



RICH BOYS SIN BEST

Cruel Boy

NEW YORK TIMES & USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

CLARISSA
WILD

CRUEL BOY



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Dark Romance

The Company Series

Delirious Series

Wicked Bride Games & Dirty Wife Games

Savage Men Series

A Debt Owed & A Debt Repaid

Father

New Adult

Fierce Series

Blissful Series

Ruin

Erotic Romance

The Billionaire's Bet Series

Enflamed Series

Bad Teacher & Bad Boss

Hotel O

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MUSIC PLAYLIST

[Click here](#) to listen to the full playlist on Youtube.

“Bad Guy” by Billie Eilish
“You Should See Me In A Crown” by Billie Eilish
“COPYCAT” by Billie Eilish
“Ilomilo” by Billie Eilish
“Pass That Dutch” by Missy Elliot
“My Body Is A Cage” by Peter Gabriel
“My Body Is A Cage” by Peter Gabriel (Oxford London Temple Version)
“WHY” by NF
“The Search” by NF
“Leave Me Alone” by NF
“I Just Wanna Know” by NF
“Let You Down” by NF
“If You Want Love” by NF
“Cruel Intentions” by Valerie Broussard
“I Feel Like I’m Drowning” by Two Feet
“Eyes On Fire” by Blue Foundation
“Muddy Waters” by LP
“Dance In The Dark” by Au/Ra
“God’s Whisper” by Raury
“Melody X” by BONAPARTE
“The One” by Jorja Smith
“Dizzy – Live Performance” by MISSIO
“The Darker The Weather // The Better The Man” by MISSIO

“Boys And Girls” by Kyle Dixon

“Angry Too” by Lola Blanc

“Lalala” by bbno\$ & y2k

“Nothing Breaks Like A Heart” by Mark Ronson feat. Miley Cyrus

“Break Up With Your Girlfriend” by Ariane Grande

DESCRIPTION

Rich boys sin best.

Gossip always goes around at Falcon Elite Prep.

Everyone knows Nate Wilson, the popular football quarterback and every girl's crush.

But there's more behind those drop-dead gorgeous eyes and that killer smile ...

He's a notorious heartbreaker ...

And he's got his eyes set on me.

The twisted games he plays are cruel and dangerous.

He teases and tempts me ... just to ruin me.

Because I know the one thing he doesn't want anyone to know.

A big, dirty secret ...

And there's nothing bad boys won't do to keep a secret buried.

CHAPTER 1



SAM

UNDERWATER, everything is quiet. Tranquil. Like heaven is all around you, caressing your body, pulling you into its embrace. Deeper and deeper, it pulls at your legs until they beg to be released.

I hold my water-resistant camera in front of me and take multiple pictures of the cold depths of the ocean. Its beauty never fails to mesmerize me. But I can't stay for too long; sooner or later, that urge to breathe always pulls me back to the surface toward the dark sky littered with a million flickering lights ... back into the noise of swooshing water and rushing wind.

The shore is mostly deserted, except for a few beer cans, party cups, and some clothes and trash lying scattered all around. The only other person there is Nate Wilson ... the most handsome guy at school and so much more than that.

He's sitting on a few rocks near the edge of the beach with a girl by his side. I can't stop watching. Their hands touch briefly, but then the wave overtakes me and blocks my view. When the water lowers, I shake my head, but the waves keep picking up. Still, I hold up my camera and take a few pictures.

Right as he turns his head toward me, I dive underwater again.

Here, there are no boys, no girls, and no secret touches. Just me and the water, and all the beautiful creatures below that need to meet my camera.

A single picture says more than words ever will.

No matter how powerful they are.



NATE

PEOPLE SAY it only takes a few minutes for your life to be destroyed. I never believed them ... until today. With just the snap of a finger, a stupid decision and a simple push, I marked my own fate.

My body grows colder and colder the longer I stay in the water. It consumes me whole as I stray farther and farther away from myself. From reality.

I'm so damn dizzy, but I can't collapse here. Not now, not in the middle of the ocean. I take a deep breath and peel my eyes open, forcing myself to go.

That's when I spot *her* ... the girl and her camera.

FLASH.

I cover my eyes with my hand. Salty seawater enters my nostrils and mouth as I struggle to swim.

When I open my eyes again, the girl is gone; swallowed by the same waves that drag me back to the shore.

As my feet sink into the sand and the water creeps up against my toes, I stop and turn around, clutching the long red hairs in my hand as though they're my last lifeline.

This is now the place where not only my life changed forever.

But hers too.

CHAPTER 2



SAM

THE DEEP BLUE sea looks like an impregnable abyss, even from a mere image on my laptop. A beautiful composition of a whole array of colors with the occasional fish swimming through the darkness as if it's taunting fate.

The pictures don't compare to real life. They don't show the feelings you had when you were there, or the taste or smell of the water. In reality, the water is cold, and the salt is harsh on the skin, and if you're not careful, it could swallow you whole.

For a few seconds, I stare at the images, cycling through them on repeat as if they'll tell me something that wasn't there before. A glimpse into an unseen world, a deep, dark secret waiting to be discovered.

But a single glance at a boy walking in the water makes me close the tab and lean away.

I sigh and close my eyes for a second. *Breathe.*

When I open my eyes, I click and drag the file toward the bin. My finger hovers over the mouse, but I can't push myself to throw it away.

"Samantha! Are you coming or not?"

Groaning to myself, I close my laptop and brush my white blond hair in front of the mirror. I always loved this metallic color, but I only painted my hair after I discovered my mom hated it.

I grab my bag, fill it with the stuff I need, and rush downstairs. Heading straight into the kitchen, I pull open the fridge to take out the milk and have

a taste.

“Sam!” Mom snatches the carton away from me.

“What?” I mumble.

“I told you not to do that,” she says, rolling her eyes as she pours some in her coffee. “Our cleaning lady keeps having to throw it away.”

I shrug as I grab a bowl and fill it up with Cheerios and steal the milk back again. Mom approaches me from the side and plants a kiss on my temple. “And morning, hope you slept well.”

“Morning to you too,” I say, smiling sweetly even though I’m totally not, but I’ll do it for her. After all, only got one mom.

My smile immediately dissipates when I turn around and come face to face with her new boy toy crawling out of their upstairs sex cave. Just the thought of what they’re doing in there makes me gag.

I ignore him as best as I can while I sit down at the table, and he waddles past me, toward the coffeemaker ... and my mom. When he touches her expensive purple silk robe, a chill runs across my spine. God, I hate that fucker.

He smooches her in a way I never thought I’d see my mom kiss someone, groping her butt along with it, and I practically spit out my Cheerios onto the kitchen table.

“Can ya not ... in here? Please?” I beg. At least I added a please. It’s more than they got last time.

My mom raises a brow at me while her boy toy throws me a look. *That* look; the one he always saves for whenever I open my mouth, and he remembers I exist ... *and* that I was here before him.

I glare right back at him while gobbling up my Cheerios. Then I grab my phone and check the messages.

Mo: Cash me ousside, whore.

I SNORT AND TYPE BACK.

SAM: Coming, whore.

Mo: Hard.

I TUCK MY PHONE AWAY, grab my bag, and get up.

“Where are you going?” Mom asks. “I thought we were going to have a family breakfast.”

“School. Duh,” I reply, shrugging while I grab some toast from the toaster.

“But it’s so early. Class doesn’t start for another hour,” she says. Spinning on her heels, she’s clenching the pan of eggs she was baking. “I still wanted to talk to you.”

Oh, boy.

Talking.

That’s code for a conversation I really don’t wanna have.

“Whoa, be careful, honey,” her new boy toy says as he holds up his hand close to the pan. “Almost hurt me there.”

I wish she had.

“Sorry,” she mutters, gazing into his eyes as though she’s already forgotten about me.

He puckers his lips and gives her a sloppy kiss. “It’s okay, honey.”

My eyes almost roll to the back of my head.

From the hallway, I yell, “Bye!”

And I stuff the toast into my mouth before grabbing my coat and running off.

“Don’t be late today! I’m making lasagna tonight!” Mom yells. As if my favorite meal will coax me to stay. Nothing in the world could keep me in that house as long as that guy is here lurking in the background.

“Oh, and if you want, you can invite Monica too!”

Ew. As if I want Mo to see the travesty that is my mom and her new boy toy, Randy.

Rushing out the door, I head straight to Monica’s new Range Rover, which she got from her parents as a birthday gift last summer, parked right outside in the driveway.

“Took you long enough,” she says as I jump in and close the door.

“Bitch,” I mumble, and she snorts. “We’re fucking early.”

She shrugs and tucks a strand of her coppery brown hair behind her ear. “Figured you didn’t wanna spend any more time with those two lovebirds.”

I suck in a breath. “Oh, man.”

“Do I even wanna know how bad it is?”

I cringe. “Nope.”

She starts the car and revs the engine. "Better get outta here fast then, before they start rolling over the lawn naked."

I gag out loud, and she laughs in response.

"I don't know what she sees in him," I say. Mom's in front of the kitchen window waving at me, but her new boy toy is right behind her, hugging her tight as if to say, "she's all mine now," and it grosses me out.

I wave back with a blank stare, and Monica drives off, whispering, "The power of the D."

"Who's the whore now?" I quip.

"Who? Me? Naaaah," she jokes. "I'm still as pristine as Virgin Mary."

"I hope you mean the drink," I retort.

"Pfft, you're one to talk. Last I remember, you were sucking the soul out of Brody's mouth." Monica punches me in the shoulder.

"That was before summer," I reply.

"So?" She raises a brow.

"I'm so over him." I look out the window.

"So who's next on your list? Got any favs?" she asks.

"No one," I reply.

"What?" She narrows her eyes. "Course you do."

"Boys are just a distraction."

It's quiet for a few seconds, then she sputters, "Pfft, that is such a Sam thing to say."

I glance at her over my shoulder. "What? It's true. Boys are dumb."

"But those eyes ..." She blinks. "Those abs ..." She bites her lip. "And those mouths ..." She curls her fingers into claws, and says, "Rawr."

"Jesus." My eyes practically roll to the back of my head. "You're such a cliché."

"Who cares? Besides, boys make me happy."

"You mean dicks?" I retort, and my tongue dips out while laughing.

Her brow rises. "You know what? That's a fact, and I don't even care."

"Whore," I say with a smirk.

"Whore you too," she says.

And we both laugh at each other like two goddamn hyenas.

The drive to school doesn't take nearly as long when I'm in the car with her. I have my own car, of course, but I prefer to carpool with her. It's better for the environment and for my health. Chatting with Mo is pretty much the only thing that keeps me sane right now with that guy living in my home. I

expected him to be gone before the end of summer, but some things are stickier than others, and this cum stain isn't coming off so easily.

When we get to the massive gates surrounding our school, I swallow and sit back while Monica rolls down her window.

"Student number?" a voice says through the monitor.

"Five, one, three, zero, eight and five, two, six, four, one."

"Thank you," the voice replies, and the gates open at a snail's pace.

We drive all the way up the hill on the stone path to the giant parking lot to the right of the school. Tons of expensive cars are parked here, most of them belonging to the spoiled kids attending the school, who got them from their rich parents. Not that I'm the one to talk.

"So ... you ready?" Monica asks, clutching her hands together.

"As ready as I'll ever be," I say, shrugging again.

"Damn, you shrug a lot," she says as she gets out of the car.

I follow suit. "So?"

She smacks the door shut and locks the car. "Is it me, or have you gotten bitchier lately?" she says, a defiant smirk on her face.

"That's what happens after the worst summer ever," I reply.

She cocks her head, and says, "Aww, c'mere." Before I know it, she's already smashed my face between her giant tits. "Hug."

"You're ... choking ... me ..." I hiss.

"Good, maybe that'll knock some sense into you," she jokes as she releases me.

I cough. "Thanks."

"You shoulda called more often," she says. "I could've been there for you."

"Nah, it's fine," I say, slinging my bag over my shoulder.

"You sure?" She raises a brow. "I know you had it rough last year, with your father—"

I interrupt her by holding up a finger and give her the sternest face I can muster.

"Right." She smashes her lips together. "Fine. We won't talk about him. But you gotta promise me you'll enjoy your senior year."

"Oh, I definitely will," I say, rubbing my lips together while we walk along the thick marble path.

"You owe it to yourself," she says. "You need to have a good time. Live a little."

“Yeah.” I suck in a deep breath. She’s right, but ... telling yourself you should and actually doing it are two entirely different things.

“C’m on, let’s go. Time to wreck the school.”

Monica drags me with her toward the huge building. To this very day, Falcon Elite Prep School still makes my jaw drop. The giant regal building reminds me of a palace built by kings and queens to oversee their citizens, but I’m no royal. Though I don’t doubt some of them attend this prep school.

This whole school is a cesspool of rich, spoiled kids. In fact, I’m ashamed to admit I’m one of them. Still, the truth is the truth. I only got in because my father is a celebrity lawyer. But it was my mom’s idea for me to go here. But I befriended Monica here, so I’m happy with the choice as I can’t imagine my life without her now.

We walk along the path that boasts a dozen seats accompanied by exotic flowers and manicured trees. Sitting in their own little circle or hanging around the fountain or the pathways behind the trees, the cliques are everywhere in the grass surrounding the building. We don’t belong to any of them, and I don’t even want to. I’d much rather be an outlier than an *it* girl.

“Oh, my God, check that out,” Monica says, nudging me with her elbow.

Speaking of *it* ...

One look at the brown-haired, long-legged girl marching in our direction while wearing a purple skirt too short for her ass, and my eyes almost roll out of my skull. Pretty Miss perfect Layla Parker. But I call her Bitch number one.

The other one is her lackey, Jenny, equally beautiful but a killer too. Not literally, but most boys who stumble into her path are left in ruins.

“Jenny looks like she’s on a murder spree,” Monica jokes. “Did you know? Rumor had it her last breakup was so bad the guy ended up crying on her lawn for hours.”

“No. But interesting.”

“And someone said Layla and Jenny caused a classmate to drop out last year just because they didn’t like the way she smelled.”

“Wow,” I reply, folding my arms.

“Yep.”

I don’t know if I should believe all the rumors floating around about them; and there are a lot. But they sure don’t deny them ... and judging

from the way they behave toward everyone around them—including me—I don't think they're really rumors after all.

Layla flaunts her stuff, strutting around the premises as though she knows she owns the property. People glare at her with a mixture of admiration, envy, and sheer panic. It's as if the zoo has suddenly turned silent at the sight of the trainer carrying the bucket of food. Everyone wants a taste. But neither of them dish any of it out ... or so they pretend.

No, Layla saves that for her darling quarterback boyfriend with his killer smile, six-pack, and V-line of which a tiny glimpse can be seen from underneath his shirt. Nate Wilson. The moment he appears from behind a tree, my eyes are glued to his presence, but I'm not sure if it's in awe or in lust. I won't ever admit that to anyone, though. The fucker is a grade A asshole, just like his girlfriend. The perfect match.

She's headed straight for us, and I'm contemplating whether to step aside or best the storm coming my way. I'd be an idiot not to move, but it's too tempting to stand my ground because this isn't just *her* sidewalk; it's mine too and everyone else's. She marches around as if she owns the place, but she doesn't, and someone needs to remind her of that.

The moment she passes me, she bumps her shoulder right into my bag and pushes me aside.

"Watch it!" she says.

When I've recaptured my footing, I hiss back, "You walked into me."

She narrows her eyes at me and throws me a look. *That* look; the one that could make a thousand girls fall to the ground and beg for their reputations not to be ruined by the matriarch. But I'm not scared of her. What's she gonna do? Hit me?

Her top lip curls. "Whatever, loser."

I know why she hates me, but it doesn't mean I care. My eyes aren't fixated on hers.

All I can look at is Nate Wilson ... and how he's staring right at me.

My throat clamps shut, and it's suddenly hard to breathe. My feet feel rooted to the ground as he stands beside Layla, the moment our eyes lock seeming to last forever.

Suddenly, Layla turns her head and swirls her long mahogany hair. "Stay out of my way."

She prances off in her Louboutins as though she's the queen of her castle and we're her defiant subjects. Nate follows but not before throwing

me a single, hardened glance as though he's trying to warn me not to get close.

Don't say a word. Keep your mouth shut. Don't follow us.

Before I know it, the moment has passed, and they're gone, vanished behind the gold-engraved doors of the building.

Goddammit. Sometimes, Layla makes me want to poke her eyes out with a pencil.

"Hope you were careful ..." Monica snorts. "You don't want whatever she has. Raging bitch princess cooties or something."

Mo always manages to make me forget my anger by making me laugh. But I still can't help but stare at the door through which Layla and Jenny disappeared ... but most of all because of Nate.

Something in his eyes made a chill run down my spine. Like a dangerous threat and a sinful promise bundled into one delicious package.

