his own fame as the Publisher at Flapper Press. Aiden’s father and uncle each ran one of the publishing houses, but Aiden inherited them both when the men passed. He combined the two presses under one umbrella and then started a

third imprint as well. He has grown the business into a world-renowned publishing house that produces no fewer than 150 new titles each year across the three imprints. The Post family quietly supports our schools by donating books and sponsoring author visits every year. He funds the high school debate team and the academic decathlon. And all the while, the people of Oak Grove are unaware of all he has accomplished and all he does for our community. Three cheers to the Post family.

I look at Callie with my mouth hanging open. “Is Aiden Brent’s dad?”

She nods with a knowing look on her face.

“Brent is descended from Oak Grove’s founding fathers?”

She leans forward like we’re sharing the biggest secret together. “Isn’t that a trip?”

It’s no wonder Brent’s bookish if he comes from a long line of publishers. I bite my lip and wonder if he’s always silently correcting my grammar. Can he even help himself?

“Is Brent off today?” I ask since we’re talking about him anyway. That seems like a normal question, right?

“No, he’s in the back, stocking. Do you want me to tell him you’re here?” Callie asks.

I look at her in surprise. “No! Why would I want that?”

“Don’t panic.” She laughs. “I just thought you were friends.”

“Oh, no.” I breathe a sigh of relief. I thought she figured me out. “I mean, we know each other. But we aren’t friends.”

Someone walks up to the register, so Callie walks away. I page through the little guidebook to see if there are any other interesting town facts that I can learn. Then I slide the book back onto the display rack.

I'm considering my next move when Brent walks in from the backroom. His hair is messy, his shirt wrinkled and dirty, and his muscles glisten with the sheen of sweat. He's wiping his hands on a rag as he walks behind the counter.

"Callie, can you make a note that we need new blades for the box cutter and more tape?"

"Sure."

He removes his glasses and uses the rag to wipe his forehead, face, and neck.

"Man, I wish we had air conditioning." He tosses the rag behind the counter, plucks a cup from the stack, and fills it with ice and soda. He drinks almost the entire cup before coming up for breath. I'm enthralled by the bobbing of his Adam's apple as he swallows. A satisfied gust of air escapes him when he finishes. "That hits the spot."

He sees me and scowls. Why is he always scowling at me?

Then he brightens. "Global Lit came in. It's in the back. Can you hang out a bit? I'll get it logged in for you if you want one."

My heart flutters like he's just proposed marriage. "Don't hurry for me. I can always come back tomorrow if that's more convenient."

"You probably have somewhere to go," he says knowingly, which makes me wonder what he knows. "I'll make sure to get them checked in tonight so they're on the shelf tomorrow. Be warned, I'm going to rearrange the periodicals, so they won't be in the

same place.”

I’m so excited for another excuse to see him that I’m probably grinning like a crazy person. I put on my best flirty expression and lean toward him. “You can show me where you moved them to when I come back tomorrow. ”

I don’t even know if he saw me. The cup is at his mouth again and he tips his head back. I hear ice shift as he drinks the last of his soda. He wipes his mouth and shakes his head. “I don’t work tomorrow, but Callie can show you.”

“Oh crap. I have a thing tomorrow.” I totally lie, but I don’t want to come back to see Callie. I try for flirty again. I cock my head sideways and give him an ‘I know you want to see me again’ look. “I’ll just come back in a couple days. Do you guys usually sell out?”

He shakes his head. “No, I think you and I are the only two people in all of Oak Grove who read it.”

I shrug. Now my expression says, ‘We have something in common, remember?’ “Mrs. K does.”

He chuckles. “Yes, but she already subscribes, so she doesn’t have to get her copy from us.” He hitches his thumb over his shoulder, and I’m momentarily distracted by his well-shaped bicep. “Let me just run back there and grab one for you.”

I wave my hand. “No, really, don’t worry about it. I’d actually forgotten about it. I was downtown for another reason and stopped in for a coffee. I’m happy to come back.” Please forgive the lies, universe.

“Okay. If you’re sure.”

“I am.”

He turns away, snatches the rag out from under the counter, and heads toward the back room. I slouch in my seat, bummed he’s working in the back. Then he turns back to me. “Did Ava like the book?”

I straighten. “She did! She was so excited. Turns out it was on her list of books to read.”

“Her tbr.” Brent nods knowingly.

I cock my head. “What’s a tbr?”

“It’s a list most avid readers keep. Stands for “to-be- read.” I’m glad she liked receiving it. I hope she enjoys reading it as well.”

“Thanks again for your help with that. You sure know your books.” Maybe flattery will soften him up since my flirting seems to fall on deaf ears. But instead, he waves a hand at me dismissively.

“I just know what I like.” He waves. “See ya later.”

“Yeah. See ya.” It’s all I can do to keep myself from heaving a sigh of disappointment. Maybe Brent doesn’t know how to flirt. Maybe it isn’t me, per se, it’s his lack of ability. The conversation went so well and still, there was not even one hint that he might be interested in me. I got lucky that he gave me my next reason to see him, but if I can’t spark any interest during our next rendezvous, I might be forced to close the book completely.

### Chapter Ten

I stare at the empty pool. This is the most boring summer ever. With Ava and Bek working, I have way too much time on my hands. I look at the pile of magazines next to me and sigh. I've paged through them several times already, and the idea of seeing the color schemes for the upcoming fall season again makes my head hurt.

My head falls back against the chaise. Am I the shallowest person ever? I have no interests beyond finding my next date. I don't volunteer like Ava. I don't create art like Bek. Even Ava's boyfriend Dylan fixes cars, and now he volunteers—willingly—with Ava.

I sigh. It isn't like I need a job. So, maybe I could volunteer. I couldn't work with animals though. Dogs know I'm afraid of them and cats hate me. What other kinds of volunteer gigs are there?

I pull out my phone and google "volunteer opportunities in Oak Grove."

No, I don't think I'd be good with old people. Working at the hospital is too germy. There are so many volunteer gigs that work with kids. Kids are not my strength. Oh my god. I'm just realizing that I have no strengths. I bang my head against my chaise in frustration. The springy mesh allows it to bounce back again, without doing damage.

Maybe volunteering isn't my thing. I know art isn't either. What do people do to fill their time?



I type the question into my browser. The number one response is read.

I blink at my screen. Is the universe trying to tell me something? Fine. I fill my browser with “Best books for nonreaders.” The first response is a young adult book, which surprises me. I read the blurb. With phrases like “hot ghost” and “delightfully funny” I can’t help but hit the “buy” button and download a copy to my phone.

I snuggle into my chaise and start to read.

A shiver races through my body. I glance up toward the sun to see if the sky is clouding up. Except the sun isn’t up in the sky. It’s hovering over the horizon. I check the time and blink. I’ve been reading for hours. Like six or so. I’m nearing the end of the book and I think the main character, Suze, is finally going to successfully deal with Heather’s ghost. I can’t just stop reading now. I grab my stuff and race inside. Plop myself on the couch in the family room and keep reading.

An hour and a half later, I finish the book and feel like I’ve just said goodbye to a good friend who is leaving on a long trip. The sun has set, and my empty stomach protests my neglect. I wander into the kitchen to see what’s in the refrigerator. Nothing. The freezer. Nothing. The pantry. Cereal. Back to the fridge. No milk. When everyone lived at home, there was always food in the house, but since Bridget moved out, it’s like Mom’s done being a mom. I guess that’s not true. She still gives me Mom advice and scolds me when I do something wrong or forget to do something altogether. She’s just done grocery shopping.

I give in and order from my favorite Chinese restaurant. Since I must wait for it to arrive, I might as well download the next book in the series. My phone’s about to die though, so I go up to my room and plug it in, and dive right into the next book, stopping only to retrieve my food from the front steps and grab a drink.

My eyelids start drooping sometime after 1:00 a.m., and I realize that I’ve been

reading for more than twelve hours straight. That's crazy! I haven't responded to any texts or scrolled social media. I heard my parents come in a couple hours ago, but didn't bother to pop my head out of my room to say hello like I normally would, because I was in the middle of an intense scene when I heard them climbing the stairs.

I force myself to close my reading app and put my phone on my bedside table. I curl up with my back to my phone so it can't taunt me. My mind is full of Suze's world, her stepbrothers, and her hot cowboy ghost. What would it be like to go to school at a million-year-old mission? And to live by the ocean? My dream. I love how capable and independent Suze is, but her stubbornness frustrates me. She doesn't know how to ask for or accept help, and it totally screws things up. Oh, my goodness, and to have a hot ghost living in your bedroom? Crazy. I totally understand why she's self-conscious about changing her clothes. What if he's watching?

I rub my face, trying to release some of the...is it tension? Whatever it is, it feels strange. Is this how Ava feels all the time? Or is it only because I read for such a long stretch? Maybe this is why Brent doesn't flirt with me. He's too busy communing with the characters in his head to bother getting to know someone new.

As I drift off to sleep, I feel like I understand him a little better.

I sleep in later than usual and wake up rubbing my sandpapery eyes. It isn't a surprise that I dreamed about Suze and Jesse. As I lay in bed, I'm trying to ground myself back in my own world instead of Carmel-by-the-sea. Today, Bek and I are going to a movie and shopping, and I need to be present. Bek is flighty enough for the both of us. We don't need me living in another world as well.

I turn on some music so I can sing along while I shower and get ready for the day. As I blow-dry my hair, I lean toward the mirror and realize my eyes are bloodshot. Must be from my reading fest. I have a mild headache, too. I've heard Ava use the term

“book hangover” before and wonder if that’s what I have.

I throw on a skirt and a tank and slip on my favorite sandals. I have a little time before I have to head over to Bek’s, so I plop on the couch and decide to read a chapter or two.

When a text pops up from Bek asking, Where are you? You okay? I leap to my feet, grab my purse, and run out the door, typing my reply after I dive into the driver’s seat of my car.

Me: Got distracted. On my way.

Bek: No worries. I’ll get our tickets so that we can just go straight in.

Bek is squatting in her front yard when I pull up. She skips over to the car as soon as she sees me.

“What were you doing?” I ask by way of greeting.

“Talking to the bees,” Bek says. “Mom lets our dandelions grow for them. I was just asking if there were enough for them.”

“Did they answer?” I eye her suspiciously.

“No.” Bek stares out her window with a happy little grin on her face. “But one did land on my hand and crawl around for a while.”

“Did it sting you?”

“It didn’t have any reason to. I wasn’t threatening it. ”

At the theater, we must park in the second lot. I fan myself with my clutch purse as we speed walk across the blacktop. “I’m so glad we’re spending the hottest part of the afternoon in an air-conditioned theater.”

Bek, who never looks like she’s hurrying, even when we are, smiles benignly. “Why? You have air conditioning at home. You could just stay there if it’s too hot.”

“True, and you could hang with me, so you don’t melt also. I just like to get out of the house as often as possible.” Even as I say it, I realize for the first time ever that I’d rather be home reading. How strange.

Bek holds her phone screen out to the ticket taker who scans the barcode and confirms there are only two of us entering. He points us in the direction of our theater before turning to the group of kids entering behind us. They are likely here to see the latest superhero movie. Bek and I are here for the latest rom-com. If I had to live in a movie for the rest of my life, I would want it to be a romantic comedy.

Because we’re late, we don’t get to sit in the middle like we usually do, but we find pretty good seats halfway up and just to the right of center. The previews are already playing when we sit down, so we don’t have long to wait for the movie to start.

Bek leans over and whispers, “This is based on a book. I can’t wait to see how true it is to the storyline.”

Bek isn’t an avid reader like Ava, but she’s always working through a book. I look at her with wide eyes when I realize that I can read romantic comedies too.

“What?” she asks.

“Nothing. I just...you made me think of something.”

The theater goes dark, so Bek turns back to the screen.

The movie is funny and poignant, sad, and uplifting. And the entire time I'm watching it, I wonder what it would have been like to discover the story through the book.

### Chapter Eleven

I wait a couple of days before I go back to the bookstore. For some reason, I don't want Brent to know how eager I am to see him. Plus, with Ava and Bek both working, it gives me an entire day to finish the second book in the series and move on to the first book in a rom-com series. Of course, I stayed up too late, but the book had me giggling and snorting and I couldn't put it down. The couple in this one reminds me so much of Ava and Dylan. I can't wait to get back to it this afternoon.

When I walk into the bookstore, Brent looks up from whatever he's doing behind the counter. He smiles, which makes me freeze in place. As soon as his brow knits into his normal scowl, I proceed forward with a little more confidence. I dodge a tower of books made up of what looks like a thriller.

"Why did you stop?" he asks.

I point to the door. "You mean just now?"

"Yeah."

I laugh. "Because you smiled when I came in. I thought something must be wrong."

"Why?" He cocks his head and his bangs flop over his glasses. But his brilliantly bright eyes still glow from under his Clark Kent disguise. I almost let my sigh of pleasure escape my lips.

"I'm far more familiar with that scowl." I point my finger at his face. "When you

smiled, I thought maybe someone was behind me or maybe you were sick.”

His mouth drops open. “No way. That can’t be true. I do not scowl at you.”

He’s so emphatic it makes me giggle. “You do too, Brent. Cross my heart.” I draw an “X” over my heart for emphasis.

When he scowls again, I pull my phone out and snap a picture before he has a chance to figure out what I’m doing. I spin the photo so he can see it. “This is how you greet me whenever I come in. Like you’re suspicious of my intentions.”

Brent snatches the phone from me and stares at it. “Nah. That’s not how I look at you.”

“It is.”

He scowls at the picture one last time before handing my phone back. “I’m sorry about that.”

“I’m sure I won’t have to do therapy for too long because of it.”

His eyes bug out until he sees my smirk, and then he narrows them at me. “I see how you are.” Then he jumps. “I almost forgot.”

He strides over to the bookshelf behind the counter and plucks something off the top corner. When he comes back, he plops a copy of Global Lit on the counter in front of me.

“Oh my gosh, you kept one aside for me?”

“I didn’t want it to sell out and leave you empty-handed.”

I'm totally confused. He still doesn't give off any flirtation vibe. Is this just Brent's version of excellent customer service? Would he do this for anyone? "That was very thoughtful of you."

"I actually sold a couple copies yesterday. After our conversation, it hit me that I should send Mrs. K. an email to let her know the store carries the magazine now. A couple students came in to get their own copy. One told me Mrs. K. announced it in class. So, I put one aside for you just in case."

I affect my best announcer voice. "The bookstore employee of the month award for stellar salesmanship goes to Brent Post." I clap as he takes a bow. "How about a white chocolate mocha, too, Bookstore Boy? I'll hang out for a bit and page through the new edition."

"Sure thing." He narrows his eyes at my use of his nickname. I'm sure he thinks it's because I just awarded him the employee of the month award. The corner of his mouth turns up, telling me he likes it. Grabbing a mug, he starts pulling levers and adjusting knobs on the coffee machine. It looks very complicated, but he still seems to have the same pleased look he had when I called him Bookstore Boy. I bite my lip, wondering if I'm starting to get to him.

"Have you read it yet?" I point to the magazine when he glances my way.

"Some. There's a great story in there about an orphan that I really enjoyed. Gave me a new perspective on the things they face when they switch foster homes."

My heart breaks a little just from his sympathetic expression. "I'll check it out."

I'm wracking my brain for a conversation that doesn't involve reading when my phone dings. It's a text from Ava.



Ava: 911! Are you around?

Me: Yeah, I'm here. What's up?

Ava: I was lifting a bag of dog food and split my pants. [ crying emoji ]

Me: What can I do?

I look up at Brent. "Make that to go. Ava has a wardrobe malfunction I need to help her with."

"Uh oh. Is she okay? "

"Yeah."

Ava: Can you swing by my house? There are a pair of jeans on my bed that I almost wore today, but tossed aside for my favorite pair [angry face emoji]

Me: Is your house unlocked? Do I knock?

"What's wrong?" Brent asks.

I realize the sides of my mouth are turned down dramatically. "Oh, I'm just unsure of her instructions. I've asked for clarification. It's fine." Though, by the way my heart races, maybe it isn't. The last time I was at Ava's house, I was, maybe, six or seven years old. I know things at her house aren't horrible like they used to be, but I still never go there.

Ava: You can knock. Grandma should be home. Let her know I sent you. She won't go upstairs, so you'll have to run up there.

Me: On it.

Ava: Thank you soooooooooo much! [multiple heart eyes emojis]

Brent's ringing up my magazine and coffee. The mocha is in a to-go cup on the counter in front of me, complete with latte art.

"Oh my gosh, look at you go. You made a stack of hearts for me." I don't tell him that I've always thought this particular latte art resembles a male's anatomy. I bite my lip when I see the stack of hearts curves to make it look even more so like...well, that.

"A tulip. I'm just learning. I swear I'm not trying to send any subliminal messages. It's a tough design to make. I should have stuck with a single heart. I've got that one down. To think, I was worried about what message that would send."

I laugh, relieved to know he sees the same thing I do.

"If you weren't in a hurry, I would never have given that to you."

"As much as I would love to see this each time I take a sip, maybe a lid is in order so I don't get mocha all over Sunny."

"A lid." He hits his forehead. "I could have spared myself the embarrassment if only I'd thought of that first. Who's Sunny? A new boyfriend?"

I narrow my gaze on him. He's avoiding eye contact as he secures a lid to my cup. Is he worried I have a boyfriend? He's impossible to read. It's so aggravating. "Sunny is my car."

"Oh, that makes sense. Yellow, like the sun."

A little thrill courses through me that he knows what car I drive. I insert my credit card into the card reader and add a tip when it prompts me.

“Want a receipt?” he asks.

“No thanks.”

“Then you’re good to go.” He presses a button on his register screen with a flourish. “I hope everything is good with Ava.”

“I’m sure it will be. Thanks.” I’m bummed that I can’t hang out, but Ava or Bek will always come first before any boy. Regardless, I’m not exactly excited about having to stop at Ava’s house. I wave the magazine in the air and back away slowly, not wanting to give up this pleasant rapport with him so soon. “Thanks for saving this for me.”

“Of course. Let me know what you think about that art...watch out!”

Just as he yells it, my heel full-stops against something. My momentum keeps me traveling backward though, and I feel my body tumble through the air. On instinct, I hold my coffee away from my timbering body. I hear the cascade of books before I feel my rear end join the avalanche and I slide to the floor.

Brent dashes out from behind the counter and skids to a stop in front of me, mouth agape .

I pick up a book and turn the cover toward him. “What a thrill ride.”

He slams his mouth closed, pinching his lips together. When it appears he’s mastered his reaction, he holds out a hand. I drop the book I’m holding to take it and a new kind of thrill runs through me. My feet slip as I try to find purchase so he can pull me

up, but my butt slides as much as my feet do when he pulls.

Finally, a laugh bursts out of him. He's laughing so hard, he has to bend forward. I continue to shuffle my feet, trying to sift them underneath the lake of books I'm sitting in to set my feet on the floor. The only good thing about all of this is that he's still holding my hand.

At last, a foot finds purchase. "Okay, try again."

He yanks and I'm finally able to lift off the continuously shifting pile. I'm still carefully holding my cup away from my body to avoid any sloshing. When I'm standing, I can't help but brag. "No coffee was harmed in the destruction of the book tower." I look around at the mess and groan. "I'm sorry, Brent."

I think he actually wipes away tears. I narrow my eyes at him.

"No harm." He takes a big breath, and his grin finally relaxes into a smile, which makes the whole embarrassing incident worthwhile. "It happens at least once a week."

"Really? Then why do you keep building them?"

"Because of the entertainment value." He shakes his head when I scowl. "I'm kidding. We have a lot of free time to do stuff like this."

I find the magazine that got swept into the avalanche and pull it out. Brent takes my hand again to keep me steady as I pick my way across the ruined display. I wish I could think of a reason for him to keep hold of it. His is so warm and envelops mine completely.

"Are you okay?" he asks when I'm finally out of the mess.

“Just embarrassed.”

He levels his megawatt smile on me and I’m ready to dive back into the display if it will keep his attention on me.

“Don’t be.” He waves my concern away. “Go take care of Ava.”

Oh right. That friend I swore always came before a boy. “See ya, Bookstore Boy.”

Brent cocks his head, his eyes alight. “See ya.”

### Chapter Twelve

My stomach spins when I raise my hand to knock. Back in elementary school and middle school, Ava had nice things to say about her grandmother. We even saw her now and again when she would drop Ava off or pick her up from birthday parties, my house, or school. The only things I've heard about the woman the last few years are all pretty negative. It seems she has become almost as neglectful as Ava's mother.

My hand is still poised in the air, ready to knock, but I can't seem to make it tip forward and complete the action. I remind myself that though her grandmother has become neglectful, she hasn't become mean. Ava always says that it's her mom who starts screaming first. If I don't start yelling at the woman, I doubt she'll yell at me.

Finally, I force myself to knock.

I wait, straining my ears for the sound of movement inside. Nothing.

I knock again, harder this time, and listen. Still nothing.

My nerves are raw, and I think I'm going to jump out of my skin. Eyeing the doorbell, I gnaw my lip. I hate using the doorbell. My aversion has always struck me as strange since our visitors have to use the doorbell if they want anyone to know they are there. At least this doorbell isn't one of those cameras recording my inner struggle for people to witness and laugh at later.

With a shaking finger, I press the stupid bell. I hear it ring inside the house. If Grandma is downstairs, she should hear that, right?

In no time, I hear some thumping and banging from within. I straighten my back and pull my tummy in, hoping it will fortify me.

The door opens a crack.

“Yeah?”

I smile, hoping to look pleasant and unthreatening. “Hi...” I can’t remember her name, so after an awkward pause, I continue. “I’m Samantha Jones, Ava’s friend. She had an accident at work and I’m here to get her a change of clothes.”

The door swings wide and I find myself looking at a much older version of the woman I remember. I just saw her a couple of weeks ago at Ava’s brother’s graduation and she didn’t look as defeated then. Or maybe I was distracted by the graduation ceremony to take notice of the differences.

My gaze sweeps her from head to toe. Whatever brown was left in her hair four years ago is completely grayed out now. Her face sags more, her eyes are droopier, and her shoulders more slumped. It’s so sad how defeated she looks. But there is concern in her eyes.

“Is she okay?”

I blink. “Yeah. Oh, I’m sorry.” I feel horrible for misleading her. “Not that kind of accident. She split her pants.”

Grandma breathes out. “Oh, well, that’s nothing new. I’m surprised she doesn’t have a change of clothes.”

“She usually does, but you know...” I let the statement drop off because I’m not sure why Ava doesn’t have a spare outfit with her like she usually does. Perhaps she used

the spare outfit already. That's not unheard of.

Grandma just stares at me, so I smile again and ask, "Can I come in?"

The woman startles like she's coming out of a dream. "Sure, sure." She pushes the screen door open and steps back to let me slide past.

With the front drapes pulled closed, the living room is dark and full of shadows. A stale, dusty smell hangs in the air. I consider bolting for the stairs to make a quick escape from Grandma, but I'm stopped by what I see. It's the exact opposite of what I saw in the woman behind me. Where she has changed a lot in a relatively short time, not a single thing in the living room seems to have changed in the decade or so since I last visited. The same two undersized pictures hang on the wall. The coffee and side tables are still free from knickknacks or magazines, or any sign that people inhabit the house. None of the furniture has been moved. It's eerie.