CHAPTER 3



NATE

TAP. Tap. Tap.

My fingers thrum against the metal of the locker in front of me, the sound calming me.

My brain is fried. All I can think of is that girl ...

The girl with the icy white blond hair who's occupied my mind ever since I saw her that day in the ocean.

I should forget about her, erase her from my mind, but the moment she stepped right in front of me before school, it all came pouring back in. It's as if she stared straight into the deepest, darkest pit of my soul. As though she's seen it all.

No, she hasn't. She hasn't got a clue. No one does.

I sigh out loud. I'm staring at my locker and the books I'm supposed to pick up, but I can't for the life of me remember what classes I'm supposed to follow today. I should've brought that damn schedule, but I forgot to print it out, and in my rush to get out the door this morning, my dumbass self left my phone at home. Maybe I could ask Layla for it ...

"Heads-up!"

Before I even have time to respond, something hits me hard in the head.

"Sorry!"

I rub the back of my head and spin around. Robby just threw a ball at me. "Nice warning, bro."

He smirks, but then says, “You’re so damn distracted lately. I don’t know what’s up with you, but ever since that party, you’ve been acting off.”

“What?” My brow rises. “Nah.”

I close my locker, and he punches me in the shoulder. “Was the booze a little too much for you? I thought you weren’t a crybaby.”

“I’m fine,” I say, throwing the ball back into his stomach so hard he clenches and an *oomph* sound leaves his mouth.

“Don’t cry now, Robby,” I retort.

“Thanks, I needed that,” he says while holding the ball, and he walks off. “You *are* coming to practice, right?” he yells. Typical. I give him a salute and shake my head when he laughs.

Suddenly, a familiar face completely redirects my attention. *That girl* with her icy white hair just walked past me, and I can’t help but follow her.

Like a man possessed, I tread in her footsteps through the crowd, leaving only a few people between her and me. She’s accompanied by another girl who I assume is her friend because I haven’t seen them separated yet, and this other girl is talking nonstop about their vacations and the boys here at school. She’s listening, but she seems distracted, as if she can sense something is wrong.

Suddenly, she turns around and stares right at me.

I stop but don’t flinch, and neither does she.

Then someone stands right in front of me. Layla snaps her fingers in front of my face, breaking the spell.

“Hello? Earth to Nate. I’m here.”

“Yeah? What is it? I’m kinda busy,” I say, and I grab her arms to push her aside so I can see where the girl is going, but Layla refuses to budge.

“What are you doing? Aren’t you supposed to have class?”

“Yeah, but—”

“You forgot, didn’t you?” She sighs and fishes her phone from her expensive-looking leather bag. “Here.” She opens an app and shows me the times and dates of each of the classes. “English in about two minutes, so you better hurry.”

She leans in and presses a kiss to my cheeks. “See you later, hun!”

Right before she passes behind me, she squeezes my ass. I hate it, but I never say it out loud.

I look around, desperately trying to find the girl I need to follow, but she’s gone. Dammit.

Sighing, I find my way through the long hallways until I come to the room number shown on Layla's app. I hope I see her again today because she's gonna need to print that schedule for me. Layla always knows where I'm supposed to be and when. She keeps tabs on me, and I like that. Maybe I let her use me as an accessory because I use her stay sane and get through the last year of this prep school alive. She's like a personal obsessive fan who can't get enough of you. Toxic relationship? Nah. Normal teenage stuff.

Without thinking, I step into the classroom even though the class has already started. The teacher throws me a grumpy look while I stand frozen in the doorway. There she is ... *that* girl ... sitting right here in the same class. And there's an empty seat behind her too. Lucky me.

For a second, all I can do is stare at her until she looks up from her paper and notices me too. And boy, that look in her eyes riles me up.

I wish I'd noticed her before ... before the summer ... before *everything*.

"You're late," the teacher, Mr. Flanagan, says.

My nostrils flare as I look away, and say, "Sorry."

The teacher licks his lips and rubs them together. Then he waves the paper in his hand up and down. "Go. Sit."

I nod and walk past all the seats. Everyone's staring at me. I know I'm late—and on my first day of the year too—but I don't care. None of this matters. I don't even know why I'm here ... except for her. *That* girl glaring right back at me as I walk past and sit down right behind her.

She doesn't move, doesn't even flinch, but I can smell her fear. It drips off her like the sweat beading on her skin just an inch below her shirt. I can't help but stare. I need to know what she's doing, saying ... and thinking. If it's about me.

I shift in my seat and flick my pencil up and down as the teacher begins to talk. I don't listen to him even though I should because I can't stop staring at this girl in front of me. She doesn't even know what she got herself into the moment she got involved with me. My life, my space ... it's sacred. The people I let in are people I choose. But I never picked her.

She picked *me*.

And that makes me feel uncomfortable. Weak. And I don't like feeling vulnerable.

I clench the pencil tightly, questioning what I should do. If I should speak up, talk to her, say the words. But what would a guy in my position say to a girl like her? What words could I ever use to describe the demons screaming in my head? None.

So instead, I lean in and peer over her shoulder, taking a peek at the texts she's sending to who seems to be her bestie ... a girl named Monica who can't shut up about the guy she's sitting next to in her class. I don't want to read about some dickwad's pretty face and how she's already thinking about dating him, but I need to know whether I can trust this girl in front of me. If, when it comes down to it, she knows when to keep her mouth shut.

But the longer I peek, the more she seems at ease. It's as if she's forgotten I'm here. As if she's completely engrossed in her conversation and not even paying attention to the teacher anymore. And for some reason, for a single second, I wish she was focusing all that attention on me.

The wind entering from a nearby window lifts her hair up, and her scent enters my nostrils, invading my sense of smell ... completely overtaking my ability to focus on the cell phone in her hands or the sounds around me ... or the fact that she immediately spins around in her seat and we come face to face. Finally.

CHAPTER 4



SAM

A PRICKLE on the back of my neck makes my skin crawl. Again and again, it comes and fades, like a feather tickling me, coaxing me to turn around and grab it.

I tried to ignore it. I desperately tried to focus on my text conversation with Monica just to pretend everything was okay. To forget *he* is sitting right behind me. Nate Wilson, the most handsome, popular boy at school and the varsity quarterback. He's highly sought after by scouts and already has a scholarship attached to his name. He's also the biggest heartthrob at this school ... and a devil.

He knows.

That's why he sat down behind me, but I won't let him creep up against me like that. Yet no matter how many minutes I tried to ignore him ... it was futile. He keeps pushing, keeps invading my space as though he belongs there now.

He doesn't, and if he thinks he can intimidate me, he's wrong.

I spin around and stare him down. He's so close, and I can see the creases on his skin where his once cheerful smile has now turned into a bitter scowl.

He flicks a pencil up and down in his hand, and it's so close to my face that I almost fear he might throw it at me or worse ... stick it in my eyes.

Am I the only one who sees this rage?

"What are you doing?" I ask.

“Sitting.” His voice is gruff and raw as if he’s trying to scare me off with a sneer, but I’m not afraid of him. Despite my thoughts about the pencil, I know he’d never do something like that. Not in front of all these people anyway.

I make a face. “Better put that pencil down before you hurt someone.” I know what I say sounds petty, but I feel petty. Especially with him breathing down my neck.

His top lip curls up, and a short, vicious grin appears and disappears all in the span of two seconds. “Better put that phone down ... before you text something you’ll regret.”

Motherfucker ... did he just threaten me?

I narrow my eyes at him. “Mind your own damn business.”

“And what if I don’t?” he retorts.

I sigh. “I don’t like playing games, so don’t even try.”

“Oh, I’m not playing games ...” His tongue briefly darts out to wet his bottom lip. “If I was, you’d know.”

That statement makes me swallow hard. Goddammit. How does he make even a threat sound sexual? I shouldn’t be surprised, though. He is the king of heartbreak, after all. Many girls have fallen for him and then taken the fall when he decided to ditch them without mercy.

But I won’t be his next victim, and we both know that.

“Nate! Sam!” the teacher yells, and I immediately turn around again after throwing him a dirty look. “Eyes on your books, please.”

Suddenly, he whispers from behind me, “Goody Two-shoes.”

“Shut up,” I whisper back.

“It’s the truth.”

“You don’t know me.”

“I know enough.”

What the hell does that even mean?

“What do you want?” I hiss over my shoulder.

The ominous stare he gives me makes my heart beat faster, but he refuses to answer. Typical.

Suddenly, the bell rings, and he gets up hastily, snatching his bag off the floor and hurrying off. I didn’t even have the chance to say another word. To tell him what I think of him ... and about what just happened.

Jesus. This guy’s really changed. He used to have a smile on his face all day long—an arrogant smile but a smile nonetheless. No one ever seemed

scared of him. But the mere sight of that scowl would put fear into any girl's heart.

That's not at all how Nate used to be.

I remember him playing on the field. Strapped into his tight gear, he would roar with his teammates while preparing for a game. And when he got the ball in his hands, he ran like lightning, passing people left and right and even jumping over someone just to get that ball to the other end of the field.

I loved watching him. I don't particularly enjoy sports, but seeing him throw blood, sweat, and tears into winning made me smile. I even drew a picture of him while lounging on the grass next to the field. In fact, I still have that drawing here somewhere in my notebook.

As I sit down on a bench outside, I fish my notebook out of my bag and sift through the pages until I find it. And oh boy, I never disappoint myself. Just looking at it reminds me of what a ditz I used to be. I sigh to myself. Nate isn't the only one who's changed.

"What is *that*?"

I snap the notebook shut and turn around. Layla and her shitty friend Jenny are peeking over my shoulders.

"Is that ... Nate?" Layla's face scrunches up, and then the most devilish grin appears.

"You're imagining things," I say, tucking the notebook back into my bag.

"No, I'm not. I saw the uniform. I'd recognize it anywhere. You were drawing him," she says, and she snatches the notebook right out of my bag.

"Hey! That's mine!" I yell as she dodges my every move like an annoying pixie floating around.

"Who cares? You're drawing my boyfriend, so I wanna know." She scrolls through the pages until she finds the picture and tears it out of my notebook, then throws the notebook to the ground. "Oh, my God ..." She snorts, glancing over the drawing. "Look!" She holds it up for Jenny to see along with everybody else walking past us on the school grounds right now. Including Nate fucking Wilson.

"What's going on?" he asks as he approaches Layla from behind.

"Look, she drew you," Layla says, showing the picture to him. "You've got yourself a fangirl."

His face contorts as she says the word, and he glares at the drawing as though it's a freak accident.

"What do you think?" she asks.

His eyes narrow. "Fucked."

Aim. Shoot. Kill.

Just one word ... as if it's the world's worst image he's ever seen. And it stings like hell.

"Give that back," I growl, and I march toward her and snatch the paper from her hand while she flaunts it to her friends.

"Why are you so obsessed with him?" she says, shaking her head. "Are you in love with him or something?"

I make a face. "Are you insane? Of course not."

She laughs hard and so loud. Everyone else on the school grounds is watching us with an equally amused face as if this is a live play and they're the popcorn-eating audience waiting for someone to snap. And that someone is me.

I stuff the picture into my bag and pick up the notebook from the ground.

"Yeah, you go pick that up like a good girl ..." Jenny mumbles, and it makes me want to wrestle them both to the ground.

But I have to contain myself. I promised my mom I'd behave.

That doesn't mean I can't let her know just how much I hate Layla too.

"Fuck you both," I hiss as I come back up again.

Layla sneers at me. *Right back at you, bitch.*

But I don't look at her. My eyes immediately focus on Nate, whose contempt clearly shows.

People are still looking at me as if I'm some kind of freak show.

"What are you looking at?" I yell.

It makes them avert their eyes. Good. Everyone knows I don't deserve this treatment ... but they can't help themselves. As the king and queen of this castle, Layla and her posse need to silence any and all uprising. Lucky for them, I have no interest in being the next ruler of this pretend kingdom. I'd much rather continue painting a picture of this cruel world, so everyone can see reality as it truly is.

"Stay the fuck away from my boyfriend," Layla growls as she grabs Nate's arm and drags him away. But his eyes are still boring into mine until they disappear out of view.

Breathe.

Breathe, Sam.

“Wow, what the hell happened here?” Monica’s voice startles me, and I jump.

“Jesus, could you not?”

“Sorry, I thought you saw me,” she says, frowning.

“Yeah, I was a bit distracted by Layla and Jenny’s bullshit,” I reply as I throw my bag over my shoulder and try to pretend nothing happened.

“What was that anyway?”

“Layla saw my drawing,” I reply. “And she made a fool out of me in front of the entire school.”

“Ouch.”

Her response is enough to make me want to sink through the ground.

Her lip quirks up. “If you want me to cut a bitch, just say the word.” She makes a fist with her hand and punches her other hand. “I’m game if you are.”

I laugh. “You know I’d love to, but you know how my mom is.”

“Oh, right.” She sighs out loud. “That’s a tough situation.”

“Tell me about it.” I roll my eyes. “I just want this all to stop.”

“They won’t. You’re a target now,” she says as we walk back into school. “The only option you have is weathering out the storm.”

“But how long will it take her to back the fuck off and leave me alone?” I groan out loud. “She’s such a bitch.”

“I know. Everybody knows,” she jests. “That’s why no one goes against her.”

“Really? ’Cause the way I see everyone look at her, it’s like they’re seeing a celebrity.”

“It’s the same idea. You’re scared of something you can’t reach,” she explains. “Miss Layla Parker, richest princess at school, with a daddy who can buy literally anything she wants with just the snap of a finger. Houses. Cars. Fuck, even entire amusement parks if she wanted them badly enough.”

“So? Just because her dad can doesn’t make her a person to admire,” I say.

“No, but people love money, and they’ll do anything they can to get it, including sucking up to the biggest bitch in school,” Monica says, and she points at the posters hanging on the wall, all celebrating Layla as the

smartest, kindest student vying to become the next homecoming queen. Of course she'll win. Everyone wants a pie of the popularity and voting for her might get them that coveted seat right next to her. Just because she already has one best friend doesn't mean she can't have two.

"Case in point. People don't have to like her to want her to win." She shrugs. "Besides, her family often donates to the school, and she helps the charity events run by the school."

"Right, she's such a pious little shit."

"People love perfect little princesses," she retorts.

"If only they could see ... she's really not." I suck in a breath and stare at the doors in front of me. The big, bad doors leading into the cafeteria or, in other words, the king and queen's court where all the important gossiping takes place. And my stomach is growling.

"Let's go grab a bite, 'kay? You'll forget about all that shit after eating your heart out," Monica says. "Besides, no one will remember what just happened."

"Because I'm a nobody."

She folds her arm around my shoulder. "Exactly. We're nobodies, and that's a perfect position to maintain because then you can do all the bad shit and get away with it too."

A devious grin spreads on my lips. Mo knows me too well.

But as we walk toward the cafeteria, the hairs on the back of my neck stand up. I pause and stare. On the wall beside the doors, flyers hang of *that girl* ... the one who died.

Nina Jacobs.

Last year, at the unofficial end-of-summer party hosted at Robby's dad's beach house, that's where it happened. I was there.

People say she drowned, others say she was drugged ... and still others believe she was murdered.

But that would never happen in a town filled with the rich and famous, would it?

"Half the school was at the funeral. Just thinking about it still gives me the shivers," Monica says.

I don't know what to say or to think, so I just nod.

Nina attended this school. We had some classes together because I remember seeing her sitting right in front of me. Her red hair and freckles

were hard not to notice; she was one of the few at this school with such a beautiful complexion. Too pretty to die.

I swallow away the lump in my throat. "Let's go."

We go into the cafeteria and try to avoid eye contact with anyone. It's my thing and how I live my life. I keep my emotions to myself because it hides my secrets well.

I grab what I need and put it on my plate and then wait for Monica to finish. I scan the room for an empty table. There's only one left, at the other end of the cafeteria, near the bins. But that's not the worst part. It's that we have to pass Layla's table to get there.

I'm not one to avoid a challenge, so I clench my plate tight and march toward her. The moment she spots me, her smile immediately disappears and out comes that dirty scowl. And everyone sitting at her table participates in her hating game, including Nate.

I suck in a deep breath and turn my head the other way while we pass them.

Suddenly, something sticks out in front of me. A foot.

Too late. I've already toppled to the floor, and the food on my plate has spilled as well.

And I can hear them fucking snort behind my back.

Fuck. Fuck them.

Monica offers me a hand, but I scramble off the floor on my own two feet, and say, "Fuck you!"

"What's your problem?" Layla scoffs, throwing her hair over her shoulder.

Monica picks up my food while I'm busy glaring at Layla. "Do you enjoy being a petty bitch?"

"Excuse me?" Jenny says. "Layla's innocent."

"Oh, of course she is," I say, rubbing my lips together.

"You fell. Maybe work on your balance a little?" Layla muses.

"Yeah, that looked like it hurt," Jenny adds, giggling too.

"Fuck you too," I hiss at her.

"Don't." Layla gets up from her seat. It's only now that I realize how much taller she is than me. Like a fucking giant on heels, ready to sharpen them and attack. But I'm not afraid of her.

"What? Call you a bitch?" I fold my arms. "Everyone knows it's the truth."

Her jaw drops. “Don’t you understand? This is your own damn fault.” She taps my chest violently.

I get up in her face. “You stuck out your foot!”

I’m about three seconds away from hitting her in the face.

“I did not!” she yells. The cafeteria has grown quiet, and everyone’s watching the drama unfold. “You need to look where you’re walking.”

“Bullshit,” I hiss, and I shove her forward. “I’m tired of your lies.”

“Get your hands off me.” Layla grabs my wrist and forcefully pushes me away. “You’re just as ugly as your whore of a mom.”

My eyes widen, and my body freezes.

Everyone at the table practically takes a collective breath. No one else says a word.

Did she really just say that? Fuck.

I grab some of the food Monica picked up and chuck it right at Layla’s face.

Everyone gasps in shock. Jenny. Monica. Even Nate.

Layla stands there, flustered, with her arms out, and her eyes scanning her clothes for damage.

“And you’re just as ugly as your fucking cheating dad,” I reply.

Another collective gasp at the table. It’s as though they’re soaking it all in, but I hate it. I don’t want to stoop to her level, but she leaves me no choice.

And the way Nate’s looking at me right now with amused eyes makes me regret my words and actions immediately. A tepid grin briefly appears on his face before disappearing again.

It’s almost as if he ... enjoys watching us fight.

“Sam. That’s enough.” Monica grabs my shoulder and attempts to pull me away.

“You’ll pay for saying that,” Layla says through gritted teeth, swiping some of the food off her face and throwing it on the floor.

“C’mon,” Monica says, tugging me with her before I do more damage.

But fuck ... she drove me to the edge.

“Let’s grab you something else to eat,” Monica says, and she attempts to drag me back to the counters.

I pull away. “I’m not hungry anymore.” And I split away from her and the entire crowd to march out of the cafeteria, slamming the doors shut behind me.

However, commotion behind me stops me in my tracks, and I peer through the small windows.

Layla is arguing with Nate. He suddenly smashes his plate onto the table. Everyone's watching him as he gets up while glaring at Layla, his eyes shooting fire. He leaves without say another word. Not even a goodbye, or a kiss. And Layla seems as flabbergasted as I am.

But my astonished face completely disappears when I realize he's marching straight toward me. I step aside just in time before the doors slam open against my face.

Nate Wilson walks past me, but not without throwing me a glance too. It's not a look of remorse or rage. It's careless ... indifference to the people around him. To the world. To me.

And when he walks through the hallway, I can't help but stare after him, wondering how someone like him, so revered and admired, could blow up like that.

But I guess it only takes a short fuse to light the fire.

CHAPTER 5



NATE

I STARE at my sweaty palms clutching the steering wheel. The leather burns my skin as I rub and rub until I'm sick of it, and then I smash my hands against the wheel. I've been driving for hours, but nothing will take away the rage circulating through my veins. Not even football practice after school. Everything's changed. I've changed.

"Fuck!"

I shouldn't have gone to school. Shouldn't have shown up there. But what else was I supposed to do? Stay home and wither away? Ruin my college, my career? My life?

Hers was ruined. Who do you think you are, Nate?

I don't know what's true anymore, nor do I know what I want ... or who I really am. Things never used to be this difficult. Life was a game I played, a fun house filled with jumps and crazy spins. I liked living the wild, party drug-filled life. But you don't know how bad something truly is until you're on the other end ... and you're in deep shit.

My dad appears in the kitchen window, and he stares me down. I've been caught.

Sighing, I grab my bag and open my car door, slamming it shut behind me. I suck in a breath and open the door to my home, rushing in as fast as I can. But nothing can stop the onslaught of questions bombarding me.

"Nate? Where were you? You were supposed to come home an hour ago." My dad barges out of the kitchen.

“Busy, sorry,” I reply, throwing my coat on the hanger.

“With what?” he asks, following me around.

I kick off my Nikes. “Stuff.”

He blocks the stairs. Of course he knew I would go straight up to my room.

“What’s going on?” he asks, frowning. “Tell me.”

I shrug. “Nothing.”

“You were sitting in your car for minutes on your own.”

“So?” I make a face. “I’m not allowed to think?”

“You never used to do that,” he says, cocking his head. “Something’s going on.”

“Things change,” I say. “Can I go now?”

“Why won’t you talk to me?” he asks.

I sigh. “Because ...”

He grabs my shoulder and squeezes. “I get that you’re a teen, and you need space ...”

“Oh God.” I rub my face. This is so embarrassing. “Dad ...”

“But I’m still your father, and I want to talk to you. I want to know what’s going on in your life.”

I roll my eyes. “Look, I was just thinking about school stuff, okay? Nothing big.”

“How is school?”

“Good, I guess,” I reply. I don’t know what he’s looking for, or what he wants me to say. “It just started.”

“Nothing to report?”

I make a face. “No.”

“Nothing out of the ordinary?”

Why does he keep pressing so much?

“Dad, everything’s fine,” I say, grabbing his shoulder. “Can I please go to my room now?”

He takes a deep breath and then nods and steps aside.

“Thanks,” I say, and I pass him quickly before he changes his mind.

But as my feet tread up these stairs, the weight they carry starts to feel heavier and heavier. Each step is another one sinking deeper and deeper into the pits of hell.

And there’s nothing I can do about it to change that. It’s already done.

I’m done. Fucking done with today.

I go into my room and drop my bag, then fall onto my bed headfirst. I bury my face in my pillows and try to cancel the noise in my head, but nothing I do will make the voices yelling at me go away. They tell me to do better, to stop lying, to fix what I've broken, and to deal with the consequences of my own lies.

But if I did, everything would've been for nothing.

My friends would hate me.

My spot as a varsity quarterback. Gone.

My scholarship for college. Gone.

My dad's respect. Gone.

My mother's legacy. Gone.

My life. Over.

No way, I can't do it.

I turn around and stare up at the ceiling for a few seconds. The iPad lying on my nightstand buzzes. I pick it up and unlock it, then go into the messenger app. One of my teammates sent me a picture.

DARYL: YU didn't tell me U hung out with Nina!

MY EYES WIDEN.

The sight of those eyes staring right back into my soul forces me to look. Forces me to see how we're playing a game of spin the bottle, and her bottle landed on me.

The single kiss that followed makes the bile rise up in my throat.

I immediately type back.

NATE: Where DY get these pics?

I BITE my nails as the little dots appear in the corner of the screen.

DARYL: Something happen, m8? ;)

I IMMEDIATELY REPLY.

NATE: Tell me.

Daryl: Chill, dude. Robby took them.

Nate: Delete them.

Daryl: Why?

Nate: Just do it.

I SIGH and close the messenger app before I lose my shit and throw this iPad out the window. But that picture of me and Nina is seared into the back of my mind, scorching its way down to the core.

If only I could get rid of this dread. How many more pictures are there?

I know of one other person who took them ... that girl who sat in front of me today.

Sam.

She was there that night at the party.

I'll never forget her piercing eyes staring back at me when we were both at the beach. Where I tried to wash away my sins. But not even the ocean can rinse the stain on my soul.

There's only one way to fix this before it's too late.

I have to find out what kind of pictures that girl Sam took.

And how I can erase them off the surface of the earth.

Only one way to find out ...



SAM

THE NEXT DAY, I grab my breakfast as quickly as I can because I'm not interested in talking to that douche nozzle. He's already out of the sex cave, which is early, even for him. I try to ignore him as I walk past and grab an apple to go. Too bad my mom just entered the kitchen too.

"Sam. Morning," she says, clearing her throat. "Do you wanna talk to me?"

"About what?" I shrug, trying to keep walking, but she blocks the way by placing her hand on the doorjamb and eyeing me down like a hawk.

"C'mon now ... Don't try to pretend nothing happened."

I raise a brow and throw a deadly glance at her boy toy.

"No, no, talk to me, not him," she says, cocking her head to get my attention. "Do you need to tell me something?"

"I was there for the lasagna, wasn't I?" I shout.

"I mean the *thing* that happened at school. You didn't tell me about that when you came home yesterday. Don't you think you should have?"

I make a face and glare at the boy toy again.

He knows. She told him.

"You know I don't approve of you fighting ..." Mom says, stopping my flow of thought.

I sigh out loud. "I know, Mom, but she really got on my nerves this time."

"It doesn't matter what people do. You don't stoop to their level."

I grimace, and shout, "She tripped me on purpose!"

My mom sucks in a breath, her eyes remorseful as if she pities me. But all it does is fuel the fire in the pit of my stomach. Especially with *him* here listening to this conversation.

"I don't wanna talk about it," I say, and I grab my bag and swiftly stoop down underneath her arm.

"Sam, please, don't fight anymore," Mom says, clutching her waist. "Please. Do it for me."

"Fine," I growl as I open the door. "Bye."

I quickly hop into my car and drive to school. Monica's classes start at a different time today so we're not riding together. But she's already texted me twice since I got into the car. I won't answer until I'm at school, though. Don't want to get into a car accident and disappoint my mom even further. I've already done enough damage in that department. First, when I didn't pick math or science as my main subjects, and then again when I decided to start painting. It's one of my favorite things to do, but since there's barely any money to be earned, she doesn't want me to go in that direction. Too bad for my mom, I'm a stubborn bitch. And she knows it since I got it from her side of the family.

When I'm finally on school grounds, I park my car and head straight for the building. I need to pee really badly as I didn't go before I left. Perks of having to run out fast to avoid getting a dent in your confidence because your mom wants to talk about the bad shit you did at school in front of her new boyfriend.

I still have a foul taste in my mouth from the whole conversation. It's none of my mom's business what happens here, and she can't lecture me about doing the right thing because she sure isn't.

I only have one real friend I can trust, and that's Monica. She sent me another message since I got here, so I fish my phone from my pocket and check them while walking. I don't look where I'm going ... and regret it

immediately. Because the moment I step into the bathroom, I hear Layla's and Jenny's voices.

"Did you see that stupid girl yet?"

I contemplate leaving right away, but then I'd never know who they're talking about, and I definitely want to know who they're targeting next. I don't think they heard me come in, so I park my bag on the bathroom counter and wait for more info.

"Who?" Layla asks.

"That girl ... What's her name again?"

"You mean that Sam girl?" Layla replies.

My eyes widen.

"Yeah, *someone* told the principal about what happened, and he made a phone call to her mother."

They both giggle. I'm sure it was Layla who ratted. *Bitch*.

"Good for us," Jenny says. "I hope she gets detention because she deserves it. She started it."

"Uh-huh. She's so annoying. And her mom too," Layla groans.

Fuck these fucking girls. Always gossiping about everybody like it means nothing. Perfect, my ass.

Suddenly, the toilets are flushed, and the doors open. Out come two red-lipped, sharp-nailed, pouty-looking girls whose eyes narrow the moment they spot me.

I'm only studying myself in the mirror, pretending to check my makeup. I ignore them completely, but that doesn't stop them from positioning themselves right beside me, effectively caging me between them. They both turn on the faucet and wash their hands while continuing to glare at me as if I'm the evil one out here.

Layla shakes her hands, and some of the drops of water land on my skin.

"What a surprise ..." she mutters.

"What? That you two are turds?" I retort.

She snorts and goes to dry her hands under the dryer. "If there's any place you'd be, it'd have to be a toilet."

I narrow my eyes. "The place where everyone dumps their shit."

"Hmm ..." She smiles in a pitiful way. "Maybe you shouldn't barge into other people's business."

I put my makeup back into my bag. "Maybe you shouldn't gossip on the girl's toilet."

"Maybe you shouldn't be such a little bitch then," she says, making a dirty face. "But I guess we all have to make do with what we have."

I roll my eyes. "Oh please, take a look in the mirror if you wanna see a real bitch."

"Really, Sam? Shut up," Jenny sneers.

"You're the one who was talking about me, not the other way around," I say, spinning on my heels so they don't do anything behind my back. I know I can see them through the mirror, but that doesn't mean she won't attempt something sneaky.

Suddenly, Layla's right in front of me, and she lifts up her hand as though she wants to hold it over my mouth. "Stop. Talking. To. Me."

I want to swat it away.

"You don't exist. Period."

"If I don't exist, then why are you vomiting words at me?" I say. Even though she's right up in my face, I refuse to move.

"Because I want you to know that I hate you ... and that you need to stay out of my way," she says through gritted teeth.

"Or else what?" I taunt.

She slides even closer. "Don't tempt me to tell the school about your little trip to the forest with Dane and Patrick last year."

"Don't you fucking dare," I growl.

If she even mentions a word, I'm going to kill her.

She doesn't even know what happened, that they tried to kiss me and touch me, and that I had to run like hell. But I bet those two fuckers told her all the lies they had to tell, and she believes it all. And now she'll hold it over my head as a threat. Disgusting.

"You weren't there," I hiss.

"No, but I know what you did with them ... What kind of a ho you really are. You don't want the whole school to know, do you?"

"Nothing fucking happened, and you know it," I say, wanting to slap the living shit out of her.

"Nothing ... or everything," she says, shrugging. "Who knows? No one will believe you anyway."

I shake my head. "Why are you doing this? I didn't do anything to you."

"You know goddamn well why," she says.

“If this is about your boyfriend—”

“Don’t talk about him!” she spits. “This is between you and me ... and your goddamn whore of a mother.”

Her words resonate and hurt me in a way that I can’t comprehend, and I do the dumbest thing I’ve done this entire year.

I slap her right across the face.

CHAPTER 6



SAM

NO ONE, and I mean absolutely no one except me, talks about my mother that way.

“You take that back,” I say with the calmest voice I can muster.

“How dare you fucking hit her?” Jenny gasps, and she grabs a piece of toilet paper and holds it under the water, then dabs it against Layla’s face.

“You can have your dear little daddy back,” I say, focusing solely on Layla. “I don’t fucking want him in my house.”

Layla holds the toilet paper close to her face as she stares me down. Ignoring me, she marches out the door, stumbling to make sure everyone sees how badly she was treated. And with Jenny playing her supporting character, they win over the crowd.

Always playing the victim those two. And what do I get? Blamed for my mother’s affair with her father.

Fuck.

It takes me a while to gather myself and actually walk out the door. I need to get a grip on this situation. It’s getting out of hand.

However, before I can think about following Layla, Monica bumps into my and stops me in the middle of the hallway.

“Dude, I’ve been looking everywhere for you,” she says, grabbing my arm. “You didn’t reply to any of my texts.”

“Sorry, I was kinda busy,” I say, trying to peer over her shoulder to find Layla.

“With what?” Monica asks. “What are you looking for?”

“Layla.”

She makes a dirty face. “Ew. Why?”

“Because we had a bitch fight in the bathroom about my mom and her dad,” I reply. “And I’m not exactly done chewing her up.”

She cringes. “Sounds rough.”

“Definitely was.” I rub my lips together. “She got up in my face and practically blamed me for my mother’s new choice of boyfriend. As if it’s my fault her dad couldn’t keep his dick in his pants.”

“Pfft.” She waves it off. “She’s just mad because her pretty princess ass isn’t being taken care of anymore. Her mom’s alone, probably crying her eyes out all day, and now there’s no more attention going to Missy Perfect anymore.”

“Exactly,” I say. “But I’m not gonna let her walk all over me.”

Mo walks with me to my locker. “Good. You shouldn’t. She knows she’s a bitch, and she’s trying to intimidate you into making your mom do something.”

“As if I can control my mom,” I say, taking my books out of my locker.

“She thinks everyone’s like her.” Mo raises her brow. “A manipulator.”

“I don’t think so. If she did, that boy toy would’ve been long gone from my house,” I say, slamming my locker shut.

I should forget about what happens. I thought I wanted to follow Layla and give her a piece of my mind, but that’s the anger talking. Nothing good can come of me riling her up even further. She’s upset about her dad, and I kinda get it.

As I turn around, a shadowy figure barges through the hallways, and it catches literally everyone’s attention. It’s not a surprise. It’s Nate, but he’s not wearing his normal outfit of expensive white trainers, khakis, and a button-up shirt. No, it’s full on torn dark jeans, dirty sneakers, and a black hoodie. He’s barely recognizable, bar the penetrating stare and scowl on his face.

And the worst part of it all is that it’s directed toward me.

I shouldn’t stay, shouldn’t let him intimidate me like that, but my feet are nailed to the ground as he waltzes right at me. My pulse is racing even though it never does. And while Monica stands her ground, hands against her hips, my body inches back against the lockers for support.