I shake my attention free and move toward the stairs. "I'll just grab a pair of pants for her and be out of your hair."

I take the stairs two at a time. At the top of the stairs, I freeze as terror fires in my muscles. Ava's mom's room is at the top of the stairs, and I almost breezed past like a herd of elephants. Ava has shared countless stories about how mad her mom is when she's awoken during the day. But the open bedroom door reminds me that she works regular office hours now and no longer sleeps during the day.

I inhale a shaky breath and head toward the end of the hall. I've been in this house for all of a minute now and feel like I'll have a brain aneurism if I stay longer. How has Ava survived this long and stayed so sane?

I turn into the last door on the right and feel the wall for a light switch. When light fills the room, I bite my lip. The room has very little personality. The top of the



dresser is bare, and the walls are bare. There is a bed and an empty bookshelf. Then I see the boxes stacked in the corner and plastic bags lined against the wall and I realize I'm in Joel's room. He must already be packing to move.

I flip the light off and cross the hallway to what must be Ava's room. Everything about the room confirms it. The drapes are open, letting natural light fill every corner, the window is ajar allowing fresh air in. The curtains are made from the same rose-covered material that wraps around her desktop. The stuffed animals we've won at the fair over the years sit expectantly on her bed, awaiting her return.

Squinting, I peer at the collage of pictures over her desk until I recognize the three of us. I cross the room for a closer look. I laugh out loud when I see a picture of Bek, Ava, and me from third grade. We're at a school fair in the gymnasium that was some fundraiser my parents took us to. We'd all won something from the fishpond game and Dad snapped a picture of us holding our prizes. Ava has a multi-colored pen, Bek has a mini spiral notebook, and I'm holding a very gaudy necklace that I remember thinking was beautiful.

We'd really thought we'd all gotten lucky enough to "catch" something. I'm only now realizing that there was someone sitting behind the screen putting a prize at the end of every pole that was cast. My dad must have thought we were such idiots.

My heart swells as I study the rest of the pictures. So many memories. I reach out and touch a picture of the three of us cuddled together in my bed. We're ten years old and look so little. Mom snapped this photo the night Ines moved out. I had such a hard time understanding why Ines would want to leave our house. We always had so much fun. I took it personally. Like she was leaving me. My friends stayed with me that night, the three of us like sardines in my bed. They've always been there for me .

I finally spin back toward the bed and snatch up the pair of jeans Ava had discarded this morning.

I'm caught up in the memories the photo collage stirred up as I jog down the stairs, so I startle when I almost run Grandma over. She stands at the base of the stairs waiting.

"I got them." I hold up the jeans to prove my point.

Grandma nods, but her gaze studies my face, not the pants I'm waving at her.

"You've grown into a lovely young woman. Not that that surprises me."

I halt on the bottom step because she stands too close for me to continue without it feeling weird. "Thank you."

She sighs heavily, and something about it tells me she has more to say. I'm not sure how to invite the conversation though, so I smile again, feeling very vapid.

"Our Ava is a good girl."

"She's the best." Her expression tells me this isn't what she wants to say, either. This is so unexpected and I'm desperate to hear what it is she hopes to convey. "Ava is one of the strongest people I know."

Grandma's face crumples. "Well, she has to be. Doesn't she?"

That wasn't what I meant to point out, but it's true, so I keep my mouth shut.

"Lately, I've realized..." she pauses and shakes her head. "I've realized so many things. Ava has grown into a compassionate person. Against all odds, she's a caring person."

I swallow and slam my lips together. But I nod in agreement.

“I didn’t know her dad.” Grandma looks into the living room like we’ll be able to watch the past play out together. “Cora and I were estranged. We’ve always had a...a...tumultuous relationship.”

She rubs her hands together, like she’s washing them, over and over in front of her.

“Well,” she sighs heavily. “I was a bad mom. I was. Cora left home when she was seventeen. Shacked up with her boyfriend. Some guy who was way too old for her.”

This is getting really uncomfortable, and I want to leave, but I can’t imagine excusing myself now.

“That wasn’t Joel’s and Ava’s father, by the way. I don’t know anything about how they met or what their relationship was like. I just know that by the time Cora reached out to me and told me her husband had walked out and she had two young kids, I had recognized my failures as a mother. So, I stepped up.”

She meets my gaze for the first time since she started this story. I don’t know what she sees in my expression, but it seems to make her soften.

“Clearly, that only lasted so long because I haven’t been great for a while now. And Cora and I have made this place a living hell for the kids.”

I nod, because that is one thing I know for sure.

“When Cora got sick, Joel and Ava stepped up to help. They didn’t even pause or think about it, they just did it. Even though she doesn’t deserve it. But Ava...”

She shakes her head and sighs. Her pause draws out longer than I expect, and I wonder if that’s it. If she’s done as suddenly as she began. Then she speaks again.

“Ava has shown a patience and compassion that I don’t recognize, and I’ve wondered if she got it from her father. Because the Lord knows it didn’t come from me or Cora.”

The pain in her eyes makes mine well with tears. A lump forms in my throat that I struggle to swallow around.

Her chin tilts up and a fierce pride kidnaps her expression. She looks like the woman I knew before life dragged her features and her body down. “But it must have been learned from you. You and that little fairy girl have been a huge reason for Ava becoming the young woman she has, you know. If Ava didn’t have your big house and your family and the constant support of good friends, she would be the next generation of me and Cora.”

She looks expectantly at me. I don’t know what she wants from me, and my emotions are hanging on the edge, so I nod.

“Thank you,” she all but whispers. “Thank you for being there when we couldn’t.”

Tears tumble down my cheeks. I step down the final step and throw my arms around the woman. She stiffens at first, but then she returns the hug, patting my back.

“Be off.” Her voice warbles with emotion. “Get those jeans to our girl.”

I nod and scurry out the door.

### Chapter Thirteen

“How did it go?” Ava asks as soon as I drive up. “Was Grandma nice?”

“She was fine.” I eye her. “Are you wearing an apron backward?”

“It’s not like I have a coat with me in this eighty-degree weather,” Ava complains. “It was Bek’s idea.”

“That’s brilliant, actually.” I hand the jeans through my open window. “Super cute room, by the way.”

She blinks. “Oh my gosh, you’ve never seen it.”

“Maybe once or twice back in first grade.” I shrug. “I love all the pictures of the three of us. You’ve inspired me. We need a collage space in my room. Will you help me put one together?”

“Absolutely. Are you sure Grandma was okay?” Ava bites her lip.

“Totally.” I’ll never tell her the woman had me in tears. Or at least I won’t tell her today.

“Thanks so much for doing this. I’d better get back.”

“I’m still picking you guys up tonight though, right?”

“Yep. Sorry to make you come back and forth.” Ava flashes an anxious expression at me as she backs toward the pet store’s back door.

“No big deal.” I wave. “See you in a couple hours.”

I press two short blasts of my horn and wave my hand out the window as I drive away. Though nothing in Oak Grove is really far, I don’t feel like driving all the way home just to come back again in two hours, so I head to the park.

The weather is even more enjoyable as I wander the walking path looking for a bench in the shade. After I sit, I extend my legs straight out in front of me and cross them at the ankles. I consider what Grandma said about Ava being the person she is because of me, my family, and Bek. It’s hard to accept at first, because all I’ve done is be her friend. And we were young, stupid children most of the time. But I think Grandma is right. The three of us have been shaped not only by our family situations—though I have little knowledge of what Bek’s is like because she doesn’t talk about it much—but also by our friendship. I would never be the confident person I am without the security I have in my friends.

I stare out at the oak trees scattered throughout the park and appreciate how each of them is different even though they’ve all grown in the same area receiving the same amount of water, sunshine, and wind. We’re kind of like that too. The biggest difference being that our roots are set in different soils from one another. My soil is rich with love and nourishment. Ava’s has been neglected and dry and depleted of nourishment, which has shaped her into a more cautious person. I think about Bek and wonder what her soil is like. The rare times she mentions her home life, it’s never with disdain or sorrow. She talks about her mom the most, and her nearly vegetative aunt the least. What is it like to live with someone who can do nothing for themselves? Her moody brother is a couple of years behind us in school. I purse my lips, wondering, not for the first time, what Bek’s home life is like. When no answers present themselves, I pull out my phone and start to read.

I'm fully engrossed in my story and snickering to myself when someone calls my name.

I look up to find Bridget coming toward me.

"Hey, sis!" I greet. I hop up to give her a hug. "What are you doing here?"

"Just looking for inspiration for my next piece. I want to do a tree, and I've always thought the park had the prettiest ones."

I examine the nearest tree, whose shade I've been taking advantage of, and feel dwarfed by it. Scanning the landscape, it's like I'm seeing the trees for the first time even though I was just admiring them myself. Suddenly, I'm seeing them through Bridget's eyes. "Wow, they're really pretty, aren't they? I've never noticed how huge they are."

Bridget nods and points to a far-off oak. "I think that's my favorite. I'm pretty sure that's the one they used on the high school. Unless that's a typical growth pattern for an oak." She pulls up photos on her phone and scrolls through them. She stops on one in particular. "Doesn't that look exactly like the silhouette of the oak tree they have on the front of the school? This branch in particular, the way it bends seems unique. That's why I think it's the same tree."

"How old would the tree have to be to be on the school though?" I ask. I don't know how old the school is, but I'm sure it's pretty old.

"All the trees in this park are over two hundred years old. That's why the park is here. To protect the trees."

I gawk at my sister. "Really?"

“Yeah.”

I scan the landscape again with new respect. Two hundred years old. Wow. Bridget is still staring at the picture she showed me. “Are you going to do a sculpture? ”

She nods. “It’s for a class, but if I like it, I’m thinking of entering it at the fair. The timing would work. Class ends on August 15 th and the fair is that next week.”

“Bridget, that’s a great idea.”

She shrugs and shoves her phone into her pocket. “What are you doing here?”

“Killing some time until I have to pick up the girls from work.”

“Were you texting with a boy?” She says it in a sing-song-y voice.

I shake my head. “No, why would you think that?”

“You were giggling.” From her teasing tone, I can tell she doesn’t believe me.

I roll my eyes. “I was reading. The book’s funny.”

All humor drops away and she stares at me.

“What?” I look down at my clothes in case I’m having a wardrobe malfunction of my own.

“You were reading?” she asks. “Like, a book?”

I feel my cheeks flame red like I was caught with a dirty magazine. “I do know how to read, you know.”



“Of course, I know that.” Bridget arches a brow. “It’s just that you don’t. At least you didn’t used to. I haven’t been out of the house for that long that you’ve completely changed your personality, have I?”

Bridget’s reaction might be why I’m so reluctant to talk about my new hobby. I just shrug.

“Oh!” Her eyes widen. “It’s because of that boy, isn’t it?”

I can feel my cheeks heat. “No, actually. That’s just a happy coincidence.”

She studies me a bit before she asks, “What are you reading?”

“Right now, I’m reading the first book in a romantic comedy series. I just finished the first two books in a ghost thriller series, which I was surprised to really enjoy. ”

Bridget gapes at me and I feel self-conscious. This is definitely why I’m hesitant to talk about it.

“Geez, Bridge. You’re making me feel like I’m stupid.”

“Aw, sis, that isn’t it at all. How is it that you even have time? Who are you dating this week? Does he know about his competition?”

I open my mouth and then close it again. Bridget is going to think something is really wrong with me if I answer that honestly.

“What?” she asks. “Does your boyfriend of the week not know about your new reading addiction?”

I sigh. “There isn’t a boyfriend this week.”

She looks around. “Is there no new guy because you’re hanging out alone in the park? Or are you here alone because there is no new guy?”

I glance over to the big outdoor stage and spy Hot Dog Guy manning his father’s cart right next to it. “No, I just...I’m on a break, I guess.”

Bridget squints. Then she looks at her phone. “Shoot, I have to get going. I have a class. Are you okay though?”

I look up at the clear blue sky and shake my head in exasperation. “Yes, Bridget. I’m fine.”

“I’ll call you tonight. Ooo, maybe not until tomorrow. Unless you need to talk. I can stay now if you need me.”

“Holy overreaction! There is nothing to talk about.” I point my finger toward the parking lot. “Get out of here, please. Go.”

She springs forward and wraps her arms around me. “Love you, sis. Call me any time. Understand?”

I just nod because she clearly isn’t listening to what I’m saying. “Bye.”

She sprints across the grass toward the parking lot. I sigh and flop onto the bench, discouraged by the exchange even though I understand where her confusion comes from. I pull my phone out and lose myself in my book again.

I ignore my incoming texts until I see one from Bek pop up.

Bek: Are you okay? Coming? Should we just head home?

Crud. I did it again. I got totally engrossed in my book and lost track of time.

Me: On my way!

Now I'm the one dashing across the expanse of grass, taking the shortest route to my car. I'm going to need to set an alarm or something in the future, so I stop leaving my friends stranded.

### Chapter Fourteen

When I knock on the door this time, my stomach isn't in knots and my palms aren't sweaty. Today, Bek and I are invited to Ava's and everybody knows we're coming. It's moving day for Joel, and we are here to help. Originally, we offered to take Ava to the zoo to distract her from the sadness that she's sure to feel, but then she asked if we would help instead.

I'm not really sure Joel needs the help. Ava says he only has his bedroom stuff to move. I saw his bedroom that day I came over to get Ava's pants. He barely has anything. But she wants to be a part of his day, and she's totally earned that right. I'm honored that she asked Bek and me to be a part of it as well. Her boyfriend, Dylan, is helping too. He and Joel are the muscle.

The door swings open and I feel Bek stiffen beside me.

"Hello Grandma," I say.

I step into the house and give her a hug. I see Ava standing in the kitchen doorway with her mouth hanging open. I step back and point behind me. "The fairy girl is Bek."

"Hello Bek. It's good to see you again."

Bek's eyes are huge. I don't know if she is as terrified as I was the other day when I came alone or if she's surprised to see Grandma here and helping, but she looks like a deer in the headlights.

“Hi,” she squeaks.

Then I’m equally stunned when Ava’s mom steps out of the kitchen. I just saw her a few short weeks ago, at Joel’s graduation, but she looks a million times stronger and healthier than she did that day. Than she ever has! “Ava, do you think Joel would like these potholders? They have an autumn theme, but we never use them. Right, Mom?”

Grandma turns and glances at them. “Nope. We don’t.”

“Yeah, he’ll probably take them,” Ava says. “He said they hardly have any kitchen stuff.”

I grab Bek’s hand, as much for reassurance that we are together and safe as to pull her out of her shocked stupor. “How can we help?”

Ava’s mom looks up like she’s only just realized we are there. “Hello girls. Thanks for helping Joely.”

Ava’s brother jogs down the stairs. “Hey Bek. Hey Sam. Thanks for coming today.”

We greet him as if we’re all close friends when, in reality, we only know Ava. Because her house has always been off-limits, we don’t even know Joel that well.

He looks at me and makes a face. “Would you mind if we put some stuff in your trunk? Yours is the only other car going over to the apartment.”

Good to know that Mom and Grandma aren’t going over too. “Yeah, no problem.”

“Okay, then come on upstairs with me. I figured my clothes would be easiest. I’ve got most of them shoved into trash bags.”

“Freshly laundered, I hope,” Ava’s mom says. “Since you’ll have to pay to do laundry at the apartment complex.”

“He can do his laundry here,” Grandma mumbles .

Ava and Joel exchange a surprised look before Bek, Ava, and I follow him upstairs.

We find Dylan in Joel’s room manhandling the mattress from the bed to lean it against the closet.

Joel point to several white plastic trash bags lined up against a wall. “I don’t know if you can fit them all into your car, but I’d appreciate as many as you can shove in there.”

“We’ll do what we can,” I say. Ava, Bek, and I grab a couple bags each and head downstairs. Out at my car, I open the trunk and we shove bags inside. There is still enough room for one more, and we might be able to put some loose items on top of the bags and maybe stuff things in between.

After several trips up and down the stairs, we have my car packed with enough room left for the three of us, and Joel’s car is full to bursting with barely enough room left for him and Dylan.

“I did not think you had this much stuff,” I say, as Joel quickly closes the back door of his car to keep everything from falling out.

“I didn’t either. It takes up a lot of room when you pile it all together.” He checks the ropes securing his mattress and box spring to the roof of the car. “I’m glad we don’t have far to drive.”

We all step back inside the house together to make sure we haven’t forgotten

anything. When Joel jogs down the stairs a final time, his grandmother is waiting for him in much the same way she waited for me when I stopped by for Ava's pants. He halts in front of her, and the way they look at each other makes my breath hitch. There is so much history and emotion in that shared look. And my conversation with her the other day heightens my emotions. I can see them both blinking back tears. Ava's mom stands near me in the middle of the living room, wringing her hands as she awaits her turn to say goodbye to her son. I smile to myself when I recognize the motion to be the same thing Grandma did when she nervously talked to me. It seems the two women might be more alike than they recognize.

Once again, I reach for the reassurance of Bek's hand. Ava stands in front of us, Dylan by her side. He's got an arm wrapped around her and she's resting her head on his shoulder. We're all spellbound by the touching scene in front of us.

"Joel, I'm sorry for the way things turned out," Grandma says. Her voice is quiet and a little shaky. "I didn't mean for it to go so badly."

Joel stares at his feet and nods.

"But I'm proud of the young man you've grown into."

He looks up at her, surprised.

"Despite the circumstances, you and your sister have stayed good, decent people. You've earned this move all on your own, and I know you've worked very hard to achieve this goal. I hope it turns out to be everything you want."

Joel clears his throat. He glances at Ava, but I can't see her face. "Thanks, Grandma."

"I..." she starts, but then she must clear her throat as well. "I love you, boy."

Joel nods again, seemingly unable to speak. They lean into each other and hug. Holding the hug longer than I expect, with each passing moment I feel more of the tumultuous history they've shared.

Finally, he breaks away and I feel Bek squeeze my hand. Joel walks up to his mom and they just hug. There isn't a big speech or confession. When they break apart, his mom whispers "Good luck, Joely."

When he smiles, he looks so much like Ava, I can't help but like him with all my heart. The rest of us turn and file out of the house, the heavy mood breaking up as we approach the cars.

Ava and Dylan give each other a quick kiss before they part. Dylan holds onto her hand as long as he can and stares at her as he backs toward Joel's car. She smiles and nods even though he never said anything. I want to sigh because it's so sweet that they've reached the non-verbal communication level of their relationship, but I also want to cry because, in that moment, I realize how much I want that.

I fold myself into my car and purse my lips. You can't get to that level in a relationship if you only date someone twice. Not for the first time, I find myself second-guessing my previous decisions. Have I been too picky with my past dates? Do I break it off before giving it a chance? At this stage, will I ever know what it's like to date again?

Bek slides into the passenger seat and Ava stuffs herself into the back, like normal. I wait for Joel to pull out of the driveway before I flip a U-turn to follow him to his new apartment. A cry of protest comes from Ava as she scrambles to keep the contents piled next to her from burying her.

"Sorry!" I meet her gaze in the rearview mirror and am relieved to see her laughing.



When we get there, I pull up to a red curb behind Joel and turn on my flashers. We all pile out of the vehicles and immediately grab something to take to the apartment. Joel leads the convoy of movers through a maze of sidewalks, up a flight of stairs, and through a propped-open door.

There are already people in the apartment even though there is hardly any furniture. A ratty armchair sits in the corner of the living room. Some boxes sit in what I'm guessing is a dining area. We all congregate in the center of the room while Joel drops his armload of stuff to hug and pound the back of one of the guys in the kitchen. I recognize the guy from school, but don't really know him. His name is David Bushnell, and he has a reputation for being very smart. We're introduced to his dad and another guy that looks a lot like David, who turns out to be his brother. Hearing the commotion, his mom and sister come out of a bedroom.

After the introductions, we start trekking back and forth from the car to the apartment to unload. David and his brother help with the bed, which will be set up in the room Joel is sharing with David.

When my car is empty, I find a parking spot and head up to the apartment.

"Who wants pizza?" I ask when I walk in. My stomach is growling and if I don't eat soon, I might gnaw off my own arm. Ava and Bek raise their hands, but everyone else looks at me like I've just declared war. I hold up my phone. "My treat. Just need the address."

"Be sure to order enough for Chris and whoever will be helping him," Ava says.

David's parents exchange a panicked look. They probably don't know how to let a kid pay for food. I'm so thankful that Bek and Ava are acting completely normal. It helps to set the tone. At least with Joel, David, and his brother.

I hear the brother whisper to Joel, “Are you dating Samantha Jones?”

“No, dude, she’s my sister’s best friend.”

I pretend to be busy on my phone, but I’m totally eavesdropping.

“I’ve been out of school for a couple years and even I’ve heard of her. She gets around, right?”

Joel makes a low growling noise. “I don’t think it’s like that, dude.”

With my temper stoked, I stomp into the kitchen where I remember seeing mail. “Is this the address?” I ask David, who stands nearest. He nods. I hop onto my food delivery app, change the delivery address, and order enough pizza, soda, and cheese bread for a small army. If we don’t eat it now, the new roommates will probably appreciate having leftovers. I remember Bridget complaining about not having food when she first moved. Hopefully, none of the new roommates have dietary restrictions or are picky eaters.

By the time I’m done, Joel and Dylan are in the bedroom assembling Joel’s bed. The apartment door still stands open, so we hear the footsteps tromping up the stairs before anyone appears on the landing outside.

“Oh my gosh!” I cry. I leap forward and wrap my arms around Chris Trent’s shoulders. “Dude, are you the Chris moving in here?”

He grins. “I am. What on earth are you doing here? Are you here to break my heart again?”

“I never broke it in the first place.” I see there are people behind him, so I step back to let them pass. The third person to pass is Brent Post! He sees me and...wait for

it...scowls. But this time I scowl back. At first, his scowl deepens, but then his face lights up with laughter.

“Am I doing it again?” he asks.

“Yes, you are. I’m getting a complex.”

Brent follows Chris into the second bedroom, and we hear greetings being exchanged when the roomies see Chris has arrived.

“What was that all about?” Ava sidles up beside me.

Bek is far more obvious. I can practically see her little fairy wings beating a million miles a minute as she hovers excitedly next to me.

“What?” I play dumb.

Ava gives me a significant look and Bek squeaks.

I laugh and tell them about the conversation we had. I even pull up the picture I took of him scowling to prove to him that he did it.

Ava laughs. “I love that you did this.”

Bek sighs. “I hope it doesn’t make him self-conscious.”

“Can you believe he’s here?” I whisper. I think David’s sister is trying to eavesdrop. She’s a couple years behind us at Oak Grove High, so I don’t want her to hear. I lean in closer and lower my volume even more. “I wonder how he knows Chris.”

“Sounds like something you’ll have to ask.” Ava waggles her eyebrows.

“Good idea, smarty pants,” I say. “When did you become so good at the art of flirting.”

Ava stops acting coy. “Isn’t that just making conversation?”

I blow out a breath. “Depends on how you deliver it, I guess.”

Bek, Ava, and I help Chris unload his stuff. By the time we’re done, the pizza arrives and I’m the hero of the hour because everybody is starving. Chris brought a tattered loveseat to add to the living room, so a few people get to sit on furniture, but the rest of us crash on the floor, happy to be off our achy feet. David’s mom digs through boxes until she pulls out almost enough glasses and mugs for everybody to pour themselves soda. Ava, Bek, and I share a mug. The three of us are seated on the floor in the dining area, leaning against the walls. David’s sister and brother are with us. Brent settles his long, graceful body across from me and next to Bek. When I need another piece of pizza, I just grab a box and put it on the floor in the middle of our circle. Everybody digs in for more at once, and Brent’s fingers brush mine. We share a laugh, but I’m disappointed when I don’t see any other emotion in his gaze. Clearly, he didn’t feel the electric sizzle of awareness I felt.

I’ve stuffed myself full and am forced to lean back to make room for my stomach. It looks like everybody else is done too. David’s family thanks me for the pizza and they say their goodbyes. Ava and Bek make an excuse to move into the living room, and I shift until I’m sitting next to Brent, leaning back on my hands, with my legs straight in front of me, crossed at the ankles. It’s a better position for my stuffed tummy.

“What a surprise to see you here,” I say.

“You too. I didn’t put two and two together about Ava being Joel’s sister and you and Ava being close friends.”

“Amazingly, I don’t really know Joel well. So, I was surprised when they asked Bek and me to help today.” Brent stares down at the floor at something, so I study his profile. His ski-slope nose and sharp cheekbones are more defined from the side than from the front. His lips too. Wow. What nice lips he has. “How do you know Chris?”

“Track. I know Joel too, but not as well.”

“I didn’t know you did track.” I squint at him. “Your movements are so fluid and graceful. That doesn’t come from running though, does it? Have you done dance or another sport?”

His eyebrows arch and he peeks at me from under his bangs. “Graceful, really?”

I hum my agreement.

He shrugs. “No, I’ve only ever run. I’ve never had anyone call me graceful either. Or fluid for that matter. Awkward, yes. Lanky, yes.”

“Oh.” I stretch the word out as a realization strikes me. “You’re just now—” I stop, unable to say aloud what I now recognize, having two brothers who went through it too. He’s coming into himself. Getting used to a body that grew too fast. But that sounds really lame even though the thought of it makes me blush.

“What? I’m what?” he asks.

He’s curious, but not eager to know what I’m going to say. He’s still not really flirting either. This guy isn’t showing much interest in me even though we’re getting along better than when I first showed up at the bookstore. I’m beginning to wonder if he has an excellent poker face. There’s only one way to find out. I take a deep breath and decide to play my hand. “Do you want to go to dinner with me?”

He straightens. “Me?”

I look around. “You’re the only one here.”

“And you?”

I squint. Not sure how to answer, I nod.

“Tonight?”

I smile. “No, not tonight. Another night.”

He pauses. He’s playing with a strand of the carpet. Rolling it between his finger and his thumb. Though he’s clearly considering the question, he still has no discernable expression on his face to let me know which direction he’s leaning. I want to scream my frustration, but I’m afraid I’ll throw up if I open my mouth. Nerves on top of a full belly isn’t a great idea.

Dylan’s desperate voice comes from Joel’s room, “Ava, can you please bring your tiny fingers in here to help us assemble this bed?”

I smile at her as she strolls by. Her expression looks like she’s about to enter a fairy grotto instead of a boys’ room.

Suddenly, Chris plops on the floor in front of us. I flinch involuntarily when he drapes his arm over my shoulders.

“How’s my favorite ex-girlfriend doing?”

I roll my eyes. He’s always given our two dates more weight than they deserve. We never even kissed. “I’m okay. How’s my favorite ex-date?” I give extra emphasis to

the last word to underscore our lack of a previous relationship.

He slams a fist over his heart. “You wound me. I’ve been pining away for you since we broke up.”

“Chris, we only went on two dates. And it was almost two years ago. You’ve never even tried to date me again. Stop acting like it was more.” Usually, this act of his is funny, but right now, in front of Brent, it’s making me uncomfortable. Especially after what I heard David’s brother say.”

Chris takes my hand in his and kisses the back of it. “But you’ll always be special to me, Sam. Thanks for the pizza.”

I smile uncomfortably as he gets up and disappears into his room. I shift my gaze to Brent. “That was awkward.”

He forces a smile too when he lifts his brows in acknowledgment.

“So, back to my question. Would you like to go out sometime?” My heart pounds loudly in my ears. I’m trying to look relaxed, but I feel stiff and wooden.

“I don’t think so, Sam. Thanks, though.” He flashes a smile and then rocks forward to stand. “I’m gonna go help Chris unpack. Thanks for the pizza.”

He doesn’t look at me, so he doesn’t see that I can’t even pretend to be polite. My stomach aches with the rejection, and I’m worried the food I ate will end up on the ugly tan carpet. I can’t even catch a breath. It’s like Brent kicked me in the chest with his rejection

Across the room, Ava’s gaze tracks from where Brent just disappeared into Chris’s room to lock with mine. Her furrowed brow tells me she knows something just went

wrong. She mouths, “You okay?” I’m too gutted to even respond. I let my gaze drop away from hers as my heart breaks.



### Chapter Fifteen

The girls come home with me after we say goodbye to Joel. I'm glad Ava doesn't have to go back to her emptier house right away, but I know she'll have to face it eventually. I've been through it several times now, but when Bridget moved out, it left my wing of the house quiet and empty. I had a hard time adjusting.

My movements are sluggish, and it isn't from walking up and down a million stairs. I'm struggling to stay engaged with my friends, and I'm battling against a misplaced sense of loss. The analogy is totally ridiculous, but I feel like I'm a cute summer blouse that was waving merrily in the breeze, drying on a clothesline, until someone tore me down, threw me to the ground, and jumped on me repeatedly. Now, I'm torn, stained, and discarded in the dirt. I don't even think I've ever seen a clothesline in real life, so why do I feel like that exactly? I always thought I was a strong, confident person. Turns out I've just never had to face defeat before.

Because our muscles are sore from a day-long workout, we put on our swimsuits and sink into the hot tub. The jets are on and we've each found our favorite seat to settle into. We're quiet for a long time, leaning our heads back, eyes closed. I keep picturing the look on Brent's face when he turned me down. Pinched lips, eyes squinted and looking at the ground. Why did he look like that? Did the thought of dating me turn his stomach?

I sink a little deeper into the water. The evening air is just cool enough to make the heated water tolerable. My body relaxes though my thoughts won't quit spinning. I need to stop replaying that conversation. Each time Brent pops into my mind, I force myself to think of something else. The book I'm reading. The series I abandoned

when I realized I could be reading romantic comedies. Ines's wedding. Anything to distract me from the sorrow and sense of failure.

Finally, Ava breaks the silence even though she still looks asleep. "Thanks for helping today, you guys. I know you don't really know Joel, so it was cool of you to pitch in like that."

"It was harder work than I expected," Bek says. "That was a lot of stairs."

Ava groans. "I know. I'm so thankful for this jacuzzi, Sam."

"Me too." I moan. "Tomorrow's gonna suck."

"The day after will be the worse," Bek says. "I don't know how I'm going to be able to heft those huge bags of pet food at work."

"Right?" Ava peeks through one eye and they grimace at each other. "Sam, are you okay? What happened with Brent?"

"What?" Bek sits up. "Something happened? When?"

"When you were in Joel's room," Ava says.

"Oh no."

Bek's concern makes me feel worse for some reason. I feel like a spoiled princess, but I've never been rejected before, and it's discouraging to learn that I want to be a whiny baby about it instead of a bold warrior. It feels like I'm only a strong, confident female when things are going well for me. That's disappointing.

I sigh and rub my face with wet hands. "I can never get a read on him when we're

talking. I finally got fed up and decided to just ask him out like I've done so many times before."

"He said no?" Bek whispers.

I nod as I stare out across the yard. The swimming pool lights cast a serene blue glow into the landscaping. It looks so much calmer than I feel. When I look at my friends, Ava looks confused.

"I'm really sorry, Sam. I don't understand why."

"The last time I was at the bookstore, I thought we were finally starting to form a connection, so when I ran into him today, and we still got along, I thought it was as good a time as any to try to escalate things." I shake my head and look out over the pool again. "I guess not."

"Chris interrupted you guys, didn't he? Did Brent seem to change his mind after that?" Ava asks.

I think back to when Chris inserted himself into the conversation. Did Brent's attitude change afterward? "I don't know. Like I said, Brent doesn't really show his feelings."

"Yeah, I guess you're right." Ava stares up toward the sky. "He never seemed perturbed with me, even when I almost burned the classroom down."

Bek stares up at the night sky, too, like maybe one of us will find an answer spelled out in the stars. "I think you should ask him why."

I blow out a puff of air. "That's an awkward conversation. Especially since I'd have to go into the bookstore for no reason to initiate it." The section of books labeled ROMANCE flashes in my head, and I realize I now have a legitimate reason to visit a

bookstore.

“Remember, he doesn’t have to know if you have a reason to be there or not,” Bek reminds me. “Grab a magazine, order a coffee, and ask him if he said no because he has a girlfriend.”

My mouth hangs agape as I stare at my fairy-like friend. I see that Ava is staring too.

“Sometimes, Bek, you are so astute,” Ava says.

Bek lifts her head, and her gaze floats between the two of us. “And yet it surprises you every time.”

Ava chuckles nervously. “Yeah. Guess that’s rude. Sorry.”

“Yeah, sorry, Bek.” I grimace and let my head fall back against the jacuzzi. “I don’t know. Maybe I’ll just stay single for a while. It isn’t terrible spending Saturday night with you two.”

“You don’t miss dating?” Ava asks. “You always seem to enjoy it.”

“I do. But I’ve learned that I enjoy time to myself too.” A contented smile curves my lips and I close my eyes. “Being alone isn’t horrible.”

“Really? That seems so...” When Ava pauses, I crack an eye open to see what she’s going to say. “Uncharacteristic.”

I shift up in my seat and rest my arms along the edge of the hot tub. The night air cools my wet skin. “With Bridget gone now and you two working this summer, it’s really the first time I’ve had an opportunity to spend time alone. I guess...” I purse my lips, trying to figure out how to say what I feel. “I think maybe, I’ve always kept

busy because it's what my parents do. They either work or they're out, basically. Their schedules are so booked that Ines needs to give them at least a two-week notice for all wedding-related appointments. And even then, they shift things around to fit it in."

"That doesn't surprise me," Bek says. "Your parents are so rarely here."

"I'm not positive," I continue. "But I think that's why I started my two-date rule. Keep things light. Never get too attached. Break it off before things get physical." I shrug. "But I think I want more out of my time than that. I think I want to find a long-term relationship."

Ava frowns. "Isn't that what you've been looking for this whole time? I thought the two dates was to judge for compatibility."

I think about my series of dates. Especially the most recent ones, and none of them had a hint of a personality that I would want to commit to long-term. I shake my head. "I don't know when I stopped looking for someone I might want to date forever and started picking guys I knew would never make it past a second date. It became habit without me even knowing."

I'm feeling overheated, whether from the water or the conversation, I'm not sure. I wade across the hot tub to sit on a taller seat. It's actually the foot end of a built-in reclining seat, but it works well when I can't handle being submerged in the steamy water anymore.

"Why don't you just go back to looking for guys that have boyfriend potential, then?" Ava asks. She's squinting like she knows there's something more and she's trying to dig it out of me.

I look up at the starlit sky. On a clear night like this, the endless darkness dotted by

pinpricks of light makes me feel puny and insignificant. Even more so now that I feel shallow as well. I nod. That's my problem. I feel shallow. I twist my lips in thought as I look between my friends. They're totally focused on me. Both awaiting my response. Thank goodness for these two whose love won't let me follow the spiral of thoughts my mind wants to send me on about how inconsequential I truly am. "I overheard David's brother say something today that I didn't like."

The girls wait quietly for me to continue. I'm afraid to say it out loud. Like maybe my mentioning it will make my friends realize the truth about me that they've overlooked this whole time. They've never turned their backs on me before. Why would I worry about them suddenly abandoning me over a misunderstanding? My heart races with anticipation and I want to forget I brought it up and change the subject completely. I slip my hands under my thighs and lean forward so that my hair becomes a curtain around me. "He asked Joel if he was dating me. When Joel said no, he said he'd heard that I get around. The worst part was the gleam in his eye when he said it." I swallow. "Like I'm a sure thing."

I blink tears away before they can see them. My skin is flushed with heat, and I don't think it is only because I'm sitting in a hot tub.

"What?" Ava sits up, sending a small wave across the hot tub. "What did Joel say?"

I glance at her and flash a tight smile. "He gallantly defended my honor. But the fact that some guy who graduated our freshman year has heard that about me, bothers me."

"That's just one guy, Sam." Bek shakes her head. "One guy with a brother in our grade."

I sigh. "I don't know that it's just one guy. I always thought that if I kept things rated PG, it would keep me safe, but now I'm beginning to wonder."

“Has anyone ever treated you like they expected something from you?” Ava asks.

Seeing her hands curled into fists lets me release some of my own tension. Once again, she’s ready to fight for me. I wish I knew what direction to point her. But how do you fight rumors and embellished stories? “No. But I haven’t dated anyone from school for a while. That’s where rumors would circulate. Right?”

“I haven’t heard anything,” Bek says. “I could ask Sarah Wu.”

My eyes grow wide. “I don’t think I’m brave enough to know what the school gossip has heard about me! ”

Ava chuckles. “There’s no way I’d ever want to know either.”

“But thanks, Bek.” I smile at her. “I think I’ll just dissuade any further gossip by changing my ways. My one-two punch, as Ava refers to it, wasn’t working for me anyway.”

“Will you at least find out why Brent said no?” she asks.

“I don’t think I will.”

Ava opens her mouth, but then closes it when she sees the look in my eye.

“I think I’ll just make myself so available he’ll have to get to know me better.”

A slow grin spreads across Bek’s face and she nods in agreement.

Ava sits back against the jets again with a satisfied smirk. “To know you is to love you.”

### Chapter Sixteen

Over the course of the week, I become a regular fixture at the bookstore. I go in at different times of the day depending on what else, if anything, I'm doing, but I spend a couple hours each day sipping coffee, eating a danish, and reading. I've spent a lot of time browsing the periodicals since I was reading the second book in the series I started. The couple in this book bear a striking resemblance to me and Brent. I am very encouraged by their happily ever after.

During my visits, I've made certain to spend time away from Brent when he's there. At first, he seemed very uncomfortable with me being there. But after the second day of me hanging out without talking to him beyond placing my order or buying a book, he started to relax.

Today, I carried my coffee and croissant upstairs to the romance section. The third book in the series I'm reading isn't released yet, so I liked the author on Amazon to get a notification when her next book comes out. When I saw the book was available for pre-order, I couldn't place my order fast enough. But that means I need a new book, so I intend to browse. I'm frustrated to discover they don't have a section of books labeled romantic comedy. I'm having a hard time finding books that don't have lots of skin on the cover. But I'm discovering that even the books without a bare male chest can still be hard to tell if the couple is going to end up in bed.

"Another present?"

I jump and whirl around. The book, whose back cover I was reading, tumbles to the floor. Brent is squatted in front of the equally large fantasy section, perpendicular to



the romance books. A box sits on the floor next to him. He has two of the same title in his hand and he's looking over his shoulder at me.

"Um, no. This is for me." I scoop up the book I dropped and turn back to the massive selection of romance novels. After scanning a few more blurbs, I grumble, "I wish books had a rating system like movies."

Brent stands and strides over to stand next to me. "What are you looking for? Maybe I can help."

"I love romantic comedies, but I prefer for them to be clean. Or at least not too steamy, you know?" I blush as I say it, of course, because who can talk to a cute boy about sex without blushing?

He cocks his head. "Clean, huh? Like wholesome?"

I arch a brow. "I mean, I guess. I never thought of using that word to describe it. Usually there are enough antics in a rom-com that wholesome seems too tame, but at least it won't make me blush?"

I form it like a question because I'm not sure I'm explaining myself well. I don't really know what I'm asking for and his surprised expression is making me doubt myself.

He nods. "I see your quandary. Romance does have a lot of heat levels. There are some that are very obvious." He points to one of the many bare-chested man covers. On this one, the man is clutching a woman whose dress is falling off her shoulder. I screw up my face to show my discomfort. "And there are sweet romances that promise no on-page steam, little to no swearing, etc."

I frown at the books under the SWEET label. They don't look anything like what I

want. “It looks like that should be labeled syrup-y instead of sweet.”

Brent chuckles. “Books are frequently miscategorized or they straddle a couple categories and end up in the one you aren’t looking at. However, in our store, you’ll find most rom-coms under contemporary. And right now, the trend is for the covers to be illustrated. Like this.” He picks up a book and hands it to me.

I skim the back cover. The story sounds great. “But how do I know if there is sex in it or not?”

When Brent blushes, I smirk. I’m so relieved I’m not the only one who can’t get through this without my cheeks flaming. He’s probably not picturing us as the cover models for that steamy romance he pointed out though. Me in his arms, my palms pressed to his bare chest, and my dress tantalizingly askew. I swallow audibly and refocus my attention on the Brent standing in front of me. With his shirt securely in place.

“You can look up the reviews. Usually, reviewers will mention if the scenes were sufficiently steamy or not if the book has them. Or you can hop over to the young adult section and find rom-coms there. Those aren’t guaranteed to be free from bare flesh either, but they are less likely than their adult counterparts.”

Brent leads me to the much smaller young adult romance section. He picks up a book with the illustration of a boy and girl standing next to each other in front of a bank of lockers. Immediately, I feel my pulse jump. That totally looks like my kind of book. I grin at him.

“I think this will work. Thanks.”

“Let me know if I can answer any other questions.” He returns to the box of books down the wall from where I’m browsing. I read the back covers of several books that

sound perfect. I want to buy them all, but if I do, then I won't have reason to come back, so I force myself to choose one.

When I turn away from the wall to return to the armchair where I set my coffee and croissant down, I catch Brent regarding me like he can't figure me out. That makes two of us, buddy. I want to chuckle out loud that his confusion over me is the first expression I can decipher.

I plop into the chair and crack open the book. I'm hooked from the start. The next thing I know, both my cup and plate are empty, but my stomach is growling again. I check my watch and see that more than two hours have gone by. I'm a slow reader, so I haven't made it through half the book, but I can't believe I've already read as much as I have before I've even paid for it.

I gather my stuff and tromp down the stairs. Setting my dishes in the bin near the bottom of the steps, I make my way to the register.

Brent is paging through a magazine when I walk up. The long lines of his legs and torso as he rests on a barstool behind the counter make my mouth go dry. He drums his fingers on his thigh to an unheard beat and I wonder what music he thinks of when nothing is playing.

He hops up when he sees me. "Whoa. I didn't know you were still here."

"I got totally sucked into the story and lost track of time." I plop the book and my purse on the counter to dig for my wallet.

"You're like Belle in *Beauty and the Beast*. I should probably just loan you the books over and over again. Do you have a library card?" He grimaces. "Though don't tell the owners I asked that."

I shake my head. “I like buying the books I read. I’m lucky enough to be able to afford them and it supports the authors.”

He smiles, but he’s also squinting like I’ve surprised him again. “And all the other people involved in publishing the book.”

I consider what he said as it dawns on me how well acquainted he would be with that end of publishing. “How many people are involved?”

He blows air through his lips and looks to the ceiling, raising a finger with each answer. “There are content editors and line editors, cover artists, book designers, marketers, distributors, retailers.” He spins a finger to point to the bookstore we are standing in. He shakes his head as he looks at me. “So many people.”

My mouth drops open as I think that through. “How can the purchase of one book pay for that many people to be involved?”

He draws in a deep breath. “More and more it can’t. That’s why so many publishers have closed, and others have bought up the smaller ones. And now that indie publishing is far more accessible, it makes it even more difficult for traditional book publishing to support all those people.”

“Wow. That’s a lot.”

“It is. My dad is always stressed about it.”

“I’m sorry.” I cock my head. “Will you go into the family business?”

Leaning a hip against the counter, Brent crosses his arms over his chest. “I don’t know. My dad wants me to. I love everything about books, so he thinks I’d be a natural, but I think it would just ruin reading for me.”

“What do you like to read?” I want to hit myself in the forehead for never having asked him that before.

“Historical fiction, like Ava.”

“Right.” I’d forgotten he’d mentioned that. In all fairness, I was really nervous that day .

“But I also like biographies, World War II books, and horror.”

I laugh. “That’s pretty random.”

“Yeah. I’ll read anything, really. But those are the books I miss if I spend too much time reading other stuff.”

“Horror, really? Like slasher stuff?”

“I prefer psychological thrillers. The stuff that makes you afraid to move from your seat at night for fear something will get you.”

The way he emphasizes the word something makes me think he’s referring to something otherworldly, which reminds me of the first two books I read. I slap my hand on the counter. “I was reading a ghost story series – not a scary one, mind you – but I abandoned it for rom-coms. I’ve been thinking about going back to it. I wonder if you guys have it here. The Mediator series by Meg Cabot?”

Brent looks it up on the iPad and shakes his head. “We could order it in if you want it.”

“You can do that?” Goosebumps rise on my arms, I’m so excited about the future book potential.

“Of course,” Brent laughs. “We’re a bookstore. It’s our business. Do you want me to bring the books in?”

I nod enthusiastically.

“Which book are you on?”

“Three, but bring them all in. If I’m going to have a series, I want them all.”

He arches a brow as he types things into the tablet “What’s your phone number?”

I freeze.

He dips his chin like he’s encouraging me to speak. “So we can text you when they arrive.”

“Oh!” My blush gives away my misunderstanding. Mortification floods through me when his gaze drops to the iPad, and he almost hides a smile. I mumble my number.

“Great. They’ll be here in a couple days.” Brent scrolls through something on his screen and frowns. “I’m surprised you abandoned the series. These are romantic comedies too. Just with ghosts.”

“Oh!” Will the world please just swallow me up? “I have a lot to learn.”

Brent squints at me and cocks his head, clearly trying to figure something out. Maybe he’s wondering if I really am this clueless or just pretending. “We’re here to help.”

### Chapter Seventeen

A light breeze stirs the leaves of the tree overhead. The shushing of the branches is as lulling as the warm air. I could nap right here on this park bench.

Knowing that the books I ordered should come in tomorrow, I decided to skip the bookstore today. Will Brent even notice when I don't show up? I stare across the expanse of grass, my book closed in my lap, with my finger marking my place. Hot Dog Cart Guy helps a couple of customers on the other side of the park, and I momentarily feel guilty for not stopping to say hello as I promised I would. My gaze wanders. There's a woman speed walking her dog, a couple walking hand in hand, and a group of kids fighting over something one of the kids has.

I squint. It doesn't look like a friendly fight. I lean forward.

The kids are about twelve years old, I think. Three boys are trying to tug something out of a girl's hands. She cries out, and before I consciously decide to, I bolt from the park bench. I hook the long strap of my purse over my head, so the strap is across my body, and shove my book inside my bag as I run. The girl cries out louder and sounds more frightened, so I pick up speed. When I get close enough, I yell with all the force in my body. "Hey!"

All four kids turn to look at me and the boys' eyes widen comically. They let go of the girl immediately and take off in the opposite direction. I slow to a stop next to the girl and stand, panting, with my hands on my hips, glaring after their retreating backs.

I swing my attention to the girl, who looks up at me with round eyes.