Nate eyes me down like a hawk, his muscular body rigid as he scans my body from top to bottom. His tongue briefly darts out to lick his lips, and an icy chill runs through my veins.

He doesn't say a word.

Instead, he throws me one final ugly glance and marches right off, leaving me breathless and speechless.

"Wow," Monica mutters. "What the hell was that?"

I'm still looking at him as he disappears down the hallway and blends in with the crowd. I can't help but feel as though he just marked me ... as though he's chosen me. And it makes my skin crawl.

"Hello? Earth to Sam." Monica snaps her fingers. "Are you there?"

"Sorry," I mutter, still staring off into the distance. "Got caught up in the moment."

"You mean you got caught up by Nate Wilson," she says. "He came all up in your space as if it was nothing."

I nod and clutch my books close to my chest as if they're my only protection against him, which is ludicrous, but still.

"What the fuck happened to him?" Monica says. "He's been such an asshole lately. And now he's even wearing totally different clothes than he usually does. All black and moody."

"Yeah, he's so ... different," I murmur, still lost in thought.

"You've noticed too, huh?" she says. "I've asked around, and people say he hasn't spoken to Layla since the cafeteria incident."

"Huh," I say, biting the inside of my cheek. "Interesting."

"He's never acted out this way. I wonder if it's because of your fight with Layla, or if it has something to do with that girl ... Nina."

The mere mention of her name makes me choke up.

"Before summer, nothing was wrong, and we all come back to school, and it's as though he's a totally different person. The only thing that's changed is that Nina has ..." She sucks up her last words.

But I can't speak either. Can't think of anything else but the deep blue sea and the boy dredging through the water ... the darkest of sins that took place there ... And all those pictures still sitting on my laptop. I should've deleted them many yesterdays ago.

"What's wrong?" Monica asks as I swallow away the lump in my throat.

"Nothing," I mumble. "Forget about it."

The bell signals the start of our class, one of the few we still share, and Monica quickly whisks me away from the lockers and the temptation to follow Nate and see what he's up to.



NATE

WHEN I SAW SAM, all I wanted to do was shove her up against the lockers and force her to do what I want. I never used to be so dominant, so arrogant, but something in me has changed. Ever since that night at the beach, I can't stop thinking about her and all the things she knows.

All the things she's seen.

It's been on my mind ever since, and when I saw her at school, I lost it.

I want nothing more than to compel her to tell me. To force her to do my bidding and give me what I want. I'd make her feel as uncomfortable as possible, push her in ways she never expected, and haunt her in her dreams until she begged me to stop.

I want her on the edge. It's the only way.

I have no other leverage. Nothing to bargain with. Nothing to give her but my rage.

But fear is an amazingly persuasive tool. And I intend to use it to my advantage.

I sit at my table in the back of the class and check my phone for missed messages. I keep hoping Sam might contact me, but that would be stupid of her, and I know she's anything but stupid.

Unlike a girl I know marching toward me right now.

"What the hell ...?" Layla says, her hands against her side. "What is this?"

"What?" I glare up at her from my seat.

She plucks at my hoodie. "This."

She tears it off my head, but my hair is all frizzy today, so I immediately pull it back over my head.

"Don't," I growl.

I'm not looking for a fight today. I'm done with that. It's always something trivial, yet she makes every little thing a problem. I've got bigger things to worry about.

"Take it off," she says, folding her arms.

"No," I reply.

She makes a face. "You never wear this."

"And?" I muse. I prefer this outfit over whatever the hell she wants me to wear. I just want to blend in with the crowd. Be a fucking ghost and disappear. But now she's putting all the attention on me like I'm some kind of walking circus. "Got a problem with it?"

"Yes, actually. I do," she says, sitting down at the table in front of me. She turns around, and whispers, "What is up with you? You've been acting weird ever since that—"

"Don't," I interrupt, placing a hand over her mouth. "I don't want to fucking talk about it. How many times do I have to say it?"

Her eyes narrow, and she removes my hand with force. "Well, I do. What is going on with you? Why are you suddenly wearing all black clothes?"

"Because I can."

Because for once I don't want to be recognized while walking around school. But that won't work when she keeps talking to me like I'm insane.

"Are you depressed or something?" she asks.

I roll my eyes. "No."

"If something's going on, you have to tell me," she says.

I sigh out loud. "Stop."

"I'm your girlfriend. I care about you." She places a hand over mine in a way that I don't like. Possessively. As though I'm a toy she plays with. An accessory she'd hang on her bag to show off to people. I'm just fucking me, and nothing she does will ever change that.

"Can't you just take it off after an hour or something?" she asks.

I raise a brow. "Why do you care so much about what I wear?"

"Because it doesn't look good on you," she replies, frowning.

I shrug. "I don't care how it looks."

"But I do," she says.

"Then don't look at me," I say. "Simple."

She narrows her eyes. "Really, Nate? Why are you acting like this? What happened to you?"

Everything. Everything happened. But it's nothing she'll ever understand.

"Stop talking to me," I say.

I'm tired of her shit. I don't have time or the attention span for her bullshit.

“What?” she scoffs. “What did you just say to me?”

I look straight into her eyes. “Stop. Talking. To. Me.”

She makes a strange sound, like a cat being strangled. “How dare you talk to me like that? I am your girlfriend.”

I grind my teeth. “Maybe you shouldn’t be anymore.”

“What?!” she yells. She immediately jolts up from her seat and glares me down.

Everyone else notices too. Even the teacher.

“Miss Parker, what are you doing? Sit down, please. Class has already begun,” the teacher says.

She completely ignores him. “Did you seriously just say that?”

I look up at her with a questioning gaze. Does she want me to repeat it or what?

“Oh, my God,” she says, and she lets out an exasperated grunting sigh. Then she grabs her bag and shoves her books in it before marching toward the door.

“Excuse me, Miss Parker, where are you going?” the teacher asks.

But she’s already slammed the door shut.

Goddammit.

Even her rage pisses me off.

Maybe I shouldn’t have said yes when she asked me to be her boyfriend, but I was a party-addict and drunk dumbass who didn’t know any better.

I do now ... so much that it consumes me whole.



AT PRACTICE, I catch the ball. Or at least, I think I did, but I miss. Again.

“Nate? What the fuck are you doing?” Daryl yells.

“I’m trying, okay?” I reply, wiping the sweat of my forehead.

I don’t know why it’s not working. I always get the catches right. But the longer I try, the more my hands falter. It’s as if I’ve completely forgotten how to play. How to exist as Nate Wilson.

“Nate, what’s going on?” Robby approaches me too now. “You’re not yourself.”

“You don’t have to tell me that,” I say, taking a breath. “I’m just getting back in the game. Don’t worry.”

“You sure you can do this today?” Robby raises a brow at me.

“Yeah, why not? I’m just rusty from the summer, that’s all.” I laugh it off as though it’s no big deal, but the guys aren’t buying it.

Daryl clears his throat. “We heard about the trouble you had with your girl.” He scratches the back of his neck. “If you need more time to get your shit together, we get it, bro.”

“Didn’t you hear me? I’m fine,” I say, and I spit onto the field. “Quit hammering me and get on the field.”

I add a grin for good measure, and so do they, and I know they believe me.

Even if I don’t.

There’s too much at stake for me to fail. My scholarship, my pride. My dad’s respect ... and my mother’s legacy. It’s always been her dream to see me play in the big leagues, and I gotta make it happen. For her.

Make Mom proud.

That’s always been my goal, even if I already broke my promise. I will make this happen, even if I have to set my soul on fire and burn in hell for it.

Bring the goddamn fire now.

CHAPTER 7



SAM

I POUR myself a glass of Coke and slouch down on the couch with a bag of chips in one hand and the remote in the other. I flip through the channels until I find the best show to watch when you're bored on a Monday evening; *The Bachelor*. A repeat broadcast, of course, but that doesn't make it any less juicy.

Too bad a certain boy toy enters the room and spoils my fun. I can feel his judgmental stare. I don't even have to look. He walks into the kitchen and pours himself a drink, then comes back into the living room and proceeds to stare at me.

"Shouldn't you be at your friend's?" he asks.

Goddamn, here we go again.

"Shouldn't you be with your wife?" I quip.

His face turns red, and his eyes almost bulge out of his skull. "Excuse me? How dare you?"

"This isn't your house," I say. "Don't talk to me like that."

"It's not *your* house either," he replies. "And your mom would not approve of you acting out like this."

I lean up from the couch and put my bag of chips down. "What the hell is your problem?"

His jaw drops. "How dare—"

"No, you come into my house and try to lecture me. What I do is none of your business."

He steps toward me, and I get up from the couch. I won't let him intimidate me. I've got enough of those assholes at school already. "You don't talk to me like that."

"And you're not my father, so don't pretend to be," I growl back.

"I still demand respect," he says with a demanding tone that pushes all my buttons.

"I. Don't. Care." I'm about to explode if he doesn't get out of my face soon. I don't want to resort to throwing a bag of chips, but if that's what it takes to get him to back the fuck off, I will. "Get out of my fucking house."

He sneers at me, almost as if he's ready for a fight. "It's time someone taught you how to behave."

"No! Stop." Mom suddenly appears in the doorway, still dressed in her bathrobe as if she only just got out of bed. "Sam, Randy, please. Don't argue."

I fold my arms. "He started it. I was minding my own business."

"She was acting like a brat," he says.

I make a fist. "Who are you calling a goddamn brat?"

"Sam! Calm down," Mom says. "I don't tolerate swearing in my house. You know this is no way to behave."

"But he's been on my back ever since you've invited him in!" I say, turning toward her. "He won't stop trying to get under my skin."

"Sam ..." She sighs.

"I'm not doing anything. I just asked her if she was still going to her friend's or not," he says.

"You didn't ask that! You were meddling in my business, trying to get me to leave my own goddamn house. You don't belong here."

"Sam!" my mother's stern voice forces me to look her in the eyes. "Don't. I'm tired of you looking for a fight. I'm done. Done with this."

Done ... She's done ... not with him, with me.

"So that's it?" I mumble, tears stinging my eyes. "You choose him over me then? Your new *boy toy* over your own flesh and blood?"

"Sam ..."

But I don't want to hear her words.

Instead, I march to the door and run outside, right into the cold, harsh rain. But I don't care about being wet. I just want to get away from there ... from that man and the mother who picks his side over mine.

I walk across the street and pull my hood up. I'll still be soaking wet, but at least I won't feel as if I'm being drenched in a downpour. The sun has disappeared behind the clouds, and all that's left is one dark, damp mess. The streetlights guide me as I walk along the path, wandering around while trying to figure out where I could go.

Maybe Monica could pick me up. I could probably stay at her place for a few days if I explain it to her. I'm sure she'll lie for me to cover my tracks.

I fumble in my pocket, searching for my phone. That's when I realize I left it at home on the table, right next to the bag of chips I was eating when that son of a bitch walked in as if he owned the place.

Dammit.

And my car keys are in my schoolbag too, which I left right at the door.

Fucking smart, Sam, way to go.

I grunt out loud at my own stupidity.

Guess I'll have to walk to her place then. I don't think it's too far. I've never gone on foot, but there's a first time for everything because there's no fucking way I'm going back home.

If I can still call it my home.

I never imagined my mom would drag it out that far, whatever it is that they have. I always thought it was a phase, and she'd eventually figure out she doesn't need a man in her life to be happy because she has me. Maybe I don't know my mom as well as I thought.

Or maybe she misses Dad just as much as I do.

I wipe away a few leftover tears and tell myself to stop being a little bitch. No amount of crying will change my mom's choice, and it won't bring back Dad either.

I pass a bench on the way, and my eyes flicker over the person sitting there. From underneath his dark hoodie, he looks up, and in an instant, our eyes connect ... and my heart stops.

It's Nate.

A million questions run through my mind. What's he doing here? Is he here for me? Does he know where I live now? And is he going to hurt me?

I don't know why these thoughts swirl around in my head. Maybe it's the way he's gazing at me with those fierce eyes ... like a predator ready to hunt its prey.

"I know you saw me."

The dark voice from underneath the hoodie gives me the chills.

“Do you have the pics?”

I freeze. My body feels numb.

“Where are they?” he asks.

If I tell him yes, he’ll want them. If I tell him no, it’s a lie.

Either way, this is bad news for me.

I shake my head.

I don’t want him to see the pictures. *I* don’t even want to see them again.

But I know why he’s looking for them.

Deep down, I knew this was coming.

So I walk.

I don’t look where I’m going; I just move. I have to get away from this dude. There’s no one on the streets but us. I’m not safe.

After a second, I glance over my shoulder. He’s right behind me.

Shit.

I walk faster, and with each couple of steps, I gaze over my shoulder to see if he’s still there, following me. He is.

I don’t know why I feel the urge to flee, but I do. What am I running from? A simple boy from school? No, a varsity quarterback who can easily catch up with me. Knowing this, I still run like hell.

The farther we get, the faster I go. I feel like an animal, fleeing for its life. Why am I so scared? The images from that night in the sea flash through my mind. Me, underwater, taking pictures of the ocean floor and the fish swimming all around. Him wading into the water with a girl’s body in his hands.

No. I don’t want to think about it.

I shake my head and keep running, forcing the images to fade.

I have to focus on the here and now. He’s on my tail, running much faster than I am, and I have no way to shake him off. What do I do?

In a bout of courage, I turn around and stop in my tracks. He’s right in front of me, towering over me like a possessed demon.

“I don’t have them,” I say through gritted teeth. But on the inside, I’m cowering, fearful of what he may do. “Leave me alone.”

His eyes narrow. He doesn’t move.

Should I leave? Or wait until he does?

“Don’t lie,” he says, and his fist balls.

Shit.

He pushes me against a building and plants his hands on either side of me on the stone wall.

His dark eyes bore into mine from underneath the hoodie. Beads of water fall down his enticing lips. "Tell me where they are."

"I don't have them with me," I say, licking my lips in an attempt to look like I don't care. "They're at home."

His face turns dark, marred with rage ... but also a whiff of excitement.

A vicious grin appears, and he leans in to whisper in my ear, "Where are they? On your laptop? In your closet? Under your pillow?" He snorts and grabs a strand of my hair, twirling it around with a gentleness that can only be described as sharp. "Maybe I should come with you ... pay your bedroom a little visit. See what else you're hiding."

"No," I say quickly, sucking in a breath when his eyes practically rip my heart out of my chest.

"No? You think you can keep the truth from me? I know what you saw," he murmurs, inching closer and closer. "You were there in the ocean ... swimming in your little blue thong and your tight bra that barely hides your nipples. What were you doing there all by yourself? Following me? Couldn't tear your eyes away, could you? I'd remember eyes like yours forever."

Fuck.

The way he talks about me and my body makes me shiver. I've never shivered for a boy. But he's not just any boy.

"I'd love to see what's underneath," he whispers into my ear. "After you tell me where those goddamn pictures are."

My eyes widen, and I shove him away. "Stop following me," I say, "or I'll call the cops."

I tuck my hand into my pocket and make an indent, hoping he believes I'm carrying a phone.

He scowls at me, fists balled. Just a second ago, I thought he was going to grope me, and now I'm afraid he'll hurt me if I don't give him what he wants. But I can't let him win.

He takes a step back. "I'll make you regret that."

I shake my head even though my heart is practically beating out of my chest. "Fuck you."

A devilish grin appears on his face. "I'm sure you'd love to."

Then he turns around and walks off.

Just like that.

Gone before I can even breathe and process what happened.

CHAPTER 8



NATE

WHEN I SAT down on that bench close to her house, I didn't expect her to be home. I didn't expect to watch her argue with her mom through the window. And I definitely didn't expect her to walk out the door.

I was waiting. Waiting for an entry, a hint, anything that would get me closer to those pictures because I know they exist. I knew it the moment I saw her that day, the flash from her camera reflecting off the sea.

But I didn't think I'd ever see her again.

And then she showed up at my school.

Just like that, as though she'd always been there.

Maybe she has, and maybe I didn't pay enough attention. Well, I am now.

I don't know what compelled me to follow her like that, but I needed to find out if she still had the pictures and where they were. I want nothing more than to have them in my possession and erase everything about that night from this goddamn planet.

But life doesn't always go exactly the way we want it to.

I scared her off. Maybe I shouldn't have been so rough, so arrogant ... so crude.

I wanted to intimidate her, to make her feel small and powerless.

I liked it.

I liked seeing her cower underneath me. Those trembling lips begging me to release her made me want to do the opposite. I wanted to claim them

as mine. I remember her in the sea, swimming with that camera, and those eyes boring straight into my soul. It was all I could look at while I sat there on the beach with Nina.

Nina ... who isn't here anymore because of me.