“Are you okay?” I ask, and though I’m still breathing hard, she understands and nods. “It looks like they didn’t get...that.” I point to the thing she clutches in her hands.

She looks at it too and shakes her head.

Her silence is a little unnerving. “What’s your name?”

Her eyes lock on me, but she lowers her chin so that she’s looking at me through long dark lashes.

I laugh. “I’m a stranger, huh?”

When she nods, the three braids sticking out from her head bounce around like they’re on springs. It’s adorable. Something about this girl tugs at my heart. Or maybe everything about her.

“Yeah, I guess I understand. Are you sure you’re okay?”

Another bob of the head.

“Do you know those boys from school?”

Bob. Bob.

“Are they mean to you at school too?”

Nod. Nod.

My heart aches for her. School is hard enough without getting bullied. A distant memory of Ava being bullied flashes through my mind and my anger piques. I glare across the park to make sure the little hoodlums aren’t returning for more. “Do you



have friends you can hang out with to keep you safe? ”

She shakes her head and looks across the park, too. Maybe to see what I’m glaring at.

“You don’t?”

“I’m new,” she whispers.

“Where are you from?”

“Virginia.”

I bite my lip. That’s a big move. Then I frown. “But if you know them from school, aren’t there any kids who you met that you could get to know better?”

“Summer school.”

“Oh.” Then I get an idea. “Hey, you up for a trip to the library?” I point to the building at the far end of the park.

The girl eyes me suspiciously and leans away from me.

“I think the library might help you. We can walk.”

She considers me and then the library and finally shrugs.

“My name is Sam, by the way,” I say, as we head across the grass toward the big brick building.

“Latisha.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Latisha. I’m very sorry you have bullies in your class at school.”

She eyes me with a critical eye. “Is your hair really that color or did you dye it?”

I laugh. “My hair is really this color.”

“You’s looks like you’s is made from snow or somethin’.”

She has a drawl that makes her difficult to understand, but I’m so excited that she’s talking that I don’t want to frustrate her back into silence by asking her to repeat herself. “Sometimes people call me the ice queen because my skin and hair are so white.” Mostly my brothers, but Latisha doesn’t need to know that.

“You’s was scary when you come running at us.”

I replay her words in my head before I can figure out what she said. “Was I?”

She nods. “Like that mean witch in The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe.”

“I was that scary?”

“Uh-huh. When you’s was running you was.”

“Scared those stupid boys away.”

When Latisha grins, it transforms her face. Her teeth gleam bright and pink spots blossom on her dark cheeks. I’m enamored by her round, glittering brown eyes. I don’t know that I’ve ever seen eyes so dark before. Her happiness is infectious, so I beam back at her.

“Thank you for scaring them away. I would have cried had’n I lost this.”

I look down at her hands but don’t know what she’s clutching. “It’s special to you?”

“’Twas my little brother’s. He died in a fire. I carry this to remember him.”

She spreads a knitted cap across a palm. Bands of yellow, mint green, and baby blue yarn make up the impossibly small cap. I bite my lip. “Oh, Latisha, I’m sorry. How old was he?”

She closes her fist around the cap. “Not a year yet. Almost.”

We step onto a large patio in front of the library and come to a stop. “Is that why you live here now? Because of the fire?”

Latisha stares at the hat in her hands and nods. “My momma died too. I live with my auntie now.”

How tragic. I can’t even fathom the grief and sorrow she must be living in. I gulp down a knot of emotion. Suddenly, I feel very inept. I have no life experiences whatsoever to help this little girl. I look up at the stately brick library looming over us and say a silent prayer that they will be able to help her. “Let’s go inside.”

She nods and we cross the patio to the large doors. I yank one open and hold it for her, and she walks in with an open, curious gaze. The lobby of the library is two stories tall. A ring of windows near the top allow sunlight to stream down to the slate floor. Straight ahead, a wide staircase winds up to the second floor. A massive wooden circulation desk sits to the right of the doors and the lobby is lined with shelves for all the requested materials being held for library patrons. There are several self-check stations around the lobby, and bulletin boards with posters for local events. It has a welcoming vibe, and I see Latisha immediately feels at home.

It's thanks to Ava I know my way around this place. I was always so bored when we would stop by to pick up a book or DVD for her, but years of being her friend taught me something, at least. I point to the left. "This way."

We enter the children's library and Latisha smiles at the comic book themed carpet, the mural of woodland creatures on one wall, which is new since my last visit, and the circle of oversized beanbag chairs in the reading corner.

There are a couple of desks just as we enter, and I step up to one. The lady sitting behind it smiles at us. "Hi kids, how can I help you today?"

"Hello. My name is Sam, and this is Latisha," I say.

"My name is Paige." The lady points at her name tag sitting on her desk.

I eye her, wondering if that's her real name or a library thing. "Latisha is new in town. I'm hoping you guys might have a summer program or something that she could participate in where she can meet some kids her age."

"It can't be in the morning though," Latisha says. "I have summer school in the morning."

Paige tilts her head. "I would think you could meet kids there too."

"Unfortunately, they aren't the sort of kids she wants to hang out with," I explain.

"No problem." Paige spins her chair and reaches for something behind her desk. When she spins our way again, she slaps a brochure down and points. "Middle school, right, Latisha?"

Latisha knits her brow. "I'm going into seventh grade."

Paige nods. “We have a reading group for kids in sixth through eighth grades that meets at 2:00 every Tuesday and Thursday. They meet outside in the park unless it’s raining. If that’s the case, they meet in the multipurpose room.” She points to the back corner of the children’s library where we can see a door labeled “Multipurpose Room.” “The first hour is for reading and the second hour is for literary-themed games.”

Latisha raises an eyebrow. “What are they reading?”

“You can read anything you’d like.”

I clap my hands. “That sounds like fun. You should totally do that, Latisha.”

Paige looks at me and smiles. “I’m glad you think so. They could use another volunteer. The gal that was helping had an accident and is out for the rest of the summer.”

I look at her and shake my head. “I don’t know anything about books. I couldn’t do it.”

“You don’t need to know about books,” Paige says.

“Please, Sam. I’ll do it if you do it.” Latisha presses her hands together as if in prayer, her brother’s tiny knit cap clasped between them. My heart squeezes.

Seeing the hopeful look on Latisha’s face, there is no way I can say no. I’m still skeptical though. “I read for an hour and then ask trivia questions for an hour?”

Paige bobs her head in a yes-no kind of way. “The games vary. Some are like a cake walk game, but with book titles or literary-related questions, there is a literary-themed balloon toss, literary decathlon, stuff like that. But you just facilitate them. Tammy is

one of our children's librarians. She organizes all the games. It's really fun. Seriously, if I could get away with it, I'd have you sit here for two hours, and I'd go out there. "

"Please, Sam." Latisha draws the word please out for a full ten seconds while she bounces on her toes. Seriously, this girl is a professional beggar.

"Tuesday and Thursday?" I ask.

Paige nods. "Through the summer."

"Okay, Latisha, I'll give it a try, if you do."

The girl jumps up and down, clapping. "Yes. Thank you." Then she looks around in panic and whispers, "Sorry."

Paige chuckles. "We don't really have a noise ordinance in the children's library."

What an unexpected turn of events. I've known this girl for maybe ten minutes now and already she's imprinted herself on my heart. First, I save her from bullies, and now I've become the newest volunteer at the local library. Yeah, no one is going to believe that last part.

### Chapter Eighteen

My phone dings around 10:30 the next morning to tell me my books are in at the bookstore. Good thing, because I finished the adorable rom-com I was reading at about 1:00 this morning. I'm looking forward to getting back to the series I abandoned. It's funny that I didn't think it was a romantic comedy because there were ghosts, but once Brent mentioned it, I knew he was right. It has all the same story elements.

I carry my plate from last night's dinner downstairs on my way out of the house. I'm surprised to find Mom in the kitchen, leaning against the center island with a coffee cup in her hand. Her outfit is uncharacteristically casual.

"Hey Mom! Where are you off to dressed like an outdoor enthusiast?"

She kisses my cheek and then rolls her eyes. "Your father thinks we need more exercise, so he enrolled us in a nature class through the community college. Every Saturday for the next six weeks, we'll be going on some excursion that promises to make my thigh muscles burn and probably expose me to lots of mosquitos. "

I tilt my head. "You outdoors? Please tell me he'll capture all the most special moments on video."

"You know he will!"

"I can't wait to see it." I drop my plate in the dishwasher. "Be careful though, okay?"

“I didn’t hear the girls at all. Did they stay over?”

“Nope. They’re both working so much I hardly see them.”

Mom cocks her head. “Did you have a date last night? You must have gotten home early.”

I shrug. “No date. I just hung out and...” I bite off my words. After Bridget’s reaction, I’m hesitant to tell anybody I’ve taken up reading. I shrug again. “You know. Stuff.”

Mom frowns. “Is everything okay? Now that I think about it, you haven’t been out in a while.”

I chuckle. “It’s fine, Mom. I think I’ve dated all the Oak Grove boys I care to date. I’m just taking a rest.”

Mom hums her acknowledgment while she studies me. “I admit, I envy you for your ability to stay home alone. I can’t remember the last time I was alone. I’m not sure I’d remember how.”

Her tone is so wistful that I feel a little sorry for her. “You should totally stay home alone with me one night. I’d love to binge a series and eat pizza with you. You’d have to get rid of Dad though. He’s no fun to watch T.V. with.”

Mom laughs. “I wouldn’t be alone if I was with you. But I love the idea, Sam. I’ll definitely do that. I’ll send you a calendar invite.”

I snort. “Somehow, I think a calendar invite defeats the purpose of what we are trying to do for you, but go ahead and send one. I’d love to have a girls’ night.”



“Spontaneity is not my thing, you know that.” Mom squeezes my hand.

“I do.” I give her a hug. “Have fun today. ”

She hums another acknowledgment, which makes me laugh. She definitely sounds doubtful.

As I steer Sunny down the driveway, I roll down my window and rest my arm on the sill. I breathe in the gorgeous summer day. The temperature has cooled off to a reasonable number. The sun bakes my skin when I stand still for too long, but a light breeze keeps it tolerable. The sky is almost too blue to look at, reminding me to slip my sunglasses on. It’s the sort of day I don’t mind being outside, so I park in the parking structure downtown instead of driving around hoping for closer street parking. I stroll from block to block, window shopping.

My nerves begin to fire as I approach the bookstore. It’s so annoying to feel this nervous. I thought I had mastered my expectations by simply making myself available. I’m walking in front of the store’s big picture window, filled with the latest books, when it hits me that Brent might not be working today. The thought halts me. Do I want to go inside and pick up those books if he isn’t even around? The sun’s glare on the window prevents me from peering inside to see if he’s working. But since I’m standing in plain sight right now, it would be strange for me to leave.

With the very real possibility he isn’t working, my stomach unknots, and I pull the door open stress-free.

The store is crawling with patrons. Something about the way they are dressed, or the way they are browsing in packs tells me most of them are tourists. I could be wrong though. I step around a family of five who collectively examine the back cover of a book and then dodge a couple walking toward the exit, a Beckett’s Bookstore bag swinging from the girl’s arm.

And there is Brent, ringing up another customer. He's smiling and agreeing with something the lady said, and that smile makes me catch my breath just like it always does. Man, I want to make him smile like that. All the time .

I head to the coffee bar and slide onto a seat.

Brent glances over his shoulder. "I'll be right...oh, hey, Sam. Be right there."

"Take your time." Because I love to watch you. I get my phone out of my purse and check to find I don't have any new texts. I set it on the counter next to my purse and watch Brent ring up the two people in line behind the original customer.

When he finally comes over, I order the fanciest coffee I can think of just so he has to work on it longer. I scroll my social media like I'm not here for him specifically but steal covert glances at him as he works.

Brent sets a frothy drink in front of me. "How's the book you got the other day? Are you enjoying it?"

"I finished it." He lifts his brows. "I loved it. It was a little different than I'm used to. The main character didn't start out intent on finding a boyfriend or with a crush on a certain guy. There was no indication that she would end up with anyone in the end. I was relieved when I started to see signs that her best friend liked her. He was a total cutie and they needed to get together."

Brent chuckles.

"Oh, but the grand gesture." I sigh.

"What do you mean?"

“To get the girl, the boy made a grand gesture. Went way out of his way to prove how much he liked her.” I blush. “It was really romantic.”

“Ah, the romantic part of rom-com.”

“Do you think stuff like that really happens in real life?” I sigh. “Nevermind. I know it does. But the grand gestures don’t always work like it did in the book.”

“You mean a promposal on the big screen isn’t romantic?”

I slam my eyes closed and scrunch my nose. Was he there that night or did he only hear about it? I peek through a single eye to see him chuckling. I sigh and look at him. “It was a grand gesture, yeah. But it would have been romantic if I was a movie buff.”

“Ah, I see. So, the gesture itself isn’t what makes it romantic.”

“I don’t think so. I think it should be meaningful to the person specifically for it to be really special. Otherwise, it’s just an Instagram moment.”

“So true.” Brent snorts. “Good timing on finishing the book since your order came in.”

“I know! I’m so excited to get back into the series.”

Someone walks up to the register, but because Brent is facing me, his back is to them. I tip my chin in their direction. “It’s busy today.”

He glances over his shoulder and straightens. “Weekends are always busy. Especially during tourist season. All the downtown stores pick up during the summer. I’ll be right back. I’ll bring your books.”

“Thanks.” I watch his easy manner as he greets the customer, and I admire the way his body just falls into place when he stands at the register. It’s strange for me to want to be with someone this much. My feelings don’t usually have a chance to develop and deepen before we start to date. On the one hand, I like the thrill of seeing him. The anticipation that builds when I know I’ll be able to talk to him. On the other hand, I hate the disappointment when he casually brushes me off.

Bek suggested I ask why he turned down my invitation. I would love to ask, but if I’m honest with myself, I’m afraid of the answer. What if it’s something I can’t fix, and it completely snuffs out moments like this? But what if it is something I can fix, and we end up dating? Wouldn’t that be worth the risk?

I sigh. Not just because I have no idea what to do, but also because someone just sauntered into line behind the person he’s helping. I don’t think I’m going to have the opportunity to ask him anything today, even if I did want to.

I sip my coffee and watch people browse. There is an adorable couple, maybe college age, who seem glued together at the hip. They’re standing in front of the travel section, and from here it looks like they’re picking up books about our town. Snatching a copy of the pocket travel guide I’ve paged through before out of its display, I hop off my stool and stride over to the couple.

“If you’re looking for all the inside info on Oak Grove, can I suggest this adorable little guide? It offers little bursts of history alongside suggestions on where to visit. You even learn how to access the local’s menu at the café.”

“Oh my gosh, that’s perfect,” the girl gushes. She takes the guide from me with a grin and flips through the pages. “It’s so cute, too.”

“There’s even a section about our local celebrity.” I point to Brent. He sees me, and the scowl I’ve somehow grown fond of takes over his expression. I smile at his

suspicion, and he hesitantly returns his attention to the customer he's helping. "Page thirty. The Post family."

Eying Brent, the couple thanks me.

"No problem. Enjoy your stay." Returning to my chair, I feel good about making the couple so happy.

I'm sipping my coffee and completely lost inside my own head when a stack of books plop onto the counter in front of me. My startled gaze locks with Brent's. His is suspicious.

"How did you find out about that guide?"

My eyes widen at the accusation in his tone. It's like I'm an undercover spy who has just been uncovered. "I read it!"

His eyes narrow further.

"I was drinking my coffee in this very seat one day, and..." I point to the display of travel guides on the counter. I leave Callie out of it, because it seems like he'd be mad at her if he knew she pointed out the Post family story.

He softens a little. "That couple was very pleased with the suggestion and ended up buying a couple other books to study the history of our town further." He fiddles with the display of travel guides, though it's in perfect order. "So, thanks for doing that."

"Um...sure." I'm so confused!

Brent sighs when he sees someone walk up to the register. "Can you hang out for a second?"

“Yeah.” Look at me acting super chill when inside my emotions are flailing.

“Be right back.” He gives me what I interpret to be a regretful parting smile and my confusion grows. On the one hand, I’m glad to be defining more of his expressions, on the other, what on earth can he want to say?

When the line at the checkout grows, I pick up the third book in the series and crack the spine. I might as well make good use of my time. I’m so into the story, that I ignore the person who slides onto the seat next to me a while later, assuming it’s another customer.

Until he says, “That good, huh?”

My head snaps to the side and I find Brent seated next to me. He clutches a toasted sandwich in his hand and a soda sits in front of him. With a nod to the book, he sinks his teeth into the sandwich.

“Yeah. I’m already absorbed.” I eye his food. “Isn’t it early for lunch?”

He’s chewing, so he simultaneously nods and shakes his head, which makes him look like a bobblehead. Albeit the best looking bobblehead I’ve ever seen. When he swallows, he says, “We have to stagger our lunch breaks, and because weekends are so busy, and I’m literally always hungry, I go first.”

I look around and see a lady I don’t recognize behind the counter. That’s when I realize that Brent chose to have his break with me. My heart races with excitement. But then I realize that I’m suddenly presented with the opportunity to ask why he turned down my dinner offer and my excitement morphs into nerves.

“Hey, I wanted to ask you something.” He studies his sandwich like it was prepared by Van Gough.

“Hit me.” Maybe if I don’t seem nervous, he’ll relax. But boy, oh boy, I’m buzzing with anticipation.

“The first time you came to the bookstore, you said you didn’t read. Now we can’t keep you stocked with enough books.”

I stare at him because that is so far from the subject matter I expected. “Is there a question there?”

“Oh, um...what changed?”

His discomfort confuses me. Heck, he confuses me. I shrug and shake my head. “I started reading.”

He glances at me and then grabs his soda. “Why though?” He shoves the straw in his mouth.

I screw up my mouth, considering how to answer, but in the end, I know I have to be honest about it. “Ava and Bek are both working this summer and I’m home alone a lot. I googled what to do when you’re bored, and the number one answer was to read.”

A laugh barks out of him and he looks at me. “Seriously?”

Even though I’m blushing, I look him in the eye and nod. “When I googled the best thing for nonreaders to read, this series was the number one suggestion.” I place my hand on the stack of books in front of me.

He laughs and shakes his head, and I wonder what he expected my answer to be.

“Can I ask you something?”

“Sure.”

“Why did you turn me down for dinner?” As soon as the question is out of my mouth, I regret posing it. There’s no turning back once I know the answer.

Brent’s gaze immediately shifts away from mine and lands on his sandwich. A flush creeps from his neck up to his cheeks. “You know. You’re so experienced with dating and I’m...” he shrugs. “Not.”

I gnaw on the inside of my lip. Definitely not the answer I expected, and maybe not the answer I wanted to hear, but I’m not sure I truly understand. “What do you mean experienced?”

I hold my breath as I watch him grow seven shades of red.

“Come on, Sam. You’ve dated all those guys.” He’s spinning what’s left of his sandwich as if he’s looking for the perfect next bite.

“Dated being the key word. You realize that, right?”

Brent glances at me with his now too familiar scowl on his face. “What do you mean?”

This conversation is so awkward, and I flush with heat again. I don’t even know if it’s embarrassment or anger flooding through me. My fists clench in my lap, and I shift so I’m angled more toward him. I don’t want anyone else to hear this. “I don’t know what kind of reputation I’ve earned out there, but I’m beginning to suspect it isn’t what I deserve.”

Brent drops his chin like he’s ashamed, but he’s definitely listening.



“The way I’ve always approached dating was to go out with a guy one or two times. If, after the first date, there isn’t an obvious connection, I don’t go on a second date. If there are no sparks flying after the second date, I don’t go on a third.”

Brent’s brow furrows further, but he stays quiet. He seems to be staring at my purse, which rests on the counter in front of me.

“Brent, I think I’ve kissed maybe four boys, tops, and they were all tame kisses. So, if experience means to you what I suspect it means, I don’t have it.”

He releases the death grip on his sandwich and sets it on the small plate in front of him. His hands shake as he pulls them into his lap. “Really?”

A large breath escapes me. It contains all the frustration and anger that I’m feeling, and I think I see Brent flinch away from me. But then he surprises me.

“I’m sorry, Sam. I don’t mean to doubt you. You have no reason to lie to me.”

The words make me pause. They’re good words, but he’s still not looking at me, so does that mean he doesn’t believe me? “Look, Brent, I don’t know what you’ve heard or assumed about me, and I don’t want to know. I’ve decided to change my dating philosophy anyway, because I think I’ve been hiding behind it somehow. Using it to avoid making a real connection. You can believe me or not, it doesn’t matter. I think you’re cute and wanted to go to dinner with you. That’s all. If that makes you feel like you will suddenly be expected to perform, and you aren’t comfortable with that, then I accept your refusal and we can move on. You’re a good book geek for me to know, so I’m not going to stop asking you questions about books. I’ve got a lot to learn.”

I slide off my stool, suddenly desperate to be away from him. As I’m fumbling with the stack of books, he reaches out and rests a hand on my wrist.

“Wait,” he says.

Humiliation has me shaking all over. Frustrated tears burn behind my eyes. I hate having to defend myself like this, and I desperately want to get away from him and lick my wounds. But instead, I pause, hands gripping the stack of books in case I need to dash away after all.

“I haven’t really dated anyone before at all. Even if all you’ve done is go out on first dates, it’s still more than I’ve done.”

I sigh and plop back onto my stool. I place my hands in my lap and stare at the stack of books in front of me. “Well, I’ve clearly been doing it wrong, so it isn’t as if I can help.”

A surprised laugh bursts out of him. “I doubt you’ve been doing it wrong. Not if you have guys like Chris pining for you.”

It’s my turn to puff out a laugh. “He’s not pining for me, Brent. He’s teasing me.”

Finally, Brent shifts and locks gazes with me. “Chris is definitely pining for you. He’s totally got a thing for you. You are all we ever hear about during practice.”

I squint. “For real?”

The corner of Brent’s mouth curls up while his eyes narrow. “Man, you are nothing like I expected.”

I open my mouth to...what...balk? Laugh? I’m not sure how to react, so I close it again. Does he mean that in a good way? Do I want to know? Did he expect a self-assured person and he’s surprised to find an insecure one? It seems like there is too much to overcome with Brent.

His gaze shifts to the register and then he checks his watch. “Shoot, I have to get back to work.” He takes a huge bite of his sandwich and washes it down with soda. “Sorry.”

In his defense, he looks sorry. But even so, he shoves the final bite in his mouth, buses his dishes, and disappears into the back room.

I hop up and pay for my stuff quickly before he comes back to the register. I race out of the store, balancing my stack of books while I speed walk down the sidewalk. Somehow, I’m even less sure about how I feel than when I walked into the place.

### Chapter Nineteen

I'm so happy to have four more books to read in the series so that I don't have to go down to the bookstore anytime soon and face Brent. Okay, I could switch back to electronic books or even order paperbacks online, but it's difficult for me to order from the big nameless people in the clouds when I can support our local community by buying directly from them. Beckett's is the only bookstore in town, so it's either that or online.

After my disastrous conversation with Brent, I have a few free days to myself. The girls and I discussed the bookstore exchange via text, and they seem to think it was a good turn of events, but I can't see it that way. I was very honest about my interest and that I wanted to go to dinner with him, and even after he realized he'd misjudged me, he still didn't change his mind and say yes. That tells me his newly formed opinion isn't in my favor.