SAM

WHEN THE DOOR OPENS, and Mo's face appears, I almost lose it.

"Oh, my God ... Sam, you're soaked," she says as she ushers me inside. "C'mon."

"Thanks," I mutter, shivering. But I don't know if it's from the cold or from what just happened with Nate. I never imagined I'd be stalked, let alone by a guy like him.

"Are you okay?" Mo asks. "What happened?"

I struggle to come up with the words. To explain to her how I got here.

"I ... Can I stay here?"

She frowns. "Is everything okay back at home?"

I shake my head. "Not right now."

She sighs and wraps me in her arms. "I'm sorry, babe. I can ask my mom and dad, but I can't promise anything."

"I know," I reply. "Thank you."

"Don't worry about it. If they don't say yes, I'll figure something out." She leans back. "Is this about your mom's new boyfriend?"

I nod, biting my lip. "I don't wanna talk about it."

"I understand," she says, smiling softly. "He's a dick."

I laugh and wipe the rain off my nose. "That's an understatement."

She beckons me. "C'mon upstairs. Go take a shower. You can grab some of my clothes."

"But—"

She pushes me up the stairs before I can protest. "Don't worry, I'll handle it."

I smile. "Thank you."

"Stop," she says, raising a brow. "You know I always try my best for my homegirl." She winks. "Now go." She slaps me on the butt and turns around. "While I grovel and suck up to my parents."

Lucky me. Even when I'm down and out, there's a place I can go. Mo always has my back even when I don't. And that's all a best friend could

ask for.



A FEW DAYS later

“SO ARE you coming to Nadia’s party tonight or not?” Monica asks as I close my locker.

“Maybe?” I mutter, staring at my schedule to see what class I’m supposed to follow next.

Last night was the first night I spent at home again, and there was so much back-and-forth arguing that I forgot to print it out, so now I’m gonna have to scramble.

“Dude, you can’t *not* come,” she says, staring me down. “C’mon. It’ll be fun. Just like the party at Robby’s beach house last summer.”

I choke up and quickly put my phone away. “Um, no thanks.”

“What? Why not?” she gasps. “I thought you liked it. You were all excited for that one last summer. Why not now?” She puts her hands against her side. “Don’t tell me something happened there ... Besides Nina, of course.”

I swallow away the lump in my throat. I’m almost tempted to tell her, but if I did, the police would be on this within twenty-four hours, and I don’t know if I want that. Nina’s death was a tragedy, but not all pictures tell the truth either. Do I really know what happened? Or do I just think I do?

“No, no, I’m just not sure if I want to,” I say, clearing my throat. “Mom asked me to have dinner with her.”

“Oh, c’mon, I’m sure she can reschedule.” Monica winks. “Rain check. She won’t mind if you tell her you really wanna go to this party.”

I roll my eyes as Monica wraps her arm around my shoulder. “Do it for me. I need a gal pal to hit up the guys.”

I snort. “You don’t need anyone to get a guy to like you.”

“True, but it’s no fun without you,” she says, smiling.

“Fine, fine, I’ll come,” I concede.

“Yay!” She hugs me as the bell rings. “Okay, gotta go. I’ll text you!”

I nod as she disappears through the crowd, and I’m left with an unsettling feeling in the pit of my stomach. Parties and I are each other’s worst enemy. For some reason, I always attract bad attention there.

Speaking of bad attention ... Nate Wilson is back again. And no longer in that dark hoodie outfit either. He's back to wearing the regular jock outfit, sporting a dirty grin on top.

I didn't expect to see him that soon after what happened on the street the other day. I figured he'd lay low for a while and maybe leave me alone. Instead, he and his buddies from football walk straight toward me.

I straighten my back and hold my head high as he approaches. I may be outnumbered, but I won't let that distract from the fact that he's the bad guy here, not me.

"Hey Sammie-Sam," he muses, and his fellow jocks all laugh as if it's somehow funny when it's just my name. "Got some more pics for me?" He winks.

"No," I reply with a stern voice.

"Aww, c'mon, we all want a taste," one of the others says, and he licks his lips.

A taste? Of what?

What is going on?

I frown while staring at Nate. "What do you want from me?"

"You know what I want." A brief vicious grin pops up on his face, and I'm immediately reminded of his scare tactic in the rain the other day.

"I told you already, I don't have them," I say, grinding my teeth.

"What's this then?" Nate holds up a picture of me ... without shirt or bra on, sticking out my tongue to the camera.

My eyes widen. That's a picture from Robby's beach house party, but it was private, and I didn't send it to anyone. Only Mo and I have that pic. How the fuck did they get their hands on that?

"Delete that," I growl, and I lunge for his phone, but he whisks it away.

"Nah, I don't think I will," he says.

"Where the fuck did you get that?" I yell.

He shrugs and laughs, and his friends do too.

Every time I get close, he holds his hand up just high enough to keep it out of my reach, as if he enjoys pushing me over the edge.

"Give that back! You don't have the right," I growl.

"Send another one," Daryl says, smooching his lips. "Will you?"

"Fuck off," I say, and I stick up my middle finger.

Nate's grin immediately changes into a scowl. He wishes I'd cave to such a blatant grasp for attention. Fuck that.

I turn around and march off. I have no patience to deal with thirsty ass motherfuckers who got ahold of private pictures. I thought that was between me and Mo. Guess not.

Fuck.



I'M WAITING for Monica beside her car at the parking lot. I fold my arms when she approaches me, and I know exactly the moment she sees the scowl on my face.

"What's going on?" she asks. "I thought we'd meet up later. I'm gonna eat dinner at home before the party starts."

"What the hell did you do, Mo?" I growl. "Nate fucking Wilson has *that* picture."

She stops in her tracks. "What picture?" she asks.

"You know, the one you took! Me without shirt and bra with my middle finger up."

Her eyes fill with shock. "What? No, he can't—"

"He showed it to me today in the hallway in front of everyone," I say, grimacing. "Just to make fun of me."

Her face softens, and her eyes tear up. "I'm sorry, Sam."

"You should be. You sent it to them!" I yell, my body trembling.

She shakes her head, confused. "I didn't, I swear."

Everybody's looking at us making a scene, but I don't care.

"Who else could've done it? You were the only one who had the pic!"

She tries to approach me, but I back away. "I didn't do it."

"Don't lie to me, please. Best friends don't do that shit to each other," I say.

"I'm not, I promise," she says, swallowing away the tears. "You have to believe me."

"Then who did, Mo?" I ask.

She averts her eyes as though she's digging in her memories. "No ... no, no ... Fuck."

"What?" I mutter.

"Shit. Robby," she says, her pupils dilating. "He must've gone through my phone back then and sent it to himself." Her fists ball. "That fucker ... I swear to God, Sam, I didn't do this. It must've been him. Please, you gotta believe me."

I take a deep breath. "I want to." I sigh. "If you say it was Robby, I wanna believe you ..."

"There's no other way. I would never *ever* send something like that to anyone." She sniffs. "I should've deleted it sooner. It was stupid to even keep it."

I take a step forward as she's about to burst into tears. "It was my idea to do it, not yours."

"I know," she says, tears rolling down her cheeks, "but I would've gotten rid of them if I knew he was gonna steal my pics. That fucking asshole ..."

I wrap my arms around her and pull her in for a hug.

Even though my tits were seen by the jocks because of a picture on her phone, she didn't send it to them on purpose. Robby used her ... and now we'll both pay the price.

"I fucking hate him," she says. "I should've never hung out with him. And I gave that fucker my virginity."

"Oh, Mo ... really?" I mutter.

She sniffs and coughs from the cries. "Last summer at the party. Remember when you were swimming and taking pics with that new camera of yours? I was up in his room with him. I think he may have searched through my phone right after."

Well, fuck. I only went swimming because she asked to have some time alone with Robby, and I figured I'd just do it. Throwing my clothes off and jumping into the water in my underwear didn't seem like such a dumb idea at the time. It was hot, and everyone was smashed. Plus, it was a good way to test out my new waterproof camera ... and to see things I never thought I'd see.

But at the same time, Robby was using Mo so he could get ahold of some private pics.

"Damn," I say. "What an asshole."

"I'm sorry, Sam," she repeats. "I'm so sorry. Please don't hate me."

"Stop apologizing," I say, still hugging her tight. Nothing we do now can change what already happened. "I won't let them rip us apart." When we finally let go of each other, I tell her, "Once besties, always besties."

We do our signature fist pump, and afterward, Mo says, "I'm gonna make that bastard pay. I swear to you on everything he's stolen and on all the chicks he's banged since."

“And I’m gonna make Nate pay for showing it around to everyone else,” I say.

A vicious smile appears on her face. “It’s our turn to be the bullies.”

I grin too. “If you can’t beat them, join them.”

CHAPTER 9



NATE

THE MUSIC IS SO loud I can barely hear Daryl screaming in my ear.

“Need another beer?” he asks. “It’s on the house. Or rather, Nadia’s.”
He adds a laugh. “She won’t mind.”

“Nah, I’m good,” I reply, showing him the one in my hand.

“C’mon, it’s almost empty. Let’s get you a refill,” he says, and he tugs the beer bottle out of my hand. Before I can even say a word, he’s already walked off to the kitchen, leaving me alone in someone else’s house.

I used to be so at home at parties, drinking all night long and going crazy just for the fun of it. But seeing all of these people dance while I’m just standing here makes me feel so out of sync. Once, I was like them. Now, I’m that guy who pretends to belong just for the sake of belonging.

But what does it even mean when I’m not really here?

From the corner of my eyes, I spot Kevin from school rummaging in his pockets again. He takes out a tiny plastic bag and hands it to a girl sitting right beside him.

My throat jams up.

“Nate ... Nate!”

I turn around only to wish I never did.

“I’ve been trying to get your attention for over an hour already.”

It’s Layla in a tight pink skirt and an off-the-shoulder black top. She went over the top this time, and from the way she’s smiling at me and wrapping her arm around my neck, she did it all for me.

“Wanna dance, cutie?” she asks.

I pull her arm off. “No, thanks.” I turn to look at Kevin, but he’s disappeared. Shit.

“Aww ... c’mon.” Layla tries to grab my hands and tug me along. “Just for a little bit.”

“No,” I say, and I jerk free. I should’ve gone after him when I had the chance. Should’ve gone after that girl who was sitting next to him when there was still time.

She frowns. “Why can’t we just have fun?”

“I’m not interested anymore,” I say, looking away.

She’s busy with things I don’t even want to be thinking about. I thought she’d get the message by now, but she circles around me like a vulture and gets right up in my face.

“Excuse me, but this is not how you treat your lady,” she says with an uptight voice.

“You’re not my lady,” I reply, handing her what’s left of my beer. “Have fun without me.”

I walk off, but she’s still at my back. “What the hell, Nate? Why are you acting like this?”

“Because I don’t want this anymore, Layla, whatever the fuck *this* is.”

Everyone’s started gaping at us, and I don’t like it one bit. She always makes a big fuss out of things when I no longer care.

“Are you seriously breaking up with me?”

“I thought I was clear enough last time,” I growl over my shoulder.

She stops in her tracks. “You can’t fucking break up with me, Nate.” She stands there while I continue to walk. “You can’t do this! Nathan!”

She can do whatever the fuck she wants. I don’t care. I’m not listening, and I’m not turning around. God, I hate it when girls call me the way my mom called me.

So I stick up both middle fingers and walk out onto the patio to get some fresh air. The music and lack of oxygen inside were killing me slowly, and the moment Layla came to breathe down my neck again, I was done for.

I shouldn’t have dated her. She’s insane. But my dick wanted something, and I listened to it. Bad Nate. Never listen to your goddamn dick again. It’s not fucking worth it.

None of it was. Not these parties ... or the drugs. Damn Kevin's fucking drugs.

I glance over my shoulder to make sure she hasn't followed me. I'd much prefer to be left alone right now, and luckily, she's taken the hint for now. Knowing Layla, she'll be back soon enough to try to seduce me again. But I won't fall for it anymore.

I've got bigger things to worry about. Like that one girl who knows my worst secret ...

I kick a rock lying in my path and watch it tumble down the steps. I reach into my pocket and take out a cigarette and a lighter that I got from Daryl. It's been too long since I last had one of these, but today's one of those days, I guess. I light it up and take a drag, the heat burning my lungs real good. Only as I blow out the smoke do I realize who's sitting on the bottom of the stone staircase with a drink cup in her hand.

Samantha Cook. What a coincidence. Just the girl I was looking for.



SAM

"WELL, well, well ..."

The sound of his voice makes all the hairs on the back of my neck stand up.

I swallow and try to ignore him, but his footsteps are hard not to notice.

Now more than ever do I wish I hadn't come to this goddamn party. If only I hadn't let Monica drag me here. But it made her so happy that I came along. And now she's off somewhere fighting with Robby.

I sigh. I wonder what she's telling him and if she'll stir up a scene. Would be typical, and I wouldn't mind at all. I'm already so done with this party...

"Didn't expect to see you here, Sammie-Sam," Nate says.

Why does he keep talking to me even when I ignore him?

"My name is Sam or Samantha," I retort, and I take a sip. "Not Sammie-Sam."

He takes another step. His frame casts a shadow on the concrete. It's hard not to feel small when he's towering over me like that.

A few specks of dust drift down into my drink, and I look up. He just flicked his cigarette ash right above me. Jerk.

If he wants a war, he can have one.

I get up and spin on my heels. He's right in front of me, staring at me with that familiar, dizzying grin on his face. The one that predicts trouble and mischief.

And I answer his smirk by dumping my cup over his head.

I pour it over him slowly, taking my time to see the Coke run down his face. Then I throw the cup on the ground.

"Thanks for ruining my drink, dipshit," I say.

"You enjoyed that, didn't you?" he says, licking up the droplets from his lips. "A little too much maybe."

"Not as much as you enjoy taunting me," I hiss.

He deserves it after what he did to me in the hallway.

"You're right ... I do love that." There's a certain sparkle in his eyes that knocks the breath out of me.

He takes another drag of his smoke, and for some reason, my eyes can't stop zooming in on his lips. Until he blows it out in my face.

I try not to be affected, but the cough still comes, and I hate it when it does.

"Want a taste?" he muses.

"Thanks for the offer, but I'm gonna have to pass," I reply with cynicism.

"Suit yourself," he says, grinning. "But why are you here again?"

"None of your fucking business," I reply, glaring at him.

"You're out here on your own," he mutters, completely ignoring me. "Doesn't seem like you're enjoying yourself." He smirks, his eyes like those of a devil. "I can help you with that, ya know."

"Ugh." I gather what's left of my courage. "Get out of my way."

When I pass him, he grabs my wrist and stops me in my tracks. "Hey. I wasn't done with you."

"You don't get to decide that," I hiss. "Let go of me."

"Actually, I do," he quips. "As long as you have what I want ..."

My stomach drops. I don't wanna talk about it, and I don't wanna think about it, but he keeps bringing it up, and I know why.

"I already told you I don't have anything," I say, and I jerk loose.

"Oh, I know you do," he says with such a gravelly undertone that it makes my body quiver. "And you just fucking poured Coke all over me, so I deserve to know. Give me the pictures, and this'll all end."

“What? The endless stalking? The nasty catcalling? Or the invasion of privacy?” I scoff. “Actual fucking murder? I doubt it.”

He suddenly grabs my arm. “What did you say?”

The heavy tone coming from his mouth has me silent for a moment. I retrace my steps and words. *Privacy. Stalker. Catcall. Murder.*

His grip on my wrist grows tighter. “What did you just call me?”

“You’re a stalker,” I hiss.

“No ... that other word.”

I know what he’s hinting at, and I’m not ashamed. *He* should be.

“Say it again,” he growls.

“No,” I reply.

Fuck that. He’s not the boss of me.

I try to shove him away, but he gets even closer and suddenly picks me up from the concrete. I gasp in shock, then scream when he carries me away.

One. Two. Three steps and he releases me right in the air.

A loud piercing squeal leaves my mouth before I’m submerged beneath cold water. My lungs almost suck it. I come up for air and cough out what I gulped in.

He threw me in the fucking pool.

“What the fuck!” I yell at him.

His buddies come out of the house. “Whooooow,” they chant.

“You fucking asshole!” I yell at Nate.

He keeps staring at me with this goddamn dirty smirk on his face. His tongue darts out to wet his lips, and he even swipes his thumb along the edge.

“Nice.”

Nice? What’s nice?

I follow his eyes, down my shirt ... and realize everything is see-through.

I immediately cover myself with my arms while the guys are still lurking and watching me as if I’m a goddamn freak show.

I feel ridiculed and embarrassed as hell.

Nate laughs and turns around.

“Fuck you, Nate Wilson!” I growl.

“Yeah, you wish,” he replies.

So I chuck some water his way. Of course, it barely even manages to reach his feet.

From here, there's not much I can do, especially not with everyone looking at my rack. There's only one thing I know to do to get back at him; words.

"Don't think I'll forget. I *know* what you did," I mutter.

For a moment, I wonder if he heard me.

But then he stops in his tracks and gazes at me over his shoulder.

The piercing look gives me more shivers than the cold water ever could.

CHAPTER 10



SAM

PUSHING her way through the posse of assholes, Layla comes to a full stop when she sees me. Jenny is right behind her, staring blankly at the water.

“What the ...?” Layla mutters.

She throws a glance at me and then Nate and then me again, her eyes blazing with a fire I’ve never seen before.

“You again,” she says, pointing at me. “I don’t want you near him.”

“He threw me in the fucking pool, Layla,” I growl as I stay there. I’m surrounded by bullies, so getting out is not an option.

“Why would he do that?” Jenny asks. “That’s so unlike Nate.”

“Then you don’t know him as well as you think you do,” I retort, glaring at Nate. “Ask him yourself.”

Layla throws him a look, but he ignores her completely. “Nate? Say something.”

“It’s none of your business,” he says, still staring at me.

Everyone’s holding their breath now, even me.

“But—”

“No. No fucking but. This is done.”

His eyes are solely on me. He clenches his teeth with a stern, almost regretful glaze in his eyes. He shrugs and, with slumped shoulders, rushes off the steps and out onto the street.

I don’t think he’ll come back.

I'm left wet and shivering alone in the dark pool with a bunch of strangers staring at me. Layla and Jenny are completely dumbfounded, so at least I'm not the only one.

Layla throws me a snooty look.

"C'mon, Jenny. Let's go," she says, and she marches her rear end right back into the house, with Jenny on her tail like the bootlicker she is.

As I'm wading through the water, Monica finally shows up.

"About time," I mutter.

"What the ... what happened to you?" she jokes, laughing a little. "You could've at least taken some of your damn clothes off."

"If you hadn't guessed, this wasn't my idea," I reply as I reach the edge. "A little help?"

"Course." She reaches out, and I grab her hand, and she lifts me out of the water with a little pull. "Geez, water makes everything so heavy."

"Thanks," I retort.

"Who did this to you?"

I roll my eyes and look at my soaked outfit. "Take a guess."

"Layla just rushed past me, so if it was her ... It'd better not have been her." She makes a fist.

"It wasn't," I say, rolling up my wet sleeves and pulling off my shoes to drain the water from them. "Nate fucking Wilson."

Her jaw drops, and she gasps. "Noooo."

"Oh, yes," I say. "And the whole team watched."

"Girl ..." Her eyes travel down my chest. "Shit, you're exposed." She immediately grabs her tiny coat and throws it over my chest area. "Here, hold this over it. It's not much, but at least it'll cover some bits."

At least I can count on Monica to help me out a little when needed, even if she wasn't here for the disaster. "Thanks," I reply.

"Sorry. If I knew they'd come pick a fight with you, I would've jumped in," she says, biting her lip. "Fuck Robby. And fuck Layla, Jenny, and Nate, and all those jerks."

"I know," I say, nodding while trying to squeeze the water out of my clothes and hair, but it's a fight against the impossible.

"How did things go with Robby?" I ask.

"Oh, I ripped that asshole a new one," she says, making a face, and she balls her fist.

"Good," I answer. That fucker deserved every ounce of wrath.

“Hey, I could rustle up some spare clothes if you want,” she says. “I’m sure Nadia has something you can wear.”

“No, thanks,” I say, letting out a sigh. “I just wanna go home.”

She grabs my arm. “Of course. Let’s go home. This party is too boring for us anyway.”

And somehow, after all the shit that just went down, Monica’s comment still manages to make me smile.



NATE

WHEN I GET HOME, I immediately rush upstairs and lock myself up in the bathroom. Footsteps follow me, coupled with a concerned voice.

“Nate? Nate?” my dad knocks on the door. “Hello? Talk to me. What happened?”

“Nothing.” I clear my throat. “Just tired and want to take a shower.”

I’d rather not talk right now. I don’t want to have to explain why I’m covered in Coke.

“Did something go down at that party?” he asks.

“No,” I reply.

The more lies I tell, the more my skin begins to itch. It’s as though my body is telling me I’m infected with something that I need to scrape out. But I can’t; it’s already lodged into my flesh like a parasite, worming its way down into my bloodstream and making its way to my heart.

“Well, if you wanna talk about it, I’m here,” Dad says.

“Thanks,” I reply.

He’s too nice to me. I don’t deserve it.

I turn on the shower and wait until I hear his steps fade away before I pull off my clothes. For a moment, I stare at myself in the mirror, wondering what kind of bastard would throw a girl in the pool like that.

Me. I’m that fucking bastard.

I’ve changed so much, and I don’t know what to do. I can’t stop. I’ve gotten myself in this mess, deep down in this fucking abysmal well that I can’t crawl my way out of. I hold my clothes in my hand and stare at the Falcon Elite label quarterback on the back. I wish I could rip it off. Maybe I should.

I never wanted this burden, to have to fight for this spot on my team. I never wanted this pressure to perform. This sport that doesn’t give me

satisfaction.

But my mom's smile every time she saw me score made me go through with it anyway. Her pride is what drives me ... but it's also my downfall.

I should've never said yes to any of it.

I chuck the clothes aside and get under the shower, violently closing the curtain. Nothing can contain this rage coursing through my veins. I'm at war with myself, and I don't know how to contain it, how not to spread this hatred in my heart to the people around me.

It's consuming me ... making me do things I never thought I'd do.

And for what?

All because of some girl ... and my stupid life-altering decisions.

And the only one who can turn everything around is Sam.

I have to find out what she has on me. Those pictures ... I *need* them in my possession, whatever the cost.

Maybe I should go pay her a visit where she least expects it.



SAM

IT'S BEEN a few days since my encounter with Nate, and he hasn't shown up at school to bully me yet. Knock on wood.

I wonder if he's changed his mind. He did seem to feel guilty after he threw me in the pool. Something about that look he gave me after my words made him stop in his tracks. It's as if he was thinking about his own actions, judging himself after the fact.

Or maybe I'm imagining things and projecting myself onto him. Because I sure as hell would be ashamed of myself if I did that to another human being. He didn't even fucking apologize. Just straight up left the scene after his darling Layla discovered us.

Something tells me they aren't in a good place either. Not that I care if they break up or stay together. I don't care at all for her kissing him in front of everyone, trying to assert her dominance as though she was marking him as hers. And I definitely don't care for him putting his hands on her ass when they walk through the hallways.

I don't care at all.

I sigh as I park my car in front of my house and go inside. My mom's still gone with her boy toy. This morning, I found a note in the kitchen about them going shopping, but I bet it's just to avoid me.

Whatever, I don't care what she does with him. As long as he's out of my face, I'm happy.

I go upstairs to my room, but the door is shut. I don't remember closing it. Did my mom do it, or did Randy snoop through my stuff? He'd better not ...

I turn the handle and open the door, only to stay frozen to the ground. My entire room is in shambles. Papers and pens scattered across the room, drawers pulled open and sifted through, trash everywhere, my notebook ... gone.

And on the floor in the middle lies a single pink poppy.

"What the ...?" I mutter, staring at the mess I *know* I didn't leave.

Someone came into my room.

Footsteps are audible behind me, but I'm still in shock.

Someone was looking for something. But who and what?

"Sam? Home already? I saw your car," Mom mutters as she comes up the stairs. "I—Oh my ..."

She glances over my shoulder at the mess in my room.

"What happened here?" she asks.

Thoughts flash through my mind, and my eyes immediately hone in on the open window with the curtains wafting in the wind. That's when I realize ... there's only one person who would be desperate enough to break into my room through the window to get something they know I have.

Nate Wilson.

But I won't say that out loud.

"Sam?" mom asks, placing a hand on my shoulder.

I turn my head, and say, "I, uh ..." I can't. My throat clamps up. If I tell her, I'll be implicated. My mom *will* call the cops. And everyone will know it was me. Everyone at school will know I *knew* ... and I didn't do shit.

My life will be ruined.

"I forgot something this morning and went looking for it without cleaning up," I lie, and I swallow away the lump in my throat. "Sorry."

"So it was you?" She makes a tsk sound. "Sam, you know you shouldn't leave your room like this."

"I know. Sorry, Mom," I reiterate.

She pats me on the back. "It's okay, as long as you clean it up." She adds a smile to make it sting less, but it doesn't help.

I go inside and pack up some of the papers and pens while she watches, stuffing it back into the drawer. When she's finally gone, I pick up the pink poppy lying on the floor and stare at it for a second. Images of a casket being hoisted into the ground come to mind, and I shiver.

I immediately throw the flower in the trash.

I search around, but my laptop is nowhere to be found. It's gone, and I know he fucking stole it.

"Son of a bitch," I mutter to myself.

I never imagined he'd go through with his threat, that he'd actually go to this length to get his hands on the pictures.

Guess it's time to pay Mr. Steal-Yo-Things a visit.

After cleaning up the mess he made, I close the window and make sure it's locked properly before grabbing my bag and rushing down the stairs.

"Where are you going?" mom asks.

"Out," I reply.

"Did you clean your room?"

"Yes!" I shut the door before she can ask any more questions I don't want to answer. I have more important things on my mind right now.

I hop into my car and fish my cell phone from my pocket, then open Google to search for his address. It's not hard to find when I combine it with his dad's business, which is apparently a landscape architect for the rich and famous. Now all I need to do is pay him a visit and demand my laptop back.

I start the engine and race off. It doesn't take me long to get where I need to be. I park my car right across the street. When I get out, I run my fingers through my hair, clear my throat, and straighten my back. No one's going to mess with me like that.

I march up toward their super deluxe home and ring the doorbell at the front gate.

My heart is almost beating out of my chest the moment someone finally answers, an older man, whom I presume is his dad.

"Hi, um, is Nate home?" I ask. "We are in the same class. We were supposed to study together today." I tuck my hair behind my ear and smile awkwardly, because I know someone's watching through the camera. I also know I'm telling a lie, but saying anything is better than nothing at all, especially when trying to get into someone's home.

"Huh ... Just a second, I'll open the gates for you."

A beep is audible, and the gates push open by themselves. I walk up to the house and the door opens before I can knock.

The man looks a bit perplexed. "Hi, Sam, right? Did you just say you were here to study with Nate?"

"Um ... yeah," I reply, biting my lip.

"Hmm ..." He narrows his eyes, almost as though he can't believe it. Maybe I picked the wrong lie to tell.

He turns his head, and yells, "Nate! Someone's here for you."

He licks his lips and reverts his attention back to me. "He'll be here in a minute. Shouldn't take him that long." His father walks off and leaves me standing in the doorway.

I nod and take a casual glance at their home with its big circular staircase on the left and big hallway on the right with golden embellishments everywhere. Nice.

Suddenly, Nate comes casually down the stairs, and I immediately turn my head away so he doesn't see it's me until he's here. Otherwise, he might spin around and walk off again.

The moment his hands touch the door handle, I stick out a foot so he can't slam the door shut in my face. His eyes slowly find mine, and when they do, fire almost erupts.

"Sam ..." A sparkle in his eyes makes me shiver. A vicious smile follows. "Didn't expect to see you here."

"Give me back my laptop."

He frowns, but there's a cheeky undertone that makes me wanna scream. "Laptop? I don't have your laptop."

"Stop lying," I say, clutching the doorjamb. "You broke into my goddamn room."

"What?" He laughs. It's obviously a fake laugh. "I'd never do that."

"You're a liar, and you know it," I hiss, stepping even closer. "I'm not leaving until I get my laptop."

"Fine. Then don't. Stay on the porch all night," he says. "I can bring you a blanket and a cup of coffee if you want." I want to rip the smirk off his face.

"How dare you come into my room and steal my stuff?" I growl, and I get up in his face. "I know you have it. I don't care what you say; you're the only one with a fucking motive."

“Oh, yeah? And what’s that then, Sammie-Sam?” he muses, leaning in. “To get those pictures you said you didn’t have?”

“You won’t get your hands on them. They’re not on there anymore,” I say through gritted teeth.

His eyes and lips twitch. It’s a telltale sign. He’s lying. I’m sure of it.

“Give. It. Back.”

He snorts. “Even if I did have that laptop of yours, which obviously I don’t ... What in the world makes you”—he presses his index finger against my chest—“think I’d ever surrender it to you?”

I swat his hand away. “Because it doesn’t belong to you.”

He inches closer, a devilish grin on his face. “As they say ... finders keepers.” He tries to close the door on me again, but I shove another foot inside.

I grumble with clenched teeth. “You’re not getting rid of me that easily, asshole.”

“Is that your nickname for me now?” he jests. “I need a better one.”

“Oh, I know one. How about bastard?” I growl.

We’re right up in each other’s faces now, and the lightning is practically shooting from his eyes. “You’re terrible with words, Sammie-Sam,” he says.

“Stop calling me that,” I hiss.

“Aww, don’t like it?” he teases. “Too bad for you, *I do*.”

I clench my fists so hard my nails dig into my skin. “Just give me back my goddamn laptop.”

“What would you be willing to do to get it? Assuming I even had it, which I don’t,” he mutters. His eyes travel down my body, and his tongue darts out to lick his lips.

“Oh, now you wanna negotiate?” I say with a snarky voice.

“No one is talking about negotiations,” he says, biting his lip as he gazes at me. “Convincing is more like it ...”

He gives me that same look he gave me the moment he saw me all wet in the pool with my see-through clothes. It’s as though he’s undressing me with his eyes right now, imagining how I look underneath. Fuck.

“I think I know something,” he murmurs.

“Oh, yeah? What?” I say, cocking my head.

“You ... giving me your panties as a start,” he says with a wicked grin spreading on his face that could melt panties right off.

But I can't let my stupid teenage hormones take over. I can't ever let my guard down around guys like him.

I shake my head. "Fuck you, Nate Wilson."

He's toying with me, and I'm not having any of it. "Fuck you. I hope you fucking enjoy sifting through my personal belongings."

I spit right in his face. I don't fucking care if it's assault. He deserves it, and after what he did to me in the pool, I doubt he'll press charges. He's got a lot of shit following him, and he knows.

He wipes off the spit with the back of his hand, the look on his face turning dark.

"You'll regret that," he says with a gruff voice.

"I don't think so," I reply, walking off. "But have fucking fun with the nonexistent pictures! I saved them in a place you'll never reach."

He continues to stare at me while I walk back to my car.

As I get into the car, he calls out from behind me, "*I will* get my hands on those fucking pictures, Sam, I promise you."

I get in and slam the door shut without responding. His words sound like a threat, and I'm sure they are.

Let him fucking bring it. I'm ready.

CHAPTER 11



NATE

I CAN'T BELIEVE she came to my fucking house.

Sam Cook really doesn't know the kind of trouble she's trying to stir up.

As she drives away, I stare after her, wondering if she'll come back for another round. I wouldn't be surprised because she's one tenacious little firecracker. I don't think I've ever met anyone quite like that girl. So violent and attractive all the same.

Rolling my eyes, I close the door and run my fingers through my hair. Weird how an encounter like that can completely tilt me off my axis even though I was the one who kept pushing her buttons. There's something about her that makes me want to go on and on until she snaps. I want to see how far I can take it before she'll crumble and break.

She's right. I am bad ... the devil himself ...

But I don't fucking care anymore.

There's only one thing I care about and that's saving myself and my reputation, no matter the cost.

"I thought she was coming here to study with you?" my dad says as he walks out of the kitchen.

My eyes narrow. Is that what she told him to get him to call me? Smart. "No, she had to leave. Emergency, and stuff."

"Oh ..." My dad nods and frowns. "Pity. She seemed nice. Unlike that other girl."

I snort and shake my head. I know he's talking about Layla. "Thanks."

“Well, at least she *wanted* to study,” he adds.

“Guess I’ll have to get a rain check on that.” I lick my lips. “I’m gonna go back upstairs.”

“To do your homework, I hope?” my dad asks.

“Yeah, yeah,” I reply as I walk up the stairs.

“I don’t wanna get another call from one of your teachers about your grades!” he adds.

“I know!” I yell back, but I know deep down every word I say to my dad isn’t true.

I go back to my room and slam the door shut.

My phone rings and rings. I stare at the screen. Layla’s calling, but I don’t feel any need to pick up. Instead, I cancel the call. Within seconds, the messages start to pour in.

LAYLA: Why aren’t you answering?

Nate: I don’t want to talk.

Layla: But we need to talk.

Nate: ’Bout what?

Layla: WTF happened at the pool maybe??

Nate: Not important.

Layla: Y tho? Are you hitting on her? SMH

OH, my fuck ... she’s jealous.