Plus, I have other things to worry about. Namely, my new volunteer gig. I climb out of my car and approach the big field where it looks like people are already gathering. I've got my book in my bag along with a blanket for Latisha and me to sit on.

I find an adult and ask if she works for the library. When she says yes, I introduce myself as the new volunteer and her face lights up with happiness.

"Paige said you might show up. I'm so happy to have you. You can go into the children's library to fill out the volunteer forms first and then come back out here."

"Okay." I look around but don't see Latisha. After all of this, she better show up.

The forms are easy, and I'm done quickly and head back outside. I hear my name squealed before I even get close. Latisha is sprinting across the grass with her arms spread wide. She barrels into me and gives me the biggest hug I've ever had. I hug her back awkwardly, but I'm laughing with pleasure. "Nice to see you too, kid."

"Tammy said you were here, but I didn't know if I could believe her. You know how some adults tell you what you want to hear just to shut you up?"

Latisha pauses but starts yammering again before I have a chance to decipher her accent and decide if I agree with her or not.

"It's quiet reading time, so we can't talk over there. That's why I came over here to say hello. If I'd waited, I would have had to just wave. I was too excited to see you. I told my aunt all about you. She's happy I made a friend, and she was happy you made me do this reading group."

I laugh. "Who made who do this?"

Latisha dips her head and peeks at me through her lashes.

"Come on, let's get over there before they won't let us in." I grab Latisha's hand and we walk back to the group.

I wave at the lady, who I guess is Tammy, and pull my blanket out to spread on the grass. Latisha grins like I just handed her an ice cream. As we get settled, I think I understand why. There are kids sitting in beach chairs and sharing blankets or sitting on beach towels. Latisha was one of only a few kids sitting directly on the grass.

We read quietly. At first, it's hard for me to concentrate on my book. Every noise draws my attention, and with about twenty kids in attendance, there is a lot of fidgeting. But eventually, I relax enough to not have to reread each paragraph to

understand it.

Sooner than I expect, Tammy taps me on the shoulder and motions for me to follow her. I smile at Latisha when concern furrows her brow, and whisper, “Almost game time. Why don’t you invite those kids on the grass to share your blanket?”

She grins and gives me a thumbs up.

Tammy and I step away from the group so she can explain how I’ll be helping.

“Because I wasn’t sure if you were coming, there won’t be a ton for you to do today. I picked a game that is easy for a single person to facilitate. But let’s take advantage of that and have you call on the children. Ask their name and their favorite dessert or something, then let them answer the game question. It’ll help both you and Latisha get to know some of the children.”

“Sounds great!” I agreed. Certainly, I can call on children.

When we return to the group, she calls their attention to the front. Books are stored in bags and backpacks, and several of the kids shift to their knees in anticipation.

“Today, we’ll be playing Pass the Perspective,” Tammy announces.

Some of the kids bounce around excitedly and clap at this news.

Tammy holds up the picture book that she’ll be reading. Confused, I scan the audience to see if they are insulted by the fact that she’s reading a book for little kids, but they seem eager to listen. She’s a spirited reader, employing different voices for each character and modulating her voice in dramatic ways that makes her audience laugh. It’s been a long time since I’ve heard a picture book read aloud, and I find myself as engaged as the kids.

“Okay.” Tammy slaps the book closed. “Let’s see who has their storytelling caps on today. First, I’d like to hear three different stories about the main character. Who wants to tell us about her? Tell us about her house, what kind of family she has, and what her least favorite dinner food is.”

Several hands shoot into the air so fast that I don’t see who was first, so I can’t call on them in order.

I look to Tammy to see if she’s ready or if she has more to explain. I’m not sure I understand what they’re supposed to do, so it feels like they might be confused too. But there are so many hands waving eagerly in the air, they must know what’s expected of them. Tammy nods encouragingly. I can’t believe how nervous I am. By the knot in my stomach, you’d think I faced ravenous zombies instead of middle schoolers. I sip in a deep breath and smile out at the kids.

“I’ll call on three kids randomly. Before you answer Tammy’s question, first tell me your name and what your favorite thing to do outside is.”

I glance at Tammy to make sure it’s okay that I changed the thing they should tell me, and she gives me a thumbs up. Latisha is one of several kids who don’t have their hands in the air. I can’t blame her for wanting to watch first. I sort of wish I could, too. Those who do have their hands up are squirming or bouncing in place and waving their hands wildly. Unexpected pressure makes me nervous to make a choice. Finally, I pick the girl who looks most eager.

“You with the flamingo shirt. What is your name?”

The girl stands. “I’m Loretta.”

“Hello, Loretta. What is your favorite outdoor activity?”

“I love to swim. ”

A murmur of agreement ripples through the children. “Very good. Now, tell us about Cindy Caterpillar’s life.”

Loretta has clearly done this before because the girl is a pro! She tells the story with emotion and hand gestures; it’s impressive. Her story is about how Cindy Caterpillar was a rich caterpillar who has two bedrooms, one for her caterpillar state and one for her butterfly state, and all the other little caterpillars loved to go to Cindy’s house because she has a garden room bursting with all their favorite flower foods.

The next kid to share his version of Cindy’s life is also a great, confident speaker and excellent storyteller. I worry that it might turn Latisha off from speaking. Luckily, the third kid to share has a disjointed story and she mumbles, making it difficult to hear her. But the group of kids cheer just as enthusiastically when she finishes as they did for the first two.

Tammy then asks for three kids to share what the story would have been like if Cindy’s best friend, Gus Grasshopper, had told it. Again, I’m super impressed by each kid. I don’t think I would have been able to come up with anything at all, but after listening to the three answers, I begin to understand what the goal is.

The last exercise is for three more kids to change the story to an unhappily ever after ending. I laugh when kids talk about spies dropping from the trees and setting off bombs or kidnapping Cindy. One kid gives a surprisingly insightful version of climate change causing the extinction of the garden and all the bugs dying off.

My heart expands a little each time I catch Latisha completely engrossed in the activity. She even whispers back and forth with the two girls who joined her on the blanket. It seems to me they are enjoying each other’s company as well as the stories.



Finally, Tammy thanks everyone for coming, thanks me for volunteering, and invites us all back on Thursday. By that point, several parents or older siblings stand along the outside of the group, waiting to take possession of their children. I smile, thinking of all the times Cisco or Justice collected me and the girls from dance class, ceramics, or whatever class we were taking at the time. Suddenly, it hits me that my parents must have been paying for at least Ava's admission fees.

I'm distracted from my thoughts when Latisha hops up and runs over to throw her arms around a thirty-something woman the same way she did with me. It must be her aunt. Knowing Latisha's tragic past, I already have mad respect for the woman, but it makes me like her more to see how happy Latisha is to see her.

Tammy walks up beside me, pulling my attention away. "Thanks for coming today, Sam. I hope you enjoyed yourself."

"I really did!" I enthuse. "I can't believe how smart these kids are. What an excellent game that was."

"I'm glad you liked it. These kids really are an inspiration, aren't they?"

"Man, they seem smarter than me already, and they're only in middle school."

Tammy waves a hand at me. "Don't discount yourself like that. You're clearly plenty smart. Can I count on you for Thursday?"

"Absolutely."

"Great. I'll pick a game that is more interactive for you as well."

My nerves fire and I grimace. "Just so I don't have to know any answers. I don't know anything about books."

“No, I just mean, it’ll be more physical. Like, you might have to be “It” in a version of Duck, Duck, Goose. Or you might have to move through the group to crown literary royalty. Something more than standing and pointing.”

“Oh, I can handle that. ”

“And, if you stick around,” Tammy says. “You might learn a thing or two about literature before the summer is over.”

“I would love that. See you Thursday.”

I walk over to my blanket to store it and my book in my bag and grin at Latisha who is dragging her aunt across the lawn by the hand.

“Sam! Sam! I want you to meet my aunt.”

I rest the bag on my shoulder and meet them halfway. “Hi, I’m Sam.”

“Hi Sam, I’m Brandy.”

Her hand is warm and soft, and her grip is firm. Even though she’s just wearing shorts, a t-shirt, and flip-flops, something about her strikes me as a professional woman. Maybe her posture or how she carries herself. I’m glad for Latisha that she has a strong woman in her life after everything she’s been through.

“Thanks for taking Latisha under your wing, like you have.”

I shake my head. “It’s nothing like that. I just can’t stand bullies. I hoped to find a bully-free zone for her.”

“That very next day after I met you,” Latisha says. “I told those boys to leave me

alone. And they did! I just stood how you stood, and I said what you said, and they crawled away like they were scared.”

“Were scared,” Brandy quietly corrects.

“Were scared,” Latisha restates.

Brandy and I share a quick humor-filled glance before I turn an impressed expression on Latisha. “That’s fantastic, Latisha. I’m so happy to hear that.”

“Latisha hasn’t stopped talking about you since last week. You’re her hero.” Brandy runs her hand down the back of Latisha’s head. The gesture is so loving, I can’t help but like the woman more.

“I’m glad to have made a difference for her. She’s the reason I’m here today, so she’s made a difference for me, too.”

We chat a little longer before Brandy tells Latisha it’s time to go. I watch them walk across the grass before I head in the opposite direction toward my car. All the while, my blood is buzzing. I’ve never made a difference like that before, and it feels pretty darn good.

### Chapter Twenty

A couple of weeks go by and I'm getting used to my new lifestyle of reading and volunteering and having less time with friends. It all makes me value the time we do spend together that much more. Tonight, Bek and I are meeting Ava and Dylan at Philly's for dinner. Philly's is a restaurant owned by the parents of some Oak Grove High students. They made a separate teen hang-out room at the back of their restaurant that a lot of students are happy to hang out in. Ava, Bek, and I used to come at least every Saturday night, but haven't done so all summer.

I spy Ava and Dylan seated at the end of a long table and give them a thumbs-up as we wind our way through the throngs of fellow students. We wave at a few kids and call out greetings to others. It's funny how it feels like we haven't seen everyone for so long when it hasn't even been two months since school got out. And knowing that we only have a month of summer left makes me both sad for the loss of my lazy summer days and excited for our senior year.

"How did you snag such a great spot?" I ask, as we settle into our chairs .

"Oh, there were kids here when we got here, but I scowled at them and they scrambled," Dylan says.

I gawk at him. He has a reputation for being a tough guy, but he isn't the type to actually intimidate anyone. "Really?"

Ava rolls her eyes. "They were done and left. We snatched the seats as soon as they got up."

Bek and I both laugh, and I wad up a napkin to throw at Dylan. He bats it away, chuckling.

Ava leans forward. “Sam, you are never going to guess what happened.”

I cock my head and take in her excited posture. “Disney on Ice is coming to town?”

Ava’s eyes widen. “I wish! But no.”

“I give up. What?”

Our conversation pauses when the server shows up with a notepad. We each give our orders, and I give her a significant look that she knows means I get the check for all of us. Dylan is very difficult to pay for, so I’ve had to resort to trickery. As soon as the server leaves, Ava’s gaze sweeps the kids nearest us to see if anyone is listening and leans forward again.

“Brent Post texted me asking if you were okay.”

A thrill shoots down my spine and I straighten. “Really?”

Ava nods with a smirk on her face, like she knew he’d do it all along.

I haven’t even thought about him in more than a week, which is crazy in itself. “What did you tell him?”

“I totally played dumb at first and said, Sam? As in Samantha Jones? I wanted to pretend like I didn’t know anything about him.”

I snicker. “Quick thinking. Thanks.”

“Anyway, he explained that you had been stopping in the bookstore regularly for a while and that you stopped coming in and he just wanted to make sure nothing had happened to you. ”

I bite my lip and study my fork. “He noticed. That’s a good sign.”

“That’s a great sign,” Bek enthuses.

For some reason, the smile I give her feels shy and unsure, which is so not like me.

“So then,” Ava continues. “Playing off the idea that I don’t know anything, I told him I had no clue why you stopped going.” She stops and looks up at the ceiling. “Which I guess isn’t a lie. I hadn’t been aware you stopped. So, I suggested he ask you directly.”

I squint at the all-knowing look on her face. “But he doesn’t have my number.”

“That’s what he said.” Ava bobs her head like she’s listening to some cool music. “So, I gave it to him.”

My pulse speeds up, but then slams to a halt when I realize I haven’t gotten a text from him. “When was this?”

Ava’s still dancing to the music no one else can hear. “About five minutes before you walked in.”

And like she’d planned it, my phone vibrates on the table. We all look down at the lit-up screen and there is a text notification from a phone number I don’t recognize. The three of us squeal in unison, causing Dylan to lean away from the table. Seeing the fear in his eyes, we laugh.

“Was that bff telepathy or something?” he asks, looking dubious.

“Definitely ‘or something,” I say, picking up my phone and swiping on the notification. I read the message aloud. “Hey Sam, it’s Brent. You haven’t been in lately. Just wanted to see if everything was okay.”

My thumbs hover over my phone as my brain composes a million possible replies, all of which sound stupid. “What should I say?”

Bek scoffs and rolls her eyes, while Ava shrugs.

“How should we know?” Ava asks. “You’re the one who knows how to talk to boys.”

I frown at my phone screen because her statement reminds me too much of my last conversation with Brent about me being experienced. He never clearly stated what he thought that meant, but with the blushing and the lack of eye contact, I’m guessing he thought it meant more than sitting across a table sharing a meal. Does he believe me when I say I’m not? Do I care if he doesn’t believe me? I close my eyes momentarily. I care.

I type a reply and send it quickly before I can second guess myself.

Sam: We’re at Philly’s tonight. You should come down.

Ava and Bek are practically sitting on the edge of their seats waiting to hear my reply. Dylan is sitting back in his seat, squinting at me like he knows something. Tilting my head, I ask him, “What do you think I said?”

He studies me a bit longer. “Something about your reaction tells me you avoided answering him.”

I raise my brows. “Point to Scott.”

Ava huffs. “I thought you liked him. Why are you avoiding him now?”

I sit on my hands and let my hair curtain my face. “I do like him, but he thinks I have all this experience and I’m...” I shrug. “Maybe too much for him. Or like all my experience will mean I expect more from him.”

Bek frowns. “That’s why you haven’t dated anyone this summer.”

I stare at the wadded-up napkin laying on the table in front of me. Heat washes through me and I know I’ve got to be pink with embarrassment. The part in my hair is probably glowing. But I nod.

“Want me to beat him up?” Dylan asks .

A grin breaks across my face and I meet his gaze. “No, that’s okay. But I appreciate your willingness to defend my honor.”

His nod tells me he’s genuine. He believes in my honor, and he stands alongside the girls who would flank me in any situation. I have to blink away tears just thinking about how much their solidarity means. I’ve never felt so uncertain about myself. This has been a very strange summer.

“And I’m not avoiding him. I told him we’re here and told him to come down.”

Ava’s eyes brighten with anticipation. “Oh, a friend date. That’s smart.”

Our meal is served, and as we eat and chat, I try not to let it bother me that Brent didn’t respond to my text. Maybe he couldn’t figure out what to say since I didn’t answer his question. Several people have stopped by to say hello and ask what we’ve



been up to. Each time a boy alludes to having dinner together, I steer the conversation away. But each time, I die a little more inside. Am I imagining the spark of hunger in their eyes? It's like another nail being pounded into my dating coffin with each boy who expects me to be an automatic date. At this rate, I'll never be able to date again just so I can kill my reputation for being too available.

At one point, Bek takes my hand under the table and just holds it. She can see what's going on in my head.

As my shame builds, I consider making an excuse and leaving, but the thought of doing that angers me. Why should I have to hide? I've done nothing wrong. Absolutely nothing. And even if I had, it isn't anyone's place to judge my behavior. Why am I the one being judged? Why am I heating with embarrassment? Wanting to hide? This is wrong.

Bek must sense something because she leans forward to get a look at my face. "Are you okay?"

Ava leans forward too. And Dylan arches a brow.

"No, I'm not." My anger bubbles like a potion in a cauldron. "I am absolutely not okay." I sit tall and look around. There are at least four boys staring dreamily at me as I scan the room, and that makes me even more mad.

I slam my hand on the table, making utensils rattle, getting the attention of many of the people in the room. I rise slowly out of my chair, feeling like lava boiling up out of a crater.

"Kirk," I shout to a boy on the far side of the room. We dated a couple times during the school year. "What's my favorite color?"

He reels backward like I slapped him.

“I don’t know.”

I shift my attention to another table. “Luke, what’s my favorite Mexican dish?”

“Uh,” Luke shakes his head. “Enchiladas?”

I roll my eyes. During our date, we had a full conversation about it being the complimentary chips and salsa you get at the beginning of your visit.

I turn and scan faces. Guys are starting to shift so they are hidden behind others. “Kenny, you’ll know this.”

Kenny’s terrified expression turns into a knowing smirk. “Shoot.”

“What’s my favorite sport?”

I see panic flash in his eyes, but then he nods. “Football.”

I snarl. He thinks that because he plays football. “Wrong.” We played horseshoes at the park on our date, and I told him that was my favorite sport. We argued if it was a sport or not.

“See what’s happening here?” I scan the room to make sure people are still listening. Especially the guys. “I’m sitting in this chair feeling like crap because I’m somehow getting the reputation for being easy. And guys are starting to think the term “easy” applies to me saying yes to more than going out with them. ”

There are murmurs in the room, and I don’t even care if they are with me or against me because I am so worked up, I couldn’t stop talking if my friends dragged me from

the room. And based on the confused expressions on the boys' faces throughout the room, things definitely need to be cleared up.

“But am I easy?” Wide eyes stare back at me. “Am I?” I shout.

When no one answers, I take a different tactic. “Raise your hand if you have gone on a date with me.” Maybe twenty hands go up. “Keep your hands in the air if you’ve gone on two dates with me.”

More than half the hands go down. The responding whispers are a little louder now.

“Now, keep your hand in the air if we have kissed.”

Nothing happens at first. I’m guessing because there are a lot of embellished stories out there that guys are about to be caught in. I arch a brow and finally, the hands start to fall. In the end, only one is still in the air. “Yes, Spencer. You were a gentleman. You walked me to the door at the end of both dates and then gave me a goodnight kiss on the second date. But in the end, we both knew there wasn’t any chemistry, didn’t we?”

He nods. “Yes, ma’am.”

I look around the room and it feels like I’m shooting lasers from my eyeballs at all the liars. “So, I will thank you all very much for correcting any stories you’ve circulated about what it’s like to date Samantha Jones.”

I dig my wallet out of my purse, take out a few bills, and throw them on the table. “Bek, you ready?”

She hops out of her seat. Ava and Dylan stand too, with Dylan taking point so he clears a path through the crowded restaurant. Ava and Bek flank me, and I make sure

to hold my head high as I march out of the room.

I stumble when I find myself passing a shocked Brent who stands at the entrance of the room. From the expression on his face, I know he heard at least most of my performance.

Good. Let him stew in it.

### Chapter Twenty-One

The four of us huddle together next to my car, watching the notifications pouring in on my phone. My phone sounds like a beehive with all the buzzing.

“What’s going on?” Ava asks.

The four of us look at each other but no one seems to understand why my phone is suddenly blowing up. The flood of texts and instant messages surprises me. It’s like they announced my phone number at the restaurant or something so that everyone in the room could send me their thoughts. I admit, I’m worried it won’t be very supportive.

“Do you want me to come home with you, Sam?” Ava asks. “I could help figure out what’s happening.”

For some reason, I look at Dylan when she offers this. He nods at me like he totally understands. Then he frowns back down at my phone. “I’m happy to help too if you think we need to set up a command center to manage this.”

I smile at them. “That’s super cool of both of you, but I’m sure this will die down as fast as it exploded.”

Bek and I climb into my car, and I prop my phone in a cup holder. The screen remains lit up the entire time it takes me to drop Bek off at her house. One notification after another scrolling across the screen.

“I don’t know, Sam. This seems crazy big.” She gnaws her lip as she watches the stream of notifications. “I don’t think you should handle this alone.”

She may drive me crazy with her fish allergy, but she’s completely dialed in when it comes to being a supportive friend. I wave a hand at her. “Don’t worry about me. I might not even look at any of it tonight.”

She swings her door open, but then turns back toward me. “I’m so impressed with what you did. That was really brave to stand up for yourself like that.” She wilts in her seat. “I’m so sorry you had to. I had no idea guys were making things up like that.”

I stare at my screen as the notifications pop up one after another. Texts from people I don’t know. Email notifications. I frown down at the screen when I see a flurry of Instagram notifications. Bek sees my expression and leans over to see the screen, and she’s frowning too.

“Instagram?” she asks.

I rub my forehead. “Yeah, I don’t think I’ll worry about this stuff tonight. Thanks for the offer, though.”

I toss my phone, screen side down, onto the passenger seat so it doesn’t distract me while I drive home. The screen has not gone dark for a second since we left the restaurant.

I consider that by speaking out like that, I might have ruined my chances of finding a boyfriend my senior year. I might not even get to go to prom. But when I remember the embarrassment on the boys’ faces as I asked the questions, I know it’s worth it. I’ll go it solo until I go away to college. Standing up for myself like that was the best thing I could do!

Of course, my parents aren't home, so I grab a sparkling water and head up to my room. I want to plug my phone into the charging cable but it's too far away from my bed. Turns out a constant stream of notifications drains a battery fast. I wasn't planning to look at any of the messages until tomorrow. Being pumped up on anger and adrenaline has exhausted me, and the idea of crawling into bed and burying my head under my covers is very enticing. But if I'm going to have to page through a bunch of messages calling me nasty names for pointing out the liars in the room, then I should get it over with tonight.

I start with my texts. I figure if they have my phone number, we've had a connection at some point.

Kurt: I didn't realize how shallow I am. I'm sorry.

I stare at the message for a long time. Not what I expected.

Me: Apology accepted.

He surprises me by responding immediately.

Kurt: Want to try again?

That feels slimy.

Me: Not on your life.

I open the next text. It's from Lana, a girl I was biology partners with sophomore year.

Lana: That was the most beautiful, powerful thing I've ever seen.

I frown. I don't remember seeing her in the room.

Me: You were there?

Lana: No.

She includes a link in the text that I tap, hesitantly. It opens to a video hosting site and there I am, asking boys questions about myself. It shocks me so much, I tap the screen to stop it from playing. The title of the video is GIRL STANDS UP AGAINST UNDESERVED SLUT SHAMING. I grimace. Have the rumors gone as far as slut shaming? I realize it doesn't matter if they are telling lies about me kissing them or doing more. It's all wrong.

My frozen image on the screen stands tall and determined. I like what I see, so I start the video playing again. I'm not gonna lie, I hate hearing my voice, but I love what I'm saying and how I'm saying it. I get riled up all over again listening to it, even though I'm the one who said it in the first place. Whoever filmed the scene stayed on me until I started asking for a show of hands. They scan the crowd too fast, and my stomach roils like I'm about to capsize on a boat. Then they scan the crowd more slowly as I ask for the show of hands for second dates.

Whoever is filming mumbles a swear word. "Seven. Seven out of 18." It's a girl filming. Then I ask for the final show of hands and the pause feels as long during the video as it felt in real time. The videographer swings the camera back to me just in time to capture the ironic look I gave the boys not willing to admit the truth. Then she does a slow pan of the entire room and ends up on Spencer. The girl swears again, but this time you can hear her own anger. She says, "That's effed up." And the video cuts out.

I don't know how to process the fact that my speech was taped and is already online. Then I look at the counter under the viewing screen and I almost drop my phone.



Three hundred people have already seen it. I don't even know if there are three hundred girls in our school.

Tentatively, I scan the comments under the video. Comments are usually so shallow and often not even related to the subject matter. I'm not surprised when I see one criticizing the dye job on my hair. I snicker when I see that someone responded that it is natural and called them a nasty name. But most of the comments are positive. Either cheering me for standing up for myself or talking about female empowerment.

The whole time I watched the video, my phone was buzzing with new notifications. I'm more encouraged to dive into my messages based on the video comments. There are a couple mean ones from guys who feel challenged by me outing them. I shake my head and wonder if they truly believe something happened between us or if they think they should have a right to tell whatever story they want of me.

I lay in bed even though I'm still clothed, because I can't take my eyes off my phone. There is something really good happening for other girls because of my speech. I have that same feeling I got when I learned that I'd empowered Latisha to stand up for herself, but this time it is a thousand times bigger.

I feel like a crazy person tucked up on my bed, alone, laughing and crying and responding aloud to some of the more heartfelt comments. Maybe I am crazy, but it feels too good to stop.

When I can't keep my eyes open any longer and I notice that my phone is on the last drop of battery power, I shut it off completely, plug it in, and burrow under my covers.

I concentrate on trying to relax and calm my mind. The stress begins to melt away when a series of comments flash behind my eyes, or the video plays in my memory and my brain kicks into gear again. I try an old-fashioned sleep remedy and picture

sheep jumping a fence as I mentally tally them, hoping the distraction will allow me to let go of the whirlwind of emotions I'm feeling. But instead, sobs take over. Though I don't understand why I'm crying, it feels like the right thing to do. My tears are the anger I felt for being wronged, the empowerment I feel for standing up for myself, and the joy I feel for the other girls who realize they don't deserve judgment either. They are happy tears, sorrowful tears, and exhausted tears. And eventually, I'm too tired even for them, and I fall asleep on my damp pillow.

### Chapter Twenty-Two

When I wake, my head feels thick, and my brain is a sloth. I stretch over the edge of the bed, as far as my body will go without tipping onto the floor, then reach my arm forward. My fingers just barely brush the edge of my phone as it lays on my dresser. I catch it with the tips of my nails a couple times until I pull it toward me enough to grasp the edge. Panting from the effort, I realize it would have been less work if I'd just gotten up and grabbed it, and hopped back into bed.

I growl when I find it turned off.

It isn't until the phone powers up and my notifications explode that I remember everything from the night before. I drop my phone and bury my head under my pillow, already too exhausted to deal with the fallout.

My phone rings and my hand automatically reaches for it. But I pause. Do I want to answer it? With a groan, I unbury my head and pick up my phone. But I don't recognize the number, so I send it to voicemail.

I stare up at my ceiling, trying to figure out how to handle my new and unusual situation. My phone seems pleasantly quiet, so I open the screen and my eyes bug out. I have twenty-five voicemails, over one hundred text messages, and—

Over one thousand Instagram notifications? What on earth?

I can't stop my thumb from opening the app. There are so many notifications to page through, but from a quick glance—because I'm still too afraid to look at things too

closely—it looks like someone tagged me in a post. A scan of the comments indicates someone tagged me in the video. Great. My eyes catch on some comments as I do a fast scroll through my notifications. Comments such as “girl power,” “you tell ‘em, honey,” and “effing can’t.”

Oh, that isn’t “can’t”.

I panic scroll away from the horrible word. That’s exactly why I don’t want to pay too close attention to anything surrounding this.

There’s a pounding on my bedroom door just before it flies open and Ava and Bek barge into my room.

“Why haven’t you answered our texts or phone calls?” Ava’s scanning me like she’s looking for a mortal wound or some other reason I’ve ignored them.

I close out of Instagram and show them my phone screen. As they scan from app to app, their eyes bug further.

“Holy smokes, Sam,” Bek whispers.

It’s a testament to how utterly bizarre the situation is when Bek crawls up onto the bed and sits cross-legged, facing me. Both Ava and I gape at her. I must look to confirm the bubble chair is still in my room.

Ava recovers first and looks at me, “It’s mostly super positive, though.”

I tell her the comment I just happened to see even when I wasn’t looking. Bek curls her lip and Ava physically leans away.

“That’s such a horrible word,” she says. “But you don’t have to worry about those

people. There will always be people like that. Just focus on those copycat videos. They're so inspiring."

Bek nods, tears shimmering in her eyes. "So inspiring."

"I'm so proud of you, Sam." Ava plops onto the bed and wraps her arms around me. "You can't help but be a leader."

I squint between her and Bek. "What are you talking about?"

Eyes still shimmering, Bek's smile is incandescent. "All those girls who saw you stand up to your abusers and felt inspired to do the same. It's the new #metoo movement."

"You even have a hashtag!" Ava enthuses.

"What are you guys talking about?" I ask again.

But Ava is frowning at me. "Wait, isn't that what you were wearing last night?"

Bek leans forward and takes my hand. She's staring me intently in the eye. "You've been crying."

I honestly can't keep up with the conversation. I decide to answer Bek first. "I cried myself to sleep last night. I was feeling...a lot, after that whole thing and my phone blowing up. Lana Taylor sent me the link to the video and..." I shrug. "It was a lot."

Suddenly, both girls are squishing me between them, cooing like they're calming a toddler having a tantrum. But the best friend hug feels so good, I just let them coo. When they've finally had enough and back away, I ask, "So what about copycats?"

Ava startles and tugs her phone out of her pocket. “Haven’t you seen them?”

“No, I’ve been avoiding diving too deep into the responses. I just don’t want to hear what an entitled b-word I am or that kind of stuff.”

Bek pats my knee. “There is some of that, of course. Like Ava said, there will always be douchebags. ”

I laugh, because Bek just said douchebags. I think that’s the first bad thing she’s ever said about anybody.

Her smile is wry. “But there is far too much good happening for you to ignore.”

Ava hands me her phone with a video loaded. It isn’t playing yet. A girl sits on the floor of her bedroom. The image is poorly lit. Her unmade bed is behind her. It’s a strange camera angle too, like she propped her phone against something to record herself. The title of the video is #NoMoreShame. Seeing that sends a thrill through me. I look up at Ava and Bek, and they both nod for me to watch.

I take a deep breath and tap the video.

“I just watched the Samantha Jones video. The reason I’m sitting alone in my room on a Saturday night is because the same thing that’s been happening to Samantha has happened to me.”

The video is only four minutes and twenty-eight seconds long, but at the end, tears are rolling down my face and I’ve smashed my fingers against my lips so that I don’t sob. Her story is so much worse than mine. Her bullies are mean and clever and far more ruthless, but I can see her spine straighten and her chin tilt up as she speaks. It’s so obvious that telling her story has helped her to regain some of her self-esteem.

I stare at the screen long after the video has ended. I pick up my phone and open the video app and look up the same video on my own phone. Then I leave a comment.

SocialSam: Your beautiful spirit shines through your ugly story. Thank you for sharing it with us and for helping to empower more, like us, who have been shamed.

The words aren't strong enough. I want her to know the awe I feel for her bravery. My story ended up online because someone else shared it. I would never have enough courage to put it out there on my own. I hit the submit button and wipe my tears.

"Okay girls." I run my hands through my knotted hair and swipe away yesterday's crusty makeup. "We're going to find every dang one of these #NoMoreShame videos and leave an encouraging comment from my account."

"Just need your login deets." Bek's already in the app as if she knew what I'd do next.

"Do you both have the day off?" I look at them with surprise.

Ava smirks. "Called in sick."

"I'm the luckiest girl in the world," I say. And I mean it. My life has suddenly blown up and my two favorite people on the planet are at my side, helping me to rebuild.

### Chapter Twenty-Three

“You did great, Samantha.”

I smile and nod as I shake the assistant’s hand. I’m still in shock that I just did the local morning show. Live, no less!

Mom rubs my back. “She really did.”

The assistant looks down at his tablet as he speaks. “Ms. Bellamy was so eager to get your story in front of as many people as possible. I was nervous when you turned me down the first time.”

Kate Bellamy is the morning show host who interviewed me. She’s a local celebrity, and I was a bit starstruck to be chatting with her at all, let alone over something so personal.

This assistant, I cannot remember his name, originally contacted me last week, shortly after my #NoMoreShame video went viral. I honestly thought the buzz would die down quickly and that’s the main reason I chose not to take him up on the offer. It felt like if I did the show and then everybody forgot about #NoMoreShame, people would think I was just trying to grasp at my fifteen minutes of fame. But by the time he reached out again, the day before yesterday, I was eager to accept the offer. I’ve been staying up late every single night, trying to respond to all the comments and videos so victims can feel heard. Knowing that the show would provide me an opportunity to talk to so many #NoMoreShame victims at once, was too good to pass up.



I couldn't believe it when Mom cleared her calendar to be here with me. Because I'm underage, I had to have a parent or guardian with me, but I honestly expected my parents to ask their lawyer to meet me here. I've done a number of interviews via email, and Mom has run several of them through her lawyer before I return them to the blogger or newspapers for publication. It means a lot to me that Mom finds this important enough to make time for.

Turns out, the reason the morning show was so persistent about having me on was because Mrs. Bellamy was a victim of shaming when she was in school. She had buck teeth, and kids teased her about it. She announced on the show that the #NoMoreShame movement has inspired her to start a non-profit to support children who are victims of shaming. Any type of shaming. I almost cried on live T.V. when she revealed the new organization, Shame-Less

She told Mom and me after our segment—quickly, since it was only a commercial break—that she hopes I'll be involved in her organization. She feels I have strong leadership qualities and that I'm already a symbol to so many girls and women.

“So, I'm sure I'll be in touch with you for Ms. Bellamy regarding the Shame-Less project,” the assistant says, as he scans the studio.

“Great,” I say. Now that the interview is over, I'm eager to leave. The studio is very chaotic when the cameras aren't rolling. “You have my information.”

“I do.” He nods. “Have a good day, ladies.”

Mom's lip is curled as she watches him walk away. “Ten bucks says he hasn't heard a word of what #NoMoreShame is about. ”

“He does seem full of himself, doesn't he?” I scan the room behind us. “Hey, want to be in a selfie with me for my Instagram page?”

Mom's eyes bug. "What? So your one hundred thousand plus followers can see me?"

I grin at her. "Yes. I'm proud of my mama!"

She squeezes my hand. "And I'm proud of my baby. Let's take a selfie."

I find a good angle that puts Mom and me in the middle of the picture and shows the large cameras and lit-up set in the background. Mom approves the picture and I quickly post it with a caption telling everyone what I just did.

After I post it, I look up to find Mom staring at me with an inscrutable expression.

"What?" I ask.

"Remember that conversation we had about what it's like to be a parent?"

"The one where you admitted to being a control freak?"

She chuckles. "Yes, that one."

"I do."

"I'm not as worried about you, Samantha." Mom runs a hand down my hair and gently squeezes my upper arm. "You have proven you know exactly when and where to flex your muscles and that you aren't afraid to do so."

I blink away the sting behind my eyes. Besides being a self-admitted control freak, Mom is a force in the business world and in life. Having her confidence means a ton to me. More than she will ever know.

"I'm very proud of you, dear."

We clasp hands and stride out of the studio and into the sunny summer day.

I spend most of my day searching for #NoMoreShame videos, watching and commenting. I also have a ton of instant messages, texts, and emails from locals about the morning show. Several people are excited to hear about Shame-Less and take the time to share their own stories about being shamed over things like hair color, sexual orientation, fashion sense, so many stories. I point all of them to the brand-new Shame-Less website and encourage them to share their stories with them directly.

There's a knock on my bedroom door. I frown when I check the time and realize it's already after six in the evening. When I'm online looking for victims, I get so caught up, I can lose entire days, like this.

"Come in?" I say it like a question, because who can it be? It's way too early for my parents. Ava or Bek wouldn't have knocked. Who else is there?

The door cracks open and Ines sticks her head in and smiles.

"Holy cupcakes! My oldest sister is here?" I push away from my desk and run across my room, with my arms held straight out, ready to wrap her in a hug.

"Not just your sister," Lincoln says, as he follows her into my room.

I tackle them both with a hug. "What are you guys doing here?"

"I hope we're not interrupting." Ines wanders around my room, touching familiar things and studying items that are new to her. It has been years since she last came into my room. She smiles and gently strokes the sculpture Bridget made of me.

Lincoln stands by the door with his hands in his pockets, grinning ear to ear. I'm not

even sure I know what he looks like without a smile.

“Not at all. I can use a break, actually. I’ve been online all day.”

“That doesn’t seem like a productive use of your time.” Ines has an eyebrow arched like she’s daring me to refute her.

So, I do, telling her about some of the videos and comments I’ve been responding to. By the time I’m done, Lincoln has wandered over to stand next to Ines, and my sister’s mouth hangs open.

“Sam, I had no idea you were doing all that.” Ines bites her lip. “I’m such a bad sister. I only asked you about it that one time, right after I heard what happened.”

I shrug. “That’s fine, Ines. It isn’t like I feel neglected by you or anything. You’re super busy with work and wedding planning and stuff.”

Lincoln puts his arm around Ines and says to her, “I feel even better about our decision now, hon. Go ahead and ask her.”

I look between the two of them. “Ask me what?”

Ines nods at Lincoln. “You’re right. I’m even more excited.” She looks at me. “Sam, instead of giving us gifts for our wedding, Lincoln and I are thinking about asking our families, guests, and friends to make a donation to support the #NoMoreShame project.”

I frown. My mind races through possibilities of what that can mean, but in the end, my active imagination keeps dumping the money into a bottomless bucket.

“But there is no #NoMoreShame project.”

“That’s the thing,” Lincoln says. “We think there should be.”

“I saw you on the morning show,” Ines said. “One of my coworkers ran into my office and told me you were on. We all shoved into the conference room to watch. Sam, I wish you had been there. After the segment was over, everybody started talking about the shame they’ve had to overcome in their lives. There is so much bullying and harsh judgement out there. I had no idea how many people are impacted in big and small ways.”

Tears shimmer in her eyes and I feel a kinship with my sister I’ve never experienced before. “And later in the day, another coworker came into my office. He was born with a bum hand. It’s a condition that has a long fancy name, but I can’t remember what it’s called. The stories he had from his school days were horrible. But the worst part was that it still happens to him. He’s a grown man in his thirties and people still taunt him and make fun of him for a condition he had no control over. That’s when I started to consider a #NoMoreShame project.”

“I don’t understand.” I looked between her and Lincoln. What is she suggesting? It isn’t like I can open a non-profit like Kate Bellamy can.

Lincoln answers. “We can set up an organization called #NoMoreShame. You can raise money under the organization and then donate the money to any cause you wish. Shame-Less would be the most logical first choice, since your movement inspired the organization, and you know the funds will be used locally. But after that, you can choose to support national or even international organizations as well.”

“And you guys are giving up presents to raise money for it?” I ask. That seems like a huge thing to do.

“We really don’t need anything. We were already considering asking for travel money instead of toasters. This feels so much better.”

Then panic fills me. “I can’t start an organization. That’s nuts.”

Lincoln smiled. “If you’re willing to remain the face of the organization, I can help with the rest. It’s what I went to school for.”

I suck in a breath. “I forgot about that!”

“Yeah. I almost did too.” He laughs. “It’ll be great to put the education to use.”

“We realize school starts soon, so you’ll be busy,” Ines says. “I would like to help as much as I can, too.”

“She’s got marketing skeellz,” Lincoln says.

“Will you guys have time for this?” I gawk at them, still unable to process what they’re suggesting. Me becoming the face of the organization? That’s crazy.

“We’ll make it work. But only if it’s something you want.” Ines takes my hands in hers. “This is your deal, Sam. You must be comfortable putting yourself out there.”

Overwhelmed, I look around the room. My gaze lands on the open laptop on my desk. I think of the hundreds, maybe thousands of people who have shared their stories in the last few weeks. The number of bleary-eyed hours I’ve spent on the computer desperately searching for stories, hoping to get them all. But I’m constantly afraid of the ones I miss being those who need to be seen the most.

“We could help so many people,” I whisper.

“We could.” Ines squeezes my hands.

I lock eyes with Ines. Out of the corner of my eye, I see Lincoln nod. But it’s her

determination that buoys me.

“We could create a safe place for people to share their stories.” I’m suddenly desperate for confirmation. My eyes skim Ines and land on Lincoln. “We could. Couldn’t we? A place that people can log in to tell their stories and know they are safe and aren’t alone.”

“Sure. We can do that.” Lincoln squeezes my shoulder. “We’ll do whatever you need, Sam.”

“It isn’t what I need.” I shake my head and glance over my shoulder to my computer. “It’s what they need.”

“We’ll do it. We’ll find a way,” Lincoln says.

I grab them both into a hug again. But this time, my heart pounds fiercely from the task ahead and I’m crying happy tears.

### Chapter Twenty-Four

“You must walk until the music stops, Taylor!” I laugh at the boy who keeps pausing to look at me each time he steps onto a new card in the circle. The kids behind him are frustrated, so I shoo him along with my hand. He jogs to catch up to the kids in front of him and everybody else scurries as well. As soon as the kids are evenly spaced again, Tammy pauses the music.

I skim the question on the notecard I hold as Tammy reads hers out loud to the kids. “A story that is composed of facts and real-life events is called what?”

Half a dozen hands shoot into the air, and several kids grunt or hoot eagerly, hoping to be chosen. I scan their faces and choose the quietest girl who rarely tries to answer a question. “Callie.”

“Non-fiction?”

“Yes!” Tammy and I cry at the same time. I jog over to Callie and hand her a bookmark, then give her a high five. She beams at me.

“Okay, who is standing on the non-fiction card?” I ask. My gaze sweeps the circle as the kids look down at their feet.

“I am!” Latisha jumps up and down with excitement.

“Awesome!” I jog over to her and hand her a magnet that says, “Because...books!” with a messy bedroom in the background. We high-five as well. “Way to go,



Latisha.”

Summer is coming to a close and I’m feeling unusually maudlin over having to say goodbye to these kids. Today is the last day the reading group meets. I bought a ton of these book-related gifts to give as prizes today, and the idea is that everybody should go home with several of them. So far, we’ve been lucky and different kids have been winning them. They all seem very motivated by the prizes, which makes me feel like a superstar.

The music starts again, so I step back to watch them walk the circle. I never would have expected to like middle school-aged kids so much, but I have had the time of my life helping this summer. Latisha made a couple of very good friends, and they both go to her school, so she will be able to continue to see them regularly.

And Tammy was right. I’ve learned a lot about literature. I’m far from an expert, but I don’t feel like an absolute novice anymore either.

The music turns off and the kids scramble to the nearest card. “Uh, uh, uh!” I say to two kids who are pushing each other to get on the same card. “Just share it!” They look at each other and laugh as they stand shoulder-to-shoulder so that they can each get a foot on the card. I snicker to myself. Kids can be so literal.

“Once upon a time,” Tammy says, “it was the princess's thirteenth birthday. She wore a blue dress to her party, and she got a new cell phone as a present.” The librarian scans all the eager faces. “What point of view is that story told in?”

I think the answer in my head before glancing at the card to make sure I’m correct. I grin and then scan the raised hands. Only three this time. “Lance? ”

“Third person.”

“Yes!” Tammy and I celebrate together.

I run around the circle to give Lance a sticker that says, “Only the cool kids read.”

“Okay, who’s standing on the third person card?” I ask, even though I can already tell by the tiny girl hopping up and down waving her hand. “Lindsay?”

She nods eagerly, and I run a “Books Rule” backpack charm over to her. She’s still hopping up and down after she takes it. “Thank you, Sam. Thanks so much. This is so cool!”

We high five.

“I didn’t get a high five,” Lance says.

“Sorry!” I run back to him to resolve my error.

When the time is up, I get and give hugs to most of the kids as they leave. I’m blinking away tears like I’ve known them forever. It isn’t just the kids I’ve enjoyed. It was the escape from the craziness that I’ve appreciated too.

Nobody here knows about the #NoMoreShame project, or the video. Nobody here wants to share their shame story—even though I would totally listen if they did. Life has been a whirlwind of attention and responsibility and planning and chaos since that video went viral, but twice a week, I got to come here and, for two hours, pretend like it hadn’t happened.

These kids appreciate me because I’m helping them have fun. That’s all. They aren’t looking to me as a leader or savior or anything like that. They just like me because I award them prizes.

It's funny to think that when I started volunteering, I worried that I wouldn't know what to do, and now I have my own foundation. It's been a summer to remember. I'm not sure I'm even the same girl anymore.

Finally, it's just Latisha, Tammy, and me. Latisha hands me the cards she picked up .

"Oh, thanks for doing that." I slide them into the envelope Tammy keeps the "Literary Walk" game supplies in, along with my notecard with the questions and answers written on it.

Latisha's head hangs and I can't see her face. She looks wilted. It reminds me of when we first met, and for the first time, I realize how much straighter she stands now and how she holds her head up.

"Hey, what's wrong?" I ask. I dip my own head, trying to catch her gaze, but she shifts away from me.

"I'm never going to see you again," she mumbles.

Her aunt steps up behind her and our gazes lock over Latisha's bowed head.

Brandy puts her hands on Latisha's shoulders. "I was wondering about something."

"Yeah?" I ask.

"Are there any volunteer opportunities for a seventh-grader and her aunt at the #NoMoreShame project?"

I inhale. "You know about that?"

Brandy snorts. "I'd have to be living under a rock not to know about that."

I smile because that's our intent. For everyone to know about it whether they want to or not. Ines has done an excellent job keeping us in the news. "I'm sure there will be events or tasks that we could use your help on. I'd love it if you sign up as volunteers. We have a sign-up form on our website that gives more information."

Latisha looks from her aunt to me. "So, I'll see Sam again?"

Brandy nods. "You will."

Latisha's eyes sparkle when she turns a grin on me. "Yay!"

I grin back. "Yay is right."

We hug, and it's nice to know it isn't the last time I'll see Latisha. I watch her and Brandy walk hand-in-hand across the lawn before I grab my stuff and head to my car.

It's hard for me to get my mind out of the #NoMoreShame project to go back to a mundane life at Oak Grove High. But I decide if I'm going to walk the halls, I'd advertise at the same time. It's the first day of school, and I'm wearing a t-shirt with my hashtag in bold letters across the front and our brand-new website underneath. I pair the shirt with a cute pair of black shorts, some strappy black sandals, and a black newsboy hat. I hand out magnets, encouraging kids to put them in their lockers, and I tell them their swag order through the website will support a local non-profit group that aids those experiencing shame.

It's the best first day of school I've ever had.

Our lunch table looks like a #NoMoreShame marketing meeting with all the swag we are sporting. But it gets the kind of attention I want. Kids come up to us throughout the lunch period and ask questions about the organization. Some want to volunteer. I caution them that not all volunteer jobs are glamorous, but if they are willing to do

some grunt work, they can sign up online.

“#NoMoreShame has somehow made you even more popular,” Ava says in a rare moment when it’s just her, Bek, Dylan, and me at the table.

I smile at her. “This is a better reason though.”