I smirk to myself. Never thought I’d see Kayla get jealous over another girl I’m toying with. Then again, that’s typical of her to assume she’d have any say in that.

NATE: No.

Layla: Peeps saying you & Sam are a thing.

A THING? I’m surprised. I’ve barely hung out with Sam. But maybe people are starting to catch on to the secret we share ... even though no one except for me and her know the truth.

NATE: Rumors.

Layla: I don’t think so.

Nate: I don't care.

Layla: What happened to you? You're so mad at me all the time.

Nate: I don't want this anymore ... I already told you.

Layla: Oh, c'mon. Let's talk about it.

Nate: I'm done talking.

Layla: So you don't want me anymore?

Nate: Get. Off. My. Back.

I STOP the conversation and block her outright. I'm done talking. Done trying to get through to her. She won't believe my words, so she'll have to believe my actions instead. Layla will never, ever understand me. I've come to realize that now.

I stare at the laptop on my desk. Sam's private laptop. Like a devil's fruit, it tempts me, whispering to me to come and open it up and see what's inside.

Finally, I grab it and sit down on my bed. I blow out a long-drawn-out breath before opening it and finding it password protected. Of course she thought of that.

I try several different ones. Her name, combinations with her birthdate, and even the name of her best friend and school. None of it works.

I growl and throw the laptop aside.

It's useless. All of it.

Even if I did manage to break in, what if I don't find anything? What if she told the truth when she said they weren't on there? I'd never be able to find out where she stored them. I need them, and she knows it.

She knows what I've done ... and she knows the goddamn truth.

It'll only be a matter of time until the world finds out too.



SAM

I'VE TRIED NOT to think about Nate searching through my laptop, seeing every private conversation and thought I've ever had. It's a long shot that he'll get beyond the password screen, but if he does, my whole life is up for grabs. All in the hands of the school's heartthrob jock ... and the worst bully it's ever known.

He's a bad guy, and he knows it. The fact that he doesn't care hurts the most.

I'm so damn angry, yet all I can do is take it out on this goddamn painting right now.

I flick my brush up and down violently, painting a picture of a girl overshadowed by trees. The image is vivid in my head and replays again and again. A girl standing near her house, a small window into her world, the tiny house behind her in shambles.

"Ooh ... interesting."

I turn my head as Mo walks in, staring at my painting.

"What is it?" she asks.

"Just a mood," I explain while patting my brush into the paint.

"It reminds me of something," she murmurs as she stands behind me and peeks over my shoulder while I paint. "Something you recently told me ... about a girl whose house was robbed by a bully."

I narrow my eyes while I glance at her. "What a coincidence."

"Sam ..." She sighs. "If you wanna talk about it, I'm here. You know that, right?"

"Mmmhmm." I know she is, but some things can only be expressed in paintings, not words.

"It must've been so scary to come home to a ravaged room," she says. "I would've been crying, for sure. And then I would have called the police."

Why do I get the feeling she's trying to frisk me for details?

"Why didn't you?" she asks.

"Because it wasn't that important," I say.

"Sure is if you're painting about it now," she jests. "There's something you're not telling me."

I try to continue painting, but she's buzzing around me like a bee, and it makes me wanna swat her with the brush.

"What?" I mutter. "There's nothing."

"Uh-huh," she says, raising a brow. "You know I can tell when you're lying."

"I'm not. I just don't want to talk about it right now." I sigh.

She places a hand on my shoulder. "Was it someone you know?"

I shiver. It's as if she senses it in me and can read my thoughts.

"No," I lie. I can't even look at her when I say it.

"Do you know what they were looking for?"

"I don't know." Another lie.

I don't know why I lie. I keep lying, and I have no reason for it. Everyone I know would go to the police immediately, knowing what I know. But I don't. Like a painting, I feel as though I'm only seeing half a picture. A mood surrounding a memory. Every canvas or photo captures a single instance of time, but it doesn't fully paint the picture.

Maybe that's why I'm so addicted to them; photographs, paintings, images flashing by. They're mere moments in a string of events that none of us could ever fully understand.

And I don't want to be the one to decide. The one to pull that trigger.

I don't know right from wrong.

I don't know if what I saw was the full story.

And even though I hate Nate, I don't think I should ... but he wants me to.

Lately, he wants *everyone* to hate him, and I wanna know why.

"You can tell me. I promise I won't tell a soul if it's that important to you," she says. "If it was personal or something."

"No," I say, trying to move on, but she keeps hammering me about it, and it's getting on my nerves.

"Why not?" she asks. "You can tell me anything."

"No, *I can't*." My intonation is so direct, like a volcano waiting to erupt, that she's momentarily taken aback. I don't blame her.

"Not this," I add, licking my lips trying to contain myself as I watch the trust she had in me degrade like a wisp in the wind.

She mulls it over for a second. "But we're best friends. You always tell me everything."

I don't know what to say to her that won't make this worse.

She nods a few times. "I get it. Fine." She looks down at her feet, and mutters, "I'm gonna go. See you later in class ... or something."

Before I can even say I'm sorry, she's already left the room.

Goddammit. Why does it have to be this way?

I wish I could tell her all the things I've seen, all the things I know, all the things that have happened to me, but doing that would mean involving her in something dangerous. And I don't want her to become a target too.

I contemplate putting away the paint and stopping for the moment, but what should I do? Run after her even though I can't tell her the truth? No, I have to let this settle. Besides, I took up this art class by choice, and I

should do my best to get a good grade. After all, I'm not great at all the other classes, and it's basically the only thing I'm interested in.

This painting deserves all my attention. It deserves to be finished, to tell a story, to exist. So I have to keep painting for the sake of it. Every swipe of the brush calms me.

Still, I wish everything was normal again, and that I didn't have to keep secrets from my best friends. Or anyone for that matter. If I hadn't taken those pictures, none of this would even be happening.

I fish my phone from my pocket and stare at the screen after unlocking it. The app that contains most of them is right in front of me, so I open it and look through them. The longer I stare at the pictures, the ickier I begin to feel, and a certain dread washes over me.

That's when I notice the set of eyes staring at me from out in the hallway.

I quickly put my phone away and pick up my brush again to continue painting in the hopes that this person will just leave me alone ... but that's a futile thing to hope for with Nate Wilson, and he saw precisely what I was doing.

CHAPTER 12



NATE

FOR MINUTES, I watched her. I watched how she brushed the canvas with concise, clearly placed strokes. How she meticulously worked on tiny details, mixed colors, and planted them where she had them in her mind. The painting ... it's beautiful.

And I watched her argue with her friend until she left ... until Sam was all alone again, struggling to breathe.

I know how it feels. But I don't recognize the feelings I have right now.

Even though I came to look for her for a different reason, I can't help but be struck in awe at her painting skills. I've never seen someone create something so mesmerizing off the top of their head. And it reminds me of something ... the window inside her home, the ravaged room behind it, and the girl cowering in front of the shadows.

Is she painting me?

I can't help but wonder. Even though I'm not directly in the picture, the subliminal message isn't hard to see for someone who was there in the scene when it happened.

I am the creep who stalks her. The killer who chases her. The bully who makes her feel helpless. The guy who wants what he came for.

But the girl standing in front of me right now is picture perfect, the way she paints beautiful, her pretty frame a sight to admire. I'm conflicted, and I can't be conflicted. Not about this. I shouldn't have feelings for her. None.

My fucking heart can't feel right now; it has to stay frozen, entangled by all the bad choices I made and stuck in permanent purgatory. Just like my soul. There's no room for fucking emotions in there, and that makes this warmth I'm feeling when I watch her paint so infuriating.

She pauses and stops painting for a moment to check her phone, and I watch her scroll through some peculiar photos. I step closer and closer, trying to peek along over her shoulder.

Suddenly, she turns her head. The look on her face changes from innocent to shocked and then to pure disgust. I despise that look; that look that says I'm the worst she could ever meet.

She quickly tucks the phone into her pocket.

"Nice painting. Made it yourself?"

"Fuck off," she says.

What a reply. I guess I deserve it after all the things I said and did. Of course she doesn't believe any compliment I give her, despite it being the God's honest truth.

"You paint well ..." I add.

"For a what? A snooty bitch? A gullible little girl?" she adds, raising her brow.

"Just good," I add. "Better than I ever could."

Her lips part, but it takes her a few seconds to form a response. "What is this? A compliment? From Nate Wilson himself?"

"What? I can't give a compliment now?" I scoff.

"You hate me, and I hate you," she says, turning around to face me. "You've never given me a compliment. You're always a jerk, and your intentions are always bad."

Ouch. That hurt. I mean, I know she thinks I'm that way, but I'm only that way because I have to be. But hearing it spoken out loud isn't something I enjoy.

She points the paintbrush at me. "And you only want one thing."

She's right. There's only one reason I am the way I am to her. To get her to give me what I want, I have to drive her to the point of surrender, and I'll use any means necessary. Even if it'll mess with both our heads and hearts.

I try to pick up the painting, but the moment my fingers touch the canvas, she swats me away.

"Don't touch it," she hisses.

“Why not? I’d love to look at it up close. Hang it on my wall. Look at it every single day.” I put emphasis on each word and look her straight in the eyes while doing so. I want her to know I think about her and that what she knows about me consumes my every waking thought.

I lean in and look her straight in the eyes. “Just like you look at *my* pictures.”

“They’re *not* your pictures,” she hisses. “Give me back my laptop or get out.”

I smile at her. I love her tenacity. “It’s not gonna be that easy, Sammie-Sam.”

“So you admit you took it,” she says. “You’re a fucking burglar.”

“I never said anything,” I muse, and I grind my teeth. “But give me your phone, and you might find out.”

“Why? So you can try to hack into it too?” she retorts, laughing. “The pictures aren’t on there either. You’re wasting your goddamn time.”

I don’t know why, but her laughter pulls something out of me I didn’t know existed. A rage unlike any other. And I lash out by jumping at her and trying to steal it from her pocket.

“Fuck, get the fuck off me!” she yells, shoving me away. “What the hell is wrong with you?”

I take a step back and think.

She’s right. I don’t know what I’m doing, but I can’t stop either. Someway, somehow, I have to get my hands on those pictures. Before she does something she’ll regret.

She’s covering it with her hand now, so I grab her arm instead. A quick jab with the paintbrush follows, right on my face. I release her from my grip.

“You fucking painted me,” I growl, rubbing my hand over my cheek right where the paint is.

We’re both breathing heavily now. My brain is on overload, trying to choose between fight or flight. Continue to get her to do what I want or leave it for now.

I don’t want to push her to the brink even though I thought I could do it.

The minute she touched me with her brush, something changed in her eyes. A volatile spark ... as though her tentative anger and hatred turned into rejection. And it stung as badly as a knife to the heart.

“Don’t look at me like that,” I mutter.

Anything but that look.

I grab a towel lying on a stool next to her and clean my face with it, but nothing will take off the shame marking me that's reflected in her eyes. And it hurts.

I rub my lips, contemplating another word, but none will explain the way I feel. Nothing I say can erase what I've done. No one but me knows the truth.

So I clench my teeth, turn around, and throw the towel in a corner before rushing off.



SAM

FOR A MOMENT, I'm stunned with my feet practically glued to the floor. My brain tries to process what just happened but fails to describe what I feel. Nothing prepared me for Nate Wilson invading my space, studying me, and judging me and my work. I feel stripped, laid bare ... and he said it was beautiful.

You can't trust his words. He tried to steal your phone.

I close my eyes and shake my head. He liked the painting, even when he knew it was about him and all the ways he makes me feel small and insignificant. Every single step I take, he follows in my footsteps like a shadow I can't escape. And it haunts me. He's haunting my every waking thought.

It's the same way for him.

No, I can't think like that. I can't think of him any other way than the bad guy. The high school jock. The insufferable bully. Because if I don't, what would that make me?

I close my eyes and blow out a breath. I can't believe I'm thinking about this. That I'm involved in something that's beyond my comprehension ... my control.

But it's not in his hands either.

Follow him.

I don't know why I listen to the little voice in my head, but I do. My feet begin to move before I realize it, and I pick up the cloth he threw into the corner on my way out. I hold it close, the paint still wet on the rag, just like the image printed onto my retina of a boy lashing out in pure agony. A boy desperate for someone to know his pain ... the truth.

I follow the path of his footsteps in several shades of blue paint down the hallway. He didn't notice when he walked through the splashes I left on the floor, but I did.

The trail leads me to the men's toilet. I hesitate to go in. Girls aren't allowed in here. If anyone else is in there, they'll tell me off. And if anyone sees me going inside, it's reputation suicide.

Do it.

Self-destruction pushes me to open the door; the need to know too powerful to ignore.

Nate stands near the edge of the bathroom, facing the window. His hands are firmly planted on the windowsill, fingers sprawled but crooked, as if he's trying to crack his nails against the stone, and his head hangs forward. A picture I could paint in a heartbeat.

"I know you're there," he says, his voice gravelly, painful. As though he's wounded and ready to lash out.

I should run and hide. Take my pride and stride out while I still own it. He could strip me bare of everything I am and throw me to the masses to be ridiculed. He's Falcon Elite's star athlete; a guy with a promise of a bright future. A person with so much baggage you don't dare touch them.

But I do.

My hand has already reached for him and grazed his shoulder.

He immediately turns around.

I take a few steps back.

"Are you stalking *me* now?" he growls, snorting. "Pathetic."

He breathes, walks, and talks like a monster. A man obsessed with one thing and one thing only. Me.

"I'm not. You started it," I reply, still stepping back until I'm backed into a corner of the toilets with no escape. He's already blocked the door with his huge frame. The only way out is by passing him. Shit.

He leans in and traps me between him and the wall. "Why did you follow me?"

My heart beats in my throat, and I swallow away the lump in my throat.

"I ... wanted to know."

"What? How a guy like me can stoop to that level? Why I even try? If I'll give up?" He looks into my eyes as though he's searching for the truth, but I don't have it for him.

"Tell me," he says.

“Why you said you thought my painting was beautiful.” It sputters out of my mouth before I realize it.

I don’t mean to be so forthcoming, but when he looks at me with those penetrating eyes, it just happens. And something about the way he clenches his jaw and then bites his lip undoes me.

“Because it’s the truth,” he says with such a serious face that I find it hard not to believe him.

He snorts. “But you’ll obviously think that’s a lie.”

“No,” I respond.

His eyes narrow. He brings one hand to his face and rubs his jaw. “Liar.”

The silence is overpowering. Seconds feel like minutes as his breathing slows, but I can feel every one of his breaths prickling on my skin.

“Is this really all about the pictures?” I ask.

He cocks his head and leans in even farther until his breath is against the side of my cheek, and my whole body is covered in goose bumps.

“That’s for me to know and for you to find out.”

A gasp escapes my mouth when his lips briefly brush past my ear.

“Tell me ... are you scared of me?” he whispers.

I want to answer, but my throat feels numb and my head dizzy.

When our eyes connect, the tension is like lightning electrifying me from the inside out. This can’t be happening. It *can’t* be that ... I can’t *want* this.

A devious, sexy smirk appears on his face. “Thought so.”

Then he turns around and walks out, leaving me out of breath ... and with my heart lost to a boy I shouldn’t ever crave.

CHAPTER 13



NATE

THE CAFETERIA IS noisy and overcrowded, but I've shut myself off from it all, and my food is going untouched. There's only one thing I can focus on; the girl sitting just a few tables away from me. *Sam*.

She eats with care and sophistication, taking every bite as though it might be her last. And it might just be.

She's been on my mind everywhere I go. I can't focus on my classes, can't work on my grades, can't fucking throw balls or run like hell without thinking about her. I don't know what it is about her, but she's got me hooked. And I don't understand why. Like she said, she hates me, and I hate her.

Or at least, that's what I tell myself while I stare at her, wondering about all the ways I can convince her to give me those goddamn pictures. They'll be the end of me, I'm sure of it.

"Nate?"

I don't hear Layla's voice until she's screaming into my ears.

"Nate!"

"What?" I yell back without even looking at her.

"Why are you—"

She suddenly smashes her plate down and sits right in front of me, blocking my view. "Stop this, Nate. Stop it," she hisses.

"What?"

She leans in, and whispers, "You're staring at her again."

“So?” I don’t intend to quit, but I can still see Layla making a face.

“Stop ... just stop,” she whispers. “You’re embarrassing yourself.”

“No, you are. Go sit somewhere else,” I say.

“What? How dare you talk to me like that?”

“We’ve broken up, remember? What are you still doing here?” I growl, this time looking at her. If there’s something I hate, it’s when people meddle in my business and try to stop me from doing what I want.

She grunts. “Ugh.”

She grabs her tray, gets up, and walks off, leaving me in peace again.