They all chorus their agreement. Then Ava gets serious. “I hope you know I never thought badly of your popularity before.”

My eyebrows practically arch off my head. “I never thought that. You always knew about my dating rules and believed one hundred percent in me.”

“Yeah, but,” Dylan scans the room, his gaze stopping on a few faces along the way. “Even if you had slept with every one of those guys, Sam, that’s not for us or anyone else to judge.”

I blink at him and realize that besides our love for Ava, we share this in common. We both have exaggerated reputations. His was a defense mechanism. I was oblivious to how my actions fueled mine. But we are living with the results, nonetheless. I’m hoping to provide a safe place for the people out there who don’t have great friends like Dylan and I do. For those who need a safe place and need some confirmation. And I understand why Dylan jumped in with both feet to support this.

Dylan and I lock eyes across the table, and I smile. “That’s exactly right, bad boy.”

He smirks.

Someone clears their throat next to me. I turn to find Brent standing beside me. A traitorous flutter erupts in my stomach. Has he gotten cuter since I last saw him? When did I last see him? Oh, yeah. The night this all started.

“Hey,” he says. With a tight smile on his face, he greets everyone else.

“Hey Brent,” Ava says. “Welcome to senior year, where you don’t have to take your life in your hands daily having the world’s clumsiest lab partner.”

His smile is genuine now, and I silently thank Ava for breaking the ice. “My parents were relieved to drop the extra hazard insurance.”

Everybody laughs and then Brent shifts his attention to me.

“Hey, I just wanted to say that I told my dad about the stuff that’s come out of you standing up for yourself, and he wanted me to ask you if you’d be interested in doing a book about it.”

Ava and Bek gasp. I lean away from Brent. “What? I barely read books; how am I supposed to write one?”

Brent tilts his head. “I happen to know that you read a lot of books. I’m guessing you’ve switched to ebooks since the guy that works at the bookstore is such an idiot.”

My mouth flaps a couple of times while I process what he just said. Finally, I purse my lips and shake my head. “I literally haven’t had time to read.”

His whole body relaxes, making me realize he was tense. He thought I was avoiding him. And it bothered him. Huh.

“Anyway, Dad’s company would hire a ghostwriter for you. But it would be your story.” Brent shrugs. “It would be a great way to expand the reach of your message.”

“I’ll think about it.”

“Great.” With a shy wave to the table, he leaves.

Ava’s gaping at me and Bek seems to be considering me.

“What?” I ask.

“You’ve been reading?” Ava asks.

I laugh. “I was just asked to write a book and that’s what you’re hung up on?”

She waves. “Oh, I was gonna get to that, but let’s take this one shocking revelation at a time.”

Bek nods. “Romantic comedies.”

Stunned, I gawk at her. “How did you know?”

“The movie we went to. You said something that seemed out of place then, but doesn’t seem out of place now.”

“That was months ago, Bek. How do you remember some random thing I said from that long back?”

“It wasn’t just the one thing. There have been several clues along the way.”

Ava gasps. “That conversation about tropes. ”

Bek nods. “The volunteer gig with the...” she arches her brow, “library.”

Ava slams her palm against her forehead. “How did I not see this?”

I shake my head and look up to the ceiling. “Deliver me from overdramatization.”

“Why did you hide it?” Dylan asks.

When I glance at my friends, I can see they’ve already figured it out.

“Because of this.” Ava’s face is pink, and she hides her face in her hands. “I’m so sorry, Sam. We are literally shaming you over it. Have we learned nothing?”

I cock my head and consider her and Bek’s embarrassment. “Actually, this is perfect.”

They squint at me and Bek asks, “What do you mean?”

I purse my lips, trying to compose my thought so it doesn’t come out as jumbled as it is inside my head. “I want to create a comfortable place for people experiencing shame to feel safe. But I’ve noticed it can also go too far. Sometimes, people become oversensitive and feel they are being shamed over the smallest things.”

Ava shakes her head. “But I was being a total jerk about you reading. How does that make you oversensitive?”

“It doesn’t. And the reason I haven’t shared my new hobby with anyone is because I knew people would give me a hard time. I’ve never been a reader. I was the first to admit it. And my social personality doesn’t lend itself to being studious or even bookish. But,” I raise an eyebrow and wag a finger in the air. “There has to be some grace in the situation as well. And that’s what you just showed me.

“Sure, I could’ve felt shame because of the things you said. And, honestly, a month ago, I would have. But now, because a spotlight is shining on it, I’ve witnessed others become over-sensitized to shame. I see now that it’s important we include an



educational aspect of forgiveness in our #NoMoreShame language. We can't expect every person we meet to be sensitive to our needs or what might trigger us. Bullying and cruelty are wrong and unacceptable. But there is an aspect of teasing or joking that either requires forgiveness or edification."

Bek pats my hand. "I hope you write that book, Sam."

"Can you believe that?" I bury my hands in my hair. "They want me to write a book! That's nuts. I'll have to talk to Lincoln about it."

"He can negotiate the book deal for you," Ava says.

"Oh, that reminds me. Can you guys help man the booth at the street fair on Labor Day?"

They all nod.

"Thanks so much. I'm super nervous about it and it'll help so much to have all three of you there."

Just then, a kid steps up to the table. Her cheeks are already red, so I know she's outside her comfort zone by approaching us. She's so small, she looks like she belongs in middle school. I don't recognize her, so she's probably a freshman.

"Hi," I say brightly.

"I'm wondering where I can get a shirt."

"We sell them on the website." I point to the URL on my shirt, only slightly embarrassed that I'm pointing to my boobs.

She pulls out her phone and types in the URL. I see her eyes scanning before she looks up and smiles. “Thanks.”

We watch her leave and Ava sighs.

“What?” I ask.

“It’s super great that there is so much interest, but we are going to be really busy fulfilling those orders.”

“We? With school and your work schedules, I’ll be lucky if you guys help ship anything!” I grin as I look around the room. “But that’s okay. Ines and Lincoln can help. Bridget will probably help, too. And believe it or not, Mom and Dad have been pitching in with things. And we have a growing list of volunteers to call on if we need to.”

“Aw, this is really bringing your family together, huh?” Ava asks.

“I think it’s a combination of this and the wedding. We have so many reasons to spend time together, suddenly. It is nice though. I wish Cisco and Justice could be here, too.”

“Okay, now to address the elephant in the room.” Ava gives me a significant look.

Bek scans the lunchroom. “There’s no elephant.”

“Thank you, Bek,” I say.

Dylan chuckles while Ava squints at Bek. “The elephant being Brent. What’s going on there, Sam?”

I shrug. “Clearly nothing.”

“It sounds like there is so much history between you two.” Ava cocks her head. “What did he mean by you switched to ebooks?”

“You know about my “making myself available” concept. I was actually buying a new book every couple of days because I was reading so much. But I haven’t been there for a while now. At first, it was because I didn’t want to see him after he admitted he didn’t think we’d make a good couple because I was so experienced.”

Bek rolls her eyes. “I think you are over dramatizing what happened, Sam.”

Maybe I am. I shrug. “That was shortly before all of this happened.” I point to my shirt. “As a matter of fact, it helped to fuel it.” I take a deep breath to calm my ire. There’s no use getting worked up over it again. Especially since I’ve addressed it publicly. “Anyway, it seems clear to me that bookish boys don’t date social girls. I don’t need no stinking boys, anyway. It’s been a long, weird summer. In the end, I’m glad it came to a head. Now, I have other things to concentrate on. I do miss reading though.”

“I’m sorry you felt you had to hide that from us,” Bek says. She brightens and leans forward in her chair. “Ooo! I have a great book for you. I literally grinned through the entire book. I’ll bring it tomorrow.”

“Cool! Thanks.”

The bell rings. We all head separate ways for our next class. As I leave the lunchroom, I see Brent watching me from across the cafeteria with a contemplative look on his face. Not seeing him makes me sad. I really enjoyed our little chats at the bookstore. He’s very easy to get along with. I tip my chin up as I stride down the hall. Like I told my friends, my weird summer was for the best. I love my new self. And

someday, I'm sure I'll find someone else who can love the new me, too.

### Chapter Twenty-Five

Labor Day weekend is packed full of extra homework, a dress fitting, a barbeque at Ava's brother's apartment complex, and the street fair. Now that we are back in school, I'm having a hard time getting online to search for #NoMoreShame videos and entries. But I've started getting up an hour earlier every day—no easy task—and I dedicate that time to my online search. Then it struck me that I can also carve out time to read at the end of each day, so I crawl into bed a little earlier each night and spend time reading every day as well. I don't get as much of either task done as I did before, but I feel better about doing a little every day instead of none for days on end.

Because Brent and Chris are friends, I'd hoped to see Brent at Joel's barbeque. No such luck. My heart stopped beating a mile a minute with anticipation about an hour after I got there and realized he wasn't coming. It was awkward seeing Chris after what Brent told me about him, but hopefully I managed to act normal enough that he doesn't realize I know he actually likes me.

Using one of our brochures as a fan against the heat, I wave it faster, hoping to cool my flushed skin a little. I shift my tired butt on the uncomfortable folding chair. After three hours of sitting in this booth at the street fair, I'm regretting my promise to stay all day. Lincoln, who just finished his shift and has been replaced by Ines and Gayle, tried to warn me that these things are grueling and boring as all get out and they make for a long day, but I thought he was just trying to take some pressure off me so I wouldn't feel obligated to stay. Note to self, when the perpetually happy guy says it sucks, listen to him!

The street fair is made up of vendor booths selling a variety of things from food to art

to chair massages. I've always loved visiting the annual event and am bummed to be stuck behind a table. If we do this again next year, maybe we can use some of those volunteers that have expressed interest in helping in the organization.

A girl walks by with a waffle cone dripping melted ice cream down the side. My stomach growls loud enough for Gayle to hear.

"You should go get something to eat," she says. "Ines and I can handle things while it's still slow. Walk around a little, too."

I look over at Ines who's completing the sale of a tote to a younger girl. I think the girl is sharing her own shame story. Ines is very focused on what she's saying. It's inspiring how many people have shared stories today or stopped by to thank us for watching their video. I feel like we are really making a difference for the people in our community. The more I do this, the more I realize how important it is for people to feel seen and heard.

Regardless of all the good feelings, the temptation to escape is too much to pass up. With a nod to Gayle, I grab my purse and bolt.

I stop to get a dumpling and stroll from booth to booth while I eat. After I've finished my food, I get a frozen lemonade and continue strolling. I find a tiny silver fairy charm on a delicate silver chain that I buy for Bek because it reminds me of her. I stop to browse the hand-painted scarfs, the novelty socks, and the t-shirts. A few people ask me about my own shirt, and I'm happy to point them in the direction of our booth and let them know that the proceeds will be donated to Shame-Less.

A huge booth stretches across the street from curb to curb, indicating the end of the street fair. Inside the booth is shelf upon shelf of books. I smile when I see a banner announcing the booth is indeed Beckett's Book Shop. I immediately head into the tent. I wave at Callie who is helping an old man at the far end of the booth. Then, I

spy Brent holding a stack of books in one arm and wandering around shelving them.

“Excuse me, I’m looking for a book for a friend.”

Brent turns, a pleasant expression on his face. When he sees me, his smile expands with pure happiness. “Sam! What a nice surprise.”

His eyes scan the tent behind me.

“Is it really?” I ask. “Haven’t you seen other kids from school? Or am I the only student who stopped in who doesn’t read?”

“Didn’t read,” Brent corrects with an arched brow. My pulse stutters. “Yes, I’ve seen a few. I’m surprised you’re alone, actually.”

“I’m working a booth too.” I point to my shirt. When his gaze automatically drops to follow my finger, I realize I might want to stop pointing my boobs out to people. “But I’m on break. I found a sweet little gift for Bek already and thought maybe I could get another book for Ava.”

“Yeah sure.” He turns and gestures for me to follow. “I was hoping you’d come in. I have something for you.”

I frown. What on earth could he have for me? As we head toward what looks like the register, I glance around the tent. “It’s like a complete bookstore in here.”

Brent speaks over his shoulder. “It was a lot of work. Took us all day yesterday to set up. We had to hire a security guard to watch the tent overnight.”

“What if it had rained?”

Brent walks behind a table and reaches underneath. A tablecloth blocks my view of what he's getting. "We have sides on the tent we can lower if it rains or gets too windy."

"Fancy."

When Brent stands, he plops two magazines onto the table next to the iPad register. "You haven't been into the store, so you've missed the last two copies of Global Lit. I got them for you."

My mouth drops open. "You saved these for me? That's super nice, Brent. Thanks."

"I was going to bring them to school," he rubs the back of his neck, "but I got the impression you didn't want to see me."

I cock my head. "What gave you that impression?"

"You?" He's looking down at the magazines instead of at me. His finger traces the letters of the magazine title.

"How did I give you that impression?" I shake my head. "And when? I haven't seen you."

"Well, that's part of it. But then, even though you were polite and stuff when I asked about the book, you were also pretty dismissive. "

"That's your fault." I cross my arms over my chest. "Not mine."

His eyes narrow. "How's it my fault?"

I'm not sure I have the energy to do this again. I suck air in through my nose, hold



my breath a second longer than normal, and then let it out in a breathy sigh. “Brent, I have expressed interest in you twice. You have rejected me both times. What do you expect from me? I can’t keep opening myself up like that.”

His expression is a mix of confusion and surprise.

I sigh again. “Come on. I was very direct both times. You couldn’t have misinterpreted me. How can you be so confused about it?”

“I didn’t reject you the second time.” He pinches the bridge of his nose under his glasses. “But now I see why you would think that.”

I’m too incredulous to speak, so I stare at him with my mouth open. I think I’m getting the same headache he has, because I suddenly want to pinch the bridge of my nose, also.

“I never said no that second time. And I thought we’d have more opportunity to discuss it, but then you never came back in. I finally got your number from Ava, but...”

“All of this happened.” I point to my shirt again even though I just told myself to stop.

He runs a hand through his hair, leaving it adorably askew. “I’m such an idiot. I didn’t realize you would assume no answer was a no answer.”

“For someone who is so well-read, you sure are a poor communicator.”

With a sad smile, he says, “My dad tells me that all the time.”

For some reason, I’m having a hard time with this information. I still feel vulnerable,

and I'm worried that I won't be able to keep my emotions in check. The last thing I want is to cry on Brent's shoulder when I'm barely talking to him again. I make my excuse with a shaky voice. "You know, I should get back to our booth." I pick up the magazines. "How much do I owe you?"

"Nothing. They're a gift."

That's even more confusing, but I smile. "Thanks."

I spin on my heel and leave.

### Chapter Twenty-Six

The booth traffic picks up in the afternoon, which helps the time to pass quicker than the morning. Ines and Gayle stick around until Bek, Ava, and Dylan arrive. Ava and Bek have helped me with online comments enough, that they know what to do if someone opens up about their own experience, but Dylan is new to it, so we take a little time to explain what he can expect and how he can actively listen and how he should respond.

“We aren’t experts or trained counselors, so we don’t want to give any advice,” I say. “The most important thing is to make them feel comfortable and heard.”

Though he looks nervous, Dylan gives a thumbs up. “Will do.”

We spend as much time visiting with kids we know, who stop to say hi, as we do selling swag or talking about the organization. Even the times when no one visits the booth go by more quickly because I’m hanging out with my friends. Finally, there is only half an hour until the fair ends. I’m rubbing my back and flexing my feet in my shoes.

“Hot tub is in order tonight,” I say. “Dylan, you’re welcome to join us if you want.”

Bek groans. “That sounds great, and we weren’t here nearly as long as you.

Dylan smiles. “Man, that sounds amazing.”

“We have extra trunks at home, so you don’t have to worry if you don’t have any

with you.”

“I’ll give you a shoulder massage now, hon,” Ava says. She steps behind him and places her hands on his shoulders, making a funny face. “Oh, maybe I can’t do this when you’re standing.”

Bek and I laugh at Ava’s attempts at giving Dylan an effective massage. She keeps dancing around on her tiptoes and jumping, hoping to get a better angle. But her boyfriend is too tall.

Someone quietly hisses my name behind me. I turn and find Brent standing awkwardly at the side of the booth. He’s clutching a book in his hand. His upper body is pitched forward like he wants to tell me a secret, but it’s also angled away from the booth as if he’s going to bolt. Something about his uncertainty tugs at my heart.

“Oh, hey.” I walk over to him.

His stance is conspiratorial. And when he speaks, it’s in a whisper. “I forgot to get that book you asked for.”

Glancing over my shoulder, he hands me the book, with the cover face down. My heart stutters when I realize he’s trying to make sure Ava doesn’t see it. I step forward to further block our exchange, and I know my grin is ridiculously large, but I’m so touched by his effort. “Thanks for remembering and bringing one over here. What do I owe you?”

He shakes his head. “I got it. Like last time, let her know she can exchange it if she’s not interested in reading it. But I think she’ll like it. ”

“Brent, you can’t keep buying my stuff. Let me pay you back.”

“Not right now. Let’s worry about it later.” He shrugs. “She might not even like it.”

His shifting from foot to foot, and his eyes nervously darting behind me is confusing me. Is it because he doesn’t want to spoil a present for Ava? Is he nervous to be talking to me? Staying away from him sure hasn’t helped me to figure him out.

“Oh hey, Brent!” Ava says. “Babe, have you officially met Brent?”

When his eyes go wide, and he looks down at the book, I smile and slip it under my arm. When Ava steps up beside me to introduce Dylan, I turn away from her and walk over to my bag, sliding the book inside. As I sidle up next to Bek, who has joined the conversation, Brent looks more relaxed. Dylan and Brent are talking about their mutual dislike of the science class they share this year. It’s nice that he seems so comfortable around Dylan. Most of the kids at school are nervous around him.

“What brings you to our end of the street fair?” Ava asks.

Brent looks at me and I raise my brows.

“I just wanted to check out your booth. It’s so cool how the #NoMoreShame project has taken off like it has.”

“Today was great,” Dylan says. “I’m glad I came. Ava’s been telling me, but I still didn’t realize how many people relate to this. And for so many different reasons. It really makes you think twice before you judge someone for their differences.”

Brent stares down at the table, though there is nothing to stare at except a navy-blue tablecloth. “Yeah, some of us have to be hit upside the head with the info before we realize what idiots we are. ”

I steal a quick glance at Ava and Bek before squinting at Brent, but he doesn’t say

anything else.

“How long will it take you guys to pack up?” I ask.

“It won’t be as bad as it was to set up. We can throw the books into boxes and don’t have to worry about unpacking them until regular business hours.”

“How did you guys do?” Dylan asks. “Was it worth coming out here?”

“Totally!” Brent's eyes are bright with excitement. “I can’t believe how many people didn’t know there was a bookstore downtown. I think the exposure alone will be worth the hard work, but our sales were good as well.”

“That’s great!” I say, remembering my own surprise when I discovered the store. “What made the owners decide to do it this year?”

“It was my idea,” Brent says. “I thought we needed more community outreach.”

“Good for you.” I grin. “It’s cool that they take your suggestions so seriously. You suggested they carry Global Lit, too, huh?”

Brent nods, toeing the ground. “They are good about considering suggestions. The whole staff brings ideas to the table. This one was just a really labor-intensive idea.”

Finally, Brent looks at me directly. “So, have you thought any more about writing a book for my dad’s publishing company?”

“I’ve thought about it a lot. And I’ve talked to several people about it. I think my next step is to talk to your dad. I don’t think I have enough of a story for a book. But if I can get others to agree to me sharing their stories, then that might be interesting. But I need to hear what your dad thinks, first. My sister’s fiancé, who actually runs the

#NoMoreShame project, will want to be there too.”

Brent nods. “Okay. I’ll have Dad reach out to him at the project and set up a meeting with you guys.”

Suddenly, I feel shy about it. I don’t know why. It’s like Brent is watching me learn to walk or something. “Thanks.”

“I should get back.” He walks backward a few steps, waves, and then finally turns and leaves.

Bek steps next to me, grabs my hand, and rests her head on my shoulder, which her head barely even reaches. “Bookstore Boy likes you.”

I sigh. “I don’t know. If he does, he doesn’t like me enough to go out with me, so it doesn’t matter in the end.”

“Can we just talk about the elephant in the room?” Ava says.

“There’s no elephant,” Bek replies, looking around. “There is no room, for that matter.”

Ava gives her a look before turning her attention to me. “You just got a book deal, Sam.”

My eyes grow round. “Oh my gosh, I did just get a book deal. We have to celebrate!”

“How about we start by breaking down this booth,” Dylan suggests. “The street fair has officially ended.”

“Thank goodness.” I start pulling boxes out from under the tables so that we can pack

up the remaining swag and brochures, but I'm thinking about Brent and wondering if Bek is right. Does Bookstore Boy finally like me?



### Chapter Twenty-Seven

I roll my neck to release some tension. The video I just finished watching was intense. That poor person has been kicked out of their house, rejected by their friends, taunted, and bullied. All for owning their gender identity. Sometimes I feel like such a hack for starting this project because of a misunderstanding over if I sleep around or not. But Mom pointed out that it doesn't matter if my situation is big or small in comparison to others. What matters is that we are providing a safe place, understanding, and pointing them toward organizations that can offer legitimate help.

This is one of those situations when I can't just leave a "Thanks for sharing your story" comment. Too much has happened to this person to ignore the fact that they need help if they haven't sought it out. I open the Google document in which we've been compiling links to different organizations, and I copy three of them to add to my response.

I love knowing that several of the volunteers we've gathered through school and various outreach programs we've done, like the street fair, are doing exactly the same thing I'm doing right now. Our outreach has really grown. And I've learned how to write a thing called a Standard Operating Procedure document. A skill that Ines swears will benefit me when I enter the workforce.

Glancing at the clock, I see it's time for me to log off for the evening. Over the last few months, I've also learned to manage my time well, too. I sit back in my chair and look up at the photo collage Ava and Bek helped me create. There are pictures from when we met at five years old, all the way through to Homecoming just a few short weeks ago.

I tear up just looking at the four of us—because Dylan is always around now, and I’m good with that—arm in arm and laughing. A chuckle bubbles out of me when I remember my shock at seeing Dylan dressed up in fancy clothes. He’s cute. Everyone knows it. But dressed up, he’s hot. Ava was beaming extra bright that night. And she and Bek looked so gorgeous in their sparkly cocktail dresses.

My chuckle morphs into a contented sigh. It was the first school dance I have been to solo. Sans date. When I walked up to the school, I felt vulnerable even though I was surrounded by my friends. The spotlight has remained on my dating status because of the #NoMoreShame project. I think of the boys who made grand gestures to ask me to a school dance in the past and that there wasn’t a single one this time. It hurts a little, but I also understand. By standing up for myself, and then by having it go viral, I put myself in the spotlight. I made dating me scary. I do miss it though. At times I wonder if I’ll ever date again.

But look at my life now. By changing my focus, I’ve taken up reading, volunteered at the library, and started a non-profit. My life is so much more diverse and fuller now. Dating will happen again one day, and I’ll be a better date because of these changes. I’ll have more to talk about, at least.

My text tone dings. It’s from Ava in our group text .

Ava: Hey, Sam, can you get to school a little early tomorrow? Say 15 minutes?

Me: Sure, no problem. Why?

Ava: We have a surprise for you.

Me: What?

Bek: It wouldn’t be a surprise if we told you!

I realize I've never really had a surprise before. Even when my parents gave me Sunny, I knew I would get a car for my sixteenth birthday, since all my siblings did. I just didn't know what kind.

Me: Do I like surprises?

Ava: You'll find out in the morning, I guess.

Me: And the surprise is at school?

Bek: Yes.

Me: Is this like that old show, Punk'd? Is it a practical joke? I know I wouldn't like that.

Ava: No! It isn't like that. It's not like an assembly or anything. It's just us. Don't worry.

Bek: Park in the shop parking lot.

I stare at my phone. That's a small lot behind the school that hardly gets used. That's either a good sign that this isn't a hidden camera thing, or a sign my friends have turned into serial killers and I'm a goner.

Me: ...okay...weird. But see you then.

I get out of my car and squint at my friends, who stand expectantly by the door leading into the shop hall. Ava stands especially straight with her hands behind her back and a ridiculous grin on her face. Bek looks as dreamy as ever. Almost like she's forgotten that they are waiting for me. Now that I'm here, I wonder how we will get into the school. The only door you can enter through is the main entrance.

I approach cautiously, expecting a cameraman to jump out from the shadows or Ashton Kutcher to walk up in disguise and tell me I won the lottery or something.

“Welcome.” Bek’s gaze is finally focused on me, and she has an uncharacteristic smirk on her face.

“Weird,” I reply. I look at Ava with an arched brow.

She pulls her hands out from behind her back and hands me a single, long-stem, red rose. Thornless, thank goodness, otherwise Ava’s hand would be shredded by now.

“What’s this for?” I take it like it’s a live grenade.

“It’s part of your surprise,” Ava says. She knocks lightly on the door and then gestures for me to precede her. The door swings open and Dylan steps out to hold it open for me. He also waves a hand for me to enter first. I step past him with my eyes narrowed.

“Morning, Scott.”

His devilish smirk crooks his mouth. “Good morning, Miss Jones. Welcome to Oak Grove High.”

Okay, so no one is going to spill the surprise yet. I enter the school and see several students in the hall. Many seem to be pausing to read the posters that line the walls. That seems strange. Kids never do more than glance at school posters. One girl even takes a picture of one.

Ava and Bek flank me, each wrapping an arm with mine to usher me down the hall. We come to the first poster, and they pause and give me a significant look. Ava tips her head toward the wall.

It's an eye-catching poster with a compelling tie-dye of colors as the background. There's a splat of white in the middle that serves as the background for the flowing red text. I read it and blink. Samantha Jones's favorite color is red.

My gaze scans the poster, looking for a logo or something to identify what this is all about. I'm wondering if this is somehow tied to the #NoMoreShame project. But there are no additional marks to indicate what this is for. I scan the hallway and realize the posters line both sides of the hall.

Ava and Bek turn me and propel me across the hall to the next poster. Samantha Jones likes chips and salsa best.

"What the heck is this?" I ask.

But nobody answers. Ava and Bek steer me to the next poster, back on the other side of the hall, while Dylan lags behind. We zigzag down the hall reading. Horseshoes should be an Olympic sport—which makes me giggle. Samantha Jones's middle name is Iris. Samantha Jones's favorite flower is...the iris. Samantha Jones is a fierce warrior—which makes me pause to consider again who might have done this. Samantha Jones is a generous friend. To which Ava and Bek both squeeze the arm they clutch. Samantha Jones loves romantic comedies. Samantha Jones loves to read.

I have the sensation of being on a rollercoaster as I stare at the poster. It couldn't be Brent.

Ava and Bek gently tug me toward the last poster in the hallway.

Samantha Jones loves a grand gesture.

I suck in a breath and slap my hand to my mouth.

The girls drag me away, though I want to stare at that poster longer. I feel like that poster holds all of the potential for my future in it, and I want to soak it up and dream and hope a little longer before moving on. We cross the intersecting halls toward the gymnasium doors. Bek pulls one open, and the girls let go of my arms and gently push me forward. I'm surprised to realize I'm afraid. I'm afraid I'll walk in and turn the corner past the bleachers, and I won't find my Bookstore Boy. What if it's Chris? Or someone else entirely? I can't believe how much I want this to end with Brent.

I can barely breathe as I walk into the gym. It's tomb quiet inside, so my heels click on the polished wood. I think how the poor gym teacher will have a fit if he sees my high heels marring his perfect floor. The slamming of the door makes me flinch. Like if my heels hadn't already, the door has somehow given us away.

A click echoes in the cavernous room and then music blares through the room. I freeze. It's my favorite song. Ava steps beside me and nudges me forward. Just two more steps and I'll be able to see into the gym. But for now, I have tunnel vision and can only see the corner I have to turn. The corner that could change everything for me.

I bite my lip and step around the corner.

My heart bursts with joy. Brent stands in the middle of the gym floor, holding an old boombox over his head like in that teen old rom-com movie, *Say Anything*.

Next to him is one last poster, propped on an easel.

Samantha Jones likes for her grand gesture to be personalized.

Tears flood my eyes, distorting my vision. Though I want to run and throw myself at him, I keep my pace to a saunter and hope I at least look cool. Brent's emerald eyes glitter with mischief as he watches me approach.

When I'm a couple steps away, I say, "This is indeed a grand gesture."

Brent finally lowers the boombox and places it on the floor at his feet. My favorite song is still playing. Where did he even get an old radio like that? And how did he get a cassette tape with my favorite song? He must have made it himself since the song hasn't even been out for a year yet.

He arches a single eyebrow, making my insides flutter. "But...is it personal enough?"

I stop in front of him and study his handsome face. Up close, I see how unsure he is about his plan, and I consider grabbing his shirt and pulling him to me so I can kiss him, but I don't want to get distracted yet.

I nod. "How did you...?" I point toward the hall.

"I undertook the most extensive research project I've ever done. I'm thinking about making it my senior project."

I purse my lips. The idea of being Brent's senior project is not enticing.

"I've been studying you. Asking your friends about you. Dragging information out of the morons you dated before who didn't understand how lucky they were. Analyzing your social media."

"So, you've basically become my stalker? Because that isn't so romantic."

He rewards me with my favorite thing: his smile. "I would never, ever stalk you. I just took the time to get to know you. To read your story." His chin drops toward his chest, and he toes the floor. "Honestly, Sam. I almost didn't go through with this."

I cock my head. "Why?"

“In order to pull this off, I became an investigative reporter. I interviewed friends, past dates, family—”

“Family?” I interrupt.

Brent nods. “Lincoln put me in touch with Ines and Bridget.”

My mouth drops open as I imagine him interviewing my sisters. But then I scold myself to stay on track. “So, after all that work, why did you almost toss it?”

Brent locks his gaze with mine and I’m suddenly sitting in a hot spring. His emerald eyes burble with emotion. “Everybody I spoke to—everybody, Sam—said how generous you are with yourself, your time, your love and friendship, your resources. I could go on and on about the things people said.”

When he falls quiet, I frown. “That’s nice to hear, but I still don’t understand why you almost abandoned this.” I hold my hands up and can’t help the pleased smile that curves my lips when I think about everything he did to put the grand gesture together. “This is amazing, Brent. This is hands down the most wonderful thing anyone has done for me. Why would you have tossed it?”

I realize his cheeks are blazing red, and I assume it is because of my praise.

“Sam, I will never forgive myself for the assumptions I made about you. And then when I was faced with the truth of you through my research, I realized I don’t even deserve you. I will never be good enough for you. The reason I ended up doing it is because you deserve it. You deserve to be seen and recognized for the amazing, generous, caring person you are. You deserve far better than me, but this is at least a start.”

I can’t speak. My heart hammers in my throat, complicated by the tears currently



choking me. I swallow but it doesn't help. I shake my head furiously to let Brent know I have thoughts and reactions to what he's said, I just can't verbalize them at the moment.

His brow creases with alarm and confusion. A crestfallen expression wipes away any concern and he nods. "I mean, I know. I missed any chance I might have had with you. Don't worry. You don't have to say anything."

I grab his arm and shake my head again. "No, you idiot. That's not it at all." I smile through my tears. "I have two of the best friends." I turn to indicate Ava and Bek, who I know are still watching, and I see Dylan standing next to Ava, his arm around her, and she leans into him. "Okay, three. And they've always been enough for me."

Brent frowns at me. I rush to clarify. "They still are, they always will be. But what you've done to make this happen is by far the most special, thoughtful thing anyone has ever done. Not only did you go out of your way to learn everything, you listened to me. You heard me and you took action. "

Hope ignites in Brent's eyes, but it's still mixed with doubt. I take a step closer so that we are inches apart and I drop my voice so that only he can hear me. "Please, forgive yourself for only seeing the surface, social Sam. I'm responsible for her. I created her intentionally. But she's moved on now, and in her place is a girl who isn't always confident about herself, who never thinks she's doing enough to help others, who loves to read and shop. That's the Sam you've taken the time to know. And other than those three people behind me, you're the only one who has put the effort into her. You're good enough, Brent. You're better than good enough."

His gaze drops to my mouth and his husky whisper sends a shiver down my spine. "There's one thing I didn't think through in this plan of mine."

"What?" I breathe.

“The school’s no p.d.a. policy.”

I laugh. The teachers do strictly enforce the no public displays of affection policy.

“Does that mean you want to kiss me?”

Air wooshes out of him like he’s been holding his breath. “So much.”

“I think we can take our chances.”

“Oh yeah? You’re willing to break the rules with me?”

“I mean, I already entered the school through an illegal entrance. I might as well go all out.”

His hands brush against my hips as his arms wrap around me. I’m shivering like it’s a winter day and I have no coat. My palms rest on his chest, and his heart pounds as fiercely as mine. The seconds it takes for him to lower his lips to mine feel like an eternity.

Finally, our lips meet. His are soft but strong, somehow. I don’t even know. I arch against him, eager to deepen the kiss when we hear a very authoritative voice call out.

“What is going on here?”

We break apart, but I’m too unsteady to step away. I have to use his chest for balance while my senses stop spinning. The heat in his gaze isn’t helping that along, though.

“I definitely didn’t think this through,” he whispers.

The levity helps me gain my balance. I laugh as I finally find myself steady enough to step away and turn toward the gym teacher storming across the room toward us.

Brent runs a hand through his hair. “Sorry, Mr. Gunn. I expected to be out of here by now.”

“What is all this?” Gunn demands. “You better not have ruined my floor.”

“We’ll clean up and get out,” Brent assures. “No gym floors were damaged in the making of this dateposal.”

I cock my head. “This what?”

Brent gathers the easel and poster, while I turn off the boombox and heft it.

“Dateposal.” Brent shrugs. “You know. Like a promposal, but more permanent.” He throws a worried glance my way. “At least, I hope it’s more permanent.”

At that moment, as we join up with my friends and exit the gym, I feel certain it’ll be very permanent, because I want nothing more than to spend the rest of my life with a boy who will work this hard for a girl. “Dateposal.” I grin. “I like it. We should hashtag it.”

“And we can make it go viral.” Dylan waves his phone. “I recorded the whole thing.”

### Chapter Twenty-Eight

There have been many more awesome kisses like the one Brent and I shared in the gymnasium the day of our dateposal. There have also been many more than two dates. Part of me was afraid I would find a reason to stop seeing him after the first or second date. Another part of me was afraid he'd find a reason to stop seeing me. I didn't stop worrying until after our tenth date. Luckily, we've seen each other almost every day, so that didn't take too long.

I give a slight shake of my head and force my attention back to the minister. This is my sister's wedding and there are no do-overs if I miss it because I'm daydreaming about my boyfriend.

It's strange to stand at the front of the ceremony and know that everybody is looking at us. I stand between Gayle and Bridget to the right of the minister. Lincoln's brother and his two other groomsmen stand to the left of Lincoln, who is sweating something fierce with nerves. His hands are folded together in front of his body as he awaits my sister's grand entrance. He looks calm, but I can see his body quivering. Even as nervous as he is, he radiates excitement .

Movement at the end of the aisle catches my attention. Ines and Dad step into view and I catch my breath. Her gorgeous dress, fantastic bouquet, and stunning headpiece all add to the vision. The barn's romantic lighting softens her in a way I've never seen her before. But what locks my gaze on her is the fact that she's luminous with anticipation. She glows from the inside out.

As the crowd stands, I glance at Lincoln and bite my lip. He's clearly blown away by

the sight of her. His nervousness has evaporated. I dab the tears pooling in the corners of my eyes with the tissue I wrapped around my finger.

Dad says something to Ines that makes her laugh and then they walk up the aisle together. Ines stares at Lincoln the entire time. Her smile is so big it threatens to reshape her face. I can't keep up with the tears, so I let them fall.

When Ines and Dad stop at the end of the aisle, she shifts her attention to us. She and I lock eyes first, and she blows me a kiss. She does the same with Bridget and then Gayle. It's so special to me that she took the time to focus on us during her ceremony.

When Dad gives her away, my heart squeezes. I remember Mom's words about how hard it is for them to let us go. I look over to her standing at the front of the audience Cisco, Justice, and Layla are next to her. Of course, Mom's crying. But she's smiling too. She and Dad grasp hands when he slides into the row beside her. I find Brent in the crowd and startle when I see he's looking at me. We grin at each other. I look at Ava next to him, and she traces pretend tears down her cheek with a finger, makes a sad face, and points at me. I nod and pretend I'm miserable. We both know they are happy tears. Dylan gives me a thumbs up and Bek only has eyes for Ines. The wistful smile on my friend's face surprises me. She's never so much as admitted to liking a boy, so it seems a huge leap to seem so starry-eyed over marriage. But that's Bek for you. She rarely makes sense, but is so loveable that she doesn't need to.

The non-traditional ceremony is packed full of beautiful words and advice. The vows Ines wrote are surprisingly fun and light-hearted. She draws laughter from the crowd as well as Lincoln, who beams at her like she's his prized pupil. Lincoln's vows are heartfelt and sappy and cause many of us to cry. It's touching how they wrote vows in each other's love language.

When the ceremony ends, we follow the newly married couple down the aisle, accompanied by cheering and applause. I sneak over to my friends before I have to

start posing for pictures. Brent wraps his long arms around my waist and kisses my forehead. I wind my arms around him too so that we are encircled in one another.

“You looked stunning up there,” he says. “I couldn’t keep my eyes off you.”

“Thank you!”

He leans forward and whispers into my ear. “I can’t wait until pictures are over so I can kiss you and not worry about messing you up.”

I peek through my lashes at him and whisper back, “Thank you for respecting the no smudge rule.”

“It’s so hard,” he groans.

“I know.” I waggle my eyebrows. “But we’ve almost made it through.”

Ava pipes up. “I’m so excited for the reception. I want to dance.”

I see panic flash across Dylan’s face and laugh.

“You know I can’t dance, right?” he says.

“Everybody can dance at a wedding reception,” Bek says.

Of the group of us, she’s the only one who has been to a wedding reception before, and she’s been to several. She has a lot of cousins .

I turn to Brent and scan his lean form, which looks every bit as good in a suit as I suspected he would. “Can you dance?”

“I’m decent.”

I think of how naturally graceful he is and suddenly, I’m as excited about dancing as Ava is.

Mom calls for the wedding party and families of the bride and groom to go up to the altar to start pictures.

“We’ll be over in the reception hall grazing on appetizers,” Ava says. “I’m starving and I’m gonna need fuel to dance the night away.”

I laugh when I see the panicked expression return to Dylan’s face. “See you over there.”

“Can I stay and watch?” Brent asks. “I promise not to get in the way.”

“That shouldn’t be a problem.” I grab his hand and we walk up the aisle toward the altar. The ring bearer, Lincoln’s three-year-old second cousin, is jumping down the stairs, while the two flower girls, who are a year or two older than him, are trying to corral him into sitting down.

When everyone is finally gathered, they place us in different configurations for photos. The photographer yells instructions to us about straightening our backs or adjusting a hand or lifting a chin. The pictures that include the children take the longest. It seems impossible to get all three children to look at the camera at the same time.

Brent sits in the front row, patiently waiting. His calm demeanor is one of the things I appreciate the most about him. It’s hard to rile him up. Because of that, when I start to stress, his even temper defuses my nerves. I take advantage of that whenever I want to yell at the photographer to just get on with it, by making eye contact with him

and absorbing some of his infinite patience. Then I make a face to make him chuckle, because my absolute favorite thing about him is his smile .

The photographer yells at me when she snaps a picture at the same time I cross my eyes and stick out my tongue at Brent.

“Oh, sorry,” I cry.

Ines laughs. “Please keep that photo!” she calls out to the photographer.

There are so many photos. Full wedding party, girls with bride, guys with groom, her parents with couple, his parents with couple, individual families with couple. The list goes on and on. When I think we are finally finished, I plop into a chair next to Brent to rest my feet.

“Oh, wait!” Ines straightens and holds up a finger. “Let’s get a picture of Sam and Brent, too.”

Brent shakes his head. “Nah. We don’t have to do that. This is your wedding.”

Ines looks between us, a knowing smile on her face. “Yeah, we need to capture this.”

I grab Brent’s hand and pull him from the chair. “Come on. There’s no arguing with the bride.”

The photographer stages the photo and walks away to get into a better position.

“I hate having my picture taken,” Brent grumbles.

“That just makes it more special.” I stand on my tiptoes and kiss his nose, then plop back onto my high heels and look at the photographer, whose shutter is already



clicking. “Oh, I guess we’re ready.”

Brent and I both laugh as the camera continues to click.

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After several hours of dancing, the D.J. announces it's the last call. A slow song spins and Brent pulls me against him. We are both sweaty from the run of faster songs we've just finished dancing to, but I'm so filled with happiness from such a wonderful wedding and reception, that nothing feels better than being pressed against Brent's heated, damp clothes.

He wraps an arm around my waist and clutches my hand in his as he sways us to and fro to the rhythm of the music. He presses my fingers against his lips and rests his forehead against mine.

"I have had so much fun tonight." His eyes are locked on my lips, and it stirs up the butterflies in my stomach. "You have the best family."

"It's been really fantastic, hasn't it?" I want to look around at all the smiling faces, but my gaze is locked on Brent, and I seem to have lost the key. "I'm so happy for Ines and Lincoln. I've never seen my sister so happy."

"I like your brothers, too. They're both really cool."

"It's good to have them home." I grin. "You'll go with us to the pumpkin patch tomorrow, right? Cisco is the undisputed pumpkin cannon champion."

"You had me at pumpkin cannon."

We sway quietly, staring into each other's eyes. I'm so comfortable with Brent, it's hard to believe there was ever a time I couldn't figure him out.

I blink up at him. “Can I ask you something?”

He lifts his head and scans my face. “This sounds serious.”

“Just something I’ve always been curious about.”

“Shoot.”

I study him for a bit before speaking. His green eyes are extra glittery in the soft lighting and shadows make his chiseled features extra sharp. I still can’t believe he doesn’t have half the girls at school drooling over him.

“When I first started coming to the bookstore, what did you think of me?”

His eyebrows arch. “That’s random. What brought that up?”

“It’s just something I’ve always wanted to know. Besides the scowl you always greeted me with, you were impossible to read. I’m curious what your major hesitation was.”

His eyes narrow with suspicion. “You really don’t know?”

I lean back. “I have no clue. You said you didn’t want to date me because of the experience thing, but that was later. Why were you always so cautious when I first showed up at the bookstore?”

Brent throws his head back and laughs. When he turns his smile on me, I let my gaze gobble it up. “Sam, I’ve always had a major crush on you. I literally thought Chris had sent you into the store to taunt me.”

I blink. “What?”

“You didn’t know?” He looks so surprised.

“That you had a crush?”

He nods.

“No! I didn’t know you even knew who I was.”

He rolls his eyes. “Come on, Sam. Everybody knows who you are.”

“Well, you didn’t act like it.” When he gives me an ironic look, I clarify. “I knew you knew who I was, of course. We’ve gone to school together our entire lives. But you never seemed to care one way or the other. How would I interpret that to mean you had a crush?”

A pained groan escapes him as he shakes his head. “To this day, I thought you originally started coming into the bookstore on a dare from Chris. He always knew how I felt. We used to try to one-up each other over whose crush was bigger.”

I stop dancing. “You cannot be serious right now.”

“Samantha Jones, I have never been more serious.” Brent starts us swaying to the music again.

“But I went in to pick up the book my mom ordered.”

Brent looks around the barn at all the decorations. “Okay, now I see that the book was valid, but I thought he put you up to it.”

I slam my eyes closed. “That makes no sense, Brent. How would he get me to pick it up for my mom? What would my mom do if I gave her a book she didn’t order?”

“I thought you were in on it.” With a shake of his head, he emits a quiet groan. “You have to know Chris to understand.”

“Well, I mean...I do know Chris. But maybe not like you do. So, you thought—like until now—that Chris sent me into the store to mess with you?”

He nods, biting his lip. “And the next couple of times. I literally thought he fed you conversation starters. I thought you picked up Global Lit on his suggestion. Every time you came in felt staged.” He wrinkles his nose and grimaces. “I’m sorry. ”

I burst into laughter. “Each time was staged.”

His eyebrows lift.

“Except the first visit. My mom really did send me down for the book. But then I realized how cute you were, and I wanted to get to know you better, so I found excuses to come in.”

With his eyes closed, he shakes his head. “And I almost blew it because I thought you were just teasing me.”

I stare at him until he finally opens his eyes. “You’ve really had a crush on me?”

A sly smile curves his lips and I’ve just discovered my second favorite smile of his. “Since second grade.”

“What?”

“That horrible kid, Tito, was teasing Ava on the playground. She was crying. I remember feeling bad for her, but I was afraid of Tito because he could fight. But you stormed over to him and pushed him around and yelled at him. I remember how shocked he was, but when he tried to hit you, you pushed him again. He stumbled

backward and almost fell. I think he was afraid you could beat him if the two of you fought, because I remember when his stance changed from fight to flight, and I knew you'd won. He made some excuse about not hitting a girl and ran away."

That's the same situation I remembered when I saw Latisha being bullied in the park and she told me how scary I looked when I ran toward them. I study Brent, who looks a bit dazed in memory. "Huh."

"What does that mean?" he asks.

"Something about that being the moment you started to like me feels right. Like you saw the person I really am long before I even figured it out." I blink at him. "Thank you."

He leans forward and kisses me gently on the lips. His lips linger, soft and warm, and I barely remember we're surrounded by my family. The kiss is so tender, I can't imagine asking him to stop. When he speaks, it's against my lips. "For what?"

I pull back in order to look him in the eye. "For being patient enough to wait a decade or so until I discovered it myself."

He sighs dramatically. "I didn't think you'd ever catch up. Sheesh. How long do you expect a guy to wait?"

"Well, the right guy? Forever."

Brent presses my fingers to his lips again, his searing gaze locked on mine. "Then forever it is."

The love song winds down, but I know in my heart that our love song is just getting started.

In order to graduate, Bek must pass her math class, but a few weeks into the school year she's already failing. A generous offer of tutoring sparks unexpected feelings in Bek. Feelings that threaten to derail her plans to move out of the house. The more she tries to deny herself her growing attraction, the worse it becomes and finally she's faced with a choice. Love or friendship? Read **MATH GEEKS DON'T DATE FLIGHTY GIRLS** book 3 in the Oak Grove High series today!