I don’t have time to deal with her right now, so I ignore her little tantrum and continue staring at that girl until she finally looks back. And when she does, it’s the best thing in the world. Those eyes, that look—full of fear, shame, and a hint of lust all wrapped into one sweet package.

I can’t get enough, and I want her to notice me, to know that I’m always looking, waiting for her to crumble.

And then I’ll be there to pick up the pieces ... one by one.



SAM

I CAN’T SWALLOW another piece of food. None. The apples and potatoes on my plate go untouched. My stomach is roaring, but my throat is completely jammed shut.

“What’s wrong?” Mo asks while munching on her bag of chips.

If I answer, she’ll be just as horrified, and I don’t know if I want her to get involved. Instead, I look away and clear my throat.

“I don’t feel so good.”

“Oh, shit,” she replies. “You need something? Tylenol?”

“No, thanks,” I say, and I pick up my tray. “I think I need to ... go.”

“Bathroom?” she asks as I get up.

“Yeah.” But I just wanna get out of here; it doesn’t matter where.

“Kay! Hope you feel better,” she yells after me as I leave.

I quickly dump what’s left of my tray in the trash and exit the cafeteria, but I can still feel his penetrative stare on my back like a laser pointer. Everywhere I go, he’s there, always looming in the background, waiting for me to pop. It’s as if he wants me to self-destruct, so he’ll get a chance to steal the pictures. Or maybe he’s watching to see if I’ll tell someone or even share the pictures.

But there is only so much glaring a person can take before it gets in your head, and I definitely feel haunted by him. So much so that I can't stop walking until I reach a bathroom and lock myself inside a stall so I can finally breathe again.

"Jesus," I mumble, sitting down to take a minute.

The door opens, and someone walks in. All I can see are black heels with red bottoms, but it's enough to know exactly who it is.

"Hi, Sam."

Layla.

"I know you're in there," she says, pausing at each door until she stops in front of mine. "You don't have to hide."

She knocks.

"What do you want?" I grumble, folding my arms.

"I want you to stay away from Nate."

I snort. "Why do you care? He's not your boyfriend anymore. He made that pretty clear."

I don't have to see her to know she's fuming right now.

She taps with her foot multiple times. "Your opinion doesn't matter, Sam. In fact, *you* don't fucking matter."

"Say that to your dad," I retort.

"Listen, you little shit, don't you fucking talk to Nate or spend even a second looking at him. You hear me?" she hisses. "He's not looking for your attention. He doesn't need someone like you."

"Well, it's clear he doesn't need you either," I quip.

"You're just like your fucking mom, stealing boys who don't belong to you," she says, and she walks away for a second only to come back again. "But I'm not my mom. I don't lay low and play nice."

Something is racketed against my stall. My heart races, and my eyes widen when I realize too late what she's doing.

I get up from the toilet and immediately unlock the door, pushing it to no avail. She's blocked it off with something, and there's no way for me to get out.

"Enjoy your fucking toilet time, slut," she says, chuckling a little before prancing off.

Bitch.

When I'm alone, I sigh out loud and slap myself. "Goddammit, Sam. Why do you always let her get away with this?"

After jerking at the door a few more times, I give up and sit down on the toilet again, fishing my phone from my pocket. There's only one way to get out of this, and that's groveling to the only person I know who's got my back.

SAM: Help.

Mo: How?

Sam: Stuck @ toilet hallway. Don't ask.

Mo: Wow.

WITHIN A FEW MINUTES, Monica has arrived and walks up to my stall. "Jesus, Sam. Really?"

"Yes, again," I reply as she takes off whatever was barring me from leaving.

When I open the door, Mo's standing there clutching a floor mop. "Who did this?"

"Take a wild guess." I know my voice is laced with sarcasm, but I can't help myself.

"Princess Layla fucking mistress Parker," she retorts, putting the floor mop in the corner of the room. "I can't believe she actually went there. Why? What the hell did you do?"

"My mom, remember?" I say, shrugging.

"No, nuh-uh, this is a personal vendetta," she says as I exit the toilet stall and wash my hands.

"She's always had a hate thing for me, you know that," I say. "But thanks for getting me out."

"Of course, you know best friends always help each other out," she says, checking her makeup in the mirror. "But still, ever since Nate's gone AWOL on her, she's been going off the rails. And he's been following you around everywhere lately too."

"You noticed?" I joke.

I was hoping I could keep her out of this, but I suppose Mo's too smart to play a fool.

"Girl, he's legit stalking your ass, and I wanna know why."

I shrug. "I don't know. Maybe he's got a thing for me."

"Nah, it has to be more than that," she says, raising a finger. "No offense. It's just that he's been so weird. Unlike himself."

I nod. "I get it."

"Not that I mean he shouldn't like you because of course he should. You're fabulous," she says, obviously trying to rephrase her previous statement. I know she's only trying to make it seem like a compliment when we all know that's not what this is.

"It's almost as if he's obsessed with you, like he wants something from you," Mo says, touching up her hair too.

The water's still running over my hands, but I'm lost in thought. Obsessed. Stalker. Nate's all those things, but if Mo only knew the reason, she'd probably have a heart attack.

And even though the word "murderer" rests on the tip of my tongue, I don't dare say it out loud.

"And Layla's not having any of it," she continues, and the spell is broken. "You know what?" She glances at me. "We should get back at her. For all the times she bullshitted us and made fun of you."

"Hmm ..." I don't like being a bitch, but sometimes, bitches need to see a bigger bitch in order to tone it down a little. "Maybe. Got any idea?"

She smirks and looks around the room, then her eyes settle on a few stacks of toilet paper. A devilish grin appears on her face. "Oh, I know just how to get back at her."

CHAPTER 14



SAM

WE IMPATIENTLY WAIT in the hallways for Layla to come back from her gossip break with her friends. When she finally walks inside, we hide behind one of the pillars and watch her go to her locker. Nate's a few feet away from her, pulling stuff from his own locker. They're on full ignore mode toward each other, but I know he'll be looking the minute Layla opens her locker. Mo can barely contain her laughter, and I have to put a hand over her mouth in order for none to spill.

The moment Layla unlocks it, a whole ton of wet, dirty, piss-stained toilet paper rolls out of her locker and onto her expensive clothes. I snort and Mo bursts out into laughter, which causes Layla to turn her head. The look on her face is priceless. I've never seen a more enraged witch than this.

God, I'm so fucking glad Mo managed to spy on her and learn her code. This was the most amazing payback ever.

"You ... you did this?!" Layla screams, slamming her locker shut. "My clothes!"

Nate turns his head to see what's going on and grins. It's the first time I've seen a genuine smile on his face. Then he gazes at me with that same penetrative stare that makes my heart throb.

Mo suddenly grabs my hand and pulls me away. "Run!"

Layla stomps in her heels, and everyone in the hallway laughs at her while she does. There will be retaliation, but I don't care. I got my sweet as

fuck revenge.

I run as fast as I can because I don't want any of her friends to catch up with me. Halfway through, I lose sight of Mo, and we separate. I jolt into the nearest empty classroom and shut the door, then pause.

Adrenaline still rushes through my veins, and I'm out of breath from running. A smile forms on my face, the excitement too real. God, I love being a bad girl. No wonder Nate always seems to enjoy bullying me so much; it's such a goddamn thrill.

I take a few seconds to cool down and figure out a plan. I don't wanna go out there now and face that stuck-up princess all by myself. Especially not when she's acting like an angry troll.

No, I gotta wait this shit out. At least until the bells ring. I can check what class is next on my phone in the meantime, so I'm prepared to run to get there on time.

Suddenly, someone fumbles with the door handle. I flinch and tuck my phone away in a moment of panic. The door slides open. Who is it? Did she catch me?

Then I see it ... the devilish pair of eyes staring back at me through the tiny slit. My heart stops.

The door opens farther, and a figure towers in the doorway. Nate. All dressed in his sports outfit, the tight one that exposes all his muscles. When he walks, his muscles ripple smoothly, fluid like water, capturing my attention as though it's a painting come to life.

He shuts the door behind him, the room still unlit with the exception of the small light filtered through the closed window blinds behind me.

Every step he takes makes me clench the windowsill a little bit harder. He probably followed me here. Damn, I should've been more careful.

He stops in the middle of the room and cocks his head. "That wasn't a nice thing to do."

I narrow my eyes. "Bullies don't deserve nice things."

"The same could be said about you now," he replies, taking another step.

"I know," I say. And I don't fucking care.

"Layla will hate you even more," he adds.

I raise my brows. Is he trying to protect her like some gallant knight? Pitiful. "Bring it."

“Hmm ... You sound confident ...” he murmurs, licking his top lip.
“I’m impressed.”

“With my ability to *not* care?” I quip.

“With your prank.” A smirk forms on his lips, and I don’t dare admit that it looks sexy on him, but it does. “She hated it. But we laughed.”

“We?” I raise a brow. Since when is there a we?

He shrugs as if it doesn’t even faze him.

“Why are you here?” I ask.

“You know why I’m here,” he replies with a dark, gravelly voice.

I swallow away the lump in my throat. “I won’t give you the pictures if that’s what you’re after.”

“You know I won’t give up, right?” he says.

I nod. I’ve known that since the day we met.

“Then why don’t you give in? What are you waiting for? Why are you keeping them?” He slowly approaches me. “You haven’t gone to the police yet ... or I would’ve known.”

“Doesn’t mean I won’t,” I reply, trying to cull this racing heart of mine, but it’s only beating faster and faster.

“I doubt it.” The way he says it, with full and utter conviction, tells me I don’t have a choice in this.

But I won’t let go without a fight.

“Those pictures won’t erase the truth,” I say.

“Do you even *know* the truth, though?” he mutters.

My lips part, but I don’t know how to answer that question because it’s been lingering on my tongue too.

“That’s why you kept them in your private account without telling anyone about it.” He scoots aside a couple of chairs that stand between him and me. “You *want* to know.”

I shake my head, but it only makes him smile more.

He’s right. My attempt to lie is pathetic, and it shows.

Dammit.

“Doesn’t matter, I’m not giving them to you,” I reply.

“I think you will. Eventually. All it takes is a little ... push.” He shoves aside the final chair standing in his way.

We’re face to face now, and I swallow hard.

What is it about this guy that makes him such an asshole but so hard to resist at the same time?

I put my hand against my side. "So I guess you and Layla are over then?"

"Haven't you heard?" he murmurs, coming into my comfort zone. My insecurities play up as though they respond to his presence without me controlling them because I immediately grow tense.

"I'm chasing after another girl."

My heart momentarily stops beating, and I suck in a breath. He steps even closer and bites his bottom lip in such an attractive way that I'm completely dumbfounded by what he just said.

It can't be true. Can it?

No. He can't *like* like me.

Why do I even care? I'm normally never that girl who swoons and falls apart in front of a guy, but something about him always manages to make my knees buckle. A certain air of arrogance mixed with ... raw sex walking on legs.

But it's all a ruse to get me to comply and give him what he wants.

"You're chasing after pictures," I say.

He's so close now, all the ridges of his abs underneath his shirt are visible, and it's almost making me want to reach out and touch them.

Stop this, Sam. Just fucking stop it.

"You make me laugh," he mutters, placing both hands on the windowsill behind me, caging me inside his arms once again.

Goddammit.

"You piss me off," I reply.

"Keep telling yourself that," he quips.

One of his hands slides from the windowsill to my hand, and I freeze. His warm hand feels like lightning shooting all over my skin as it travels up my arm.

"You should know better than to taunt me," he says, leaning in to whisper in my ear. "I like scared little girls ... like you."

His tongue dips out and grazes along the rim of my ear. A chill runs up my spine as he places his other hand on my knee. The oxygen is knocked right out of me when he slides it upward along my thigh.

"You're a dirty girl, aren't you?" he whispers, adding a groan that sets my body on fire. "I like that."

His hand creeps up my red and black checkered skirt, fingers curling underneath the fabric of my panties.

Shit. Shit. Shit. Why am I letting him do this? He's the bad guy.

He groans again, tugging at the elastic to pull them down. "You're a filthy ... little ... thief."

RIP!

In one quick pull, he's torn them straight off.

I gasp in shock as he holds my panties in his hand, wearing a victorious grin on his face.

"What the—?"

He brings them to his face and takes a whiff, a delicious moan grumbling in his throat.

"I'll hold onto these," he murmurs, stuffing them into his pocket.

And after a dirty look, he turns around and walks off.

"What?" I mutter, ignoring the throbbing sensation between my legs.

He glances at me over his shoulder. "Consider it a down payment ... I'll give them back if you give me those pictures within a day. And if you don't, I'll find more creative ways to tempt you."

So that's what this is all about. Extortion. I should've known, shouldn't have been so gullible to assume he'd ever feel something for me. Playing with lust as though it's a goddamn tool.

I spit at him, but it lands on the floor. "You're a disgusting piece of shit, Nate Wilson."

He doesn't even look at me when he says, "Believe me, I know."

Then he closes the door on me.

Great. Now I'm left without panties in a skirt that's too short to sit in commando style.

Guess I'm going to have to ask Mo to fake an "I'm sick" note for me.

But the worst part of this all is that Nate fucking Wilson now has possession of a pair of my panties ... and I can only imagine all the things he can and will do to them.

CHAPTER 15



NATE

I STARE at the panties hanging from a single index finger. I bet she'll want these back soon ... but not before I've thoroughly enjoyed myself.

I take another sniff and groan from the scent of her wetness. I wish I could take a lick.

But that would be wrong.

Very, very wrong.

She's the girl I shouldn't want—the girl who holds the keys to my unraveling—yet I can't stop craving the very thing I should fear. I can't stop myself from wanting to get closer every single time I see her. Something about that girl makes me go wild.

Maybe it's because we aren't supposed to be together ... because my reputation and image are on the line. Or maybe it's because she's much more like me in ways Layla never was.

Suddenly, the door to my room opens, and I shove the panties underneath my butt.

"Nate, are you—? What was that?" My dad's eyes narrow.

"Nothing," I muse, and I grab a magazine on the other side of my body. "Just a sports magazine." Dad buys me these each week to promote my professionalism or something. He just wants to make sure I keep my scholarship and my entire future at the forefront of my mind. No pressure.

"Okay." He licks his lips and rubs his chin. "Well, dinner's ready."

"Great. I'll be there in a minute," I answer.

“Good.” He nods.

“Oh, and Dad ... you know you can always call from downstairs, right?” I add.

“Yeah, but I figured I’d just come anyway. See what’s up,” he says.

“You mean to check up on me,” I retort, annoyed.

“We’re just not talking a lot these days,” he replies. “And I’d like to work on that.” He clears his throat. “So if there’s anything you want to tell me, now’s the time.”

“Um, I’ve got nothing,” I reply, sweat already dripping down my back.

“Right.” He frowns. “See you downstairs then.”

Why is it that my dad can always see through my lies, but he never questions my answers?

After he leaves, I pull the panties out from underneath my butt and sit up. If my dad finds out I’m keeping these, I’m dead, but it’s worth it. Now, all I need to do is figure out a way to use it to my advantage.



SAM

THE NEXT DAY

GETTING home without panties was an adventure in and of itself and not in a good way. I can’t believe Nate ripped them off my body as if it meant nothing. I should’ve known he would do such a thing, but I let my lusty body do the thinking instead of my fucking brain.

I can’t trust the feelings I have, nor can I trust him.

I should just focus on my studies and forget about the bastard. If he comes to me about the pictures, I’ll keep on ignoring him. There’s no way I’ll let him extort me like that. Eventually, he has to get tired of trying, right?

Right. That’s what I thought.

But when I walk to my locker to pick up my books for the day, there’s something hanging from the combination lock ... my bold, red panties.

My eyes widen as everyone who walks past my locker giggles and snorts when they spot them. My body begins to heat and shake vigorously. I can’t go to my locker now because everyone would know it’s mine, and they’d all be laughing at me. But I only have a few more minutes until the bell rings, and then I’ll miss my goddamn class.

Goddammit.

Taking in a deep breath, I march toward my locker, swallowing my pride while ignoring the laughter. But I hold my head high with pride as I take the panties off the locker and tuck them into my pocket.

That's when I spot him.

Nate fucking Wilson, smiling like the devil himself.

And my resolve to ignore him crumbles.

He did this on purpose to humiliate me.

But I'm not going to go down easily.

He may have played with his own reputation, but I won't allow him to toy with mine.

"Asshole," I growl at him.

But he only sticks out his tongue and winks at me before walking off.

I want to scream, "Come back here, you fucker!" but that would only make me look even worse than this thing in my pocket already has. I have to pick my fights, and this one isn't it. But I will get back at him for this. He can count on that.



AFTER SCHOOL, I don't go home. It's not a place I go to happily anymore, anyway. My mom shoved our recent fight with her boy toy under the rug and pretends it didn't happen, just so she can keep the bullshit intact. She's smitten ... I recognize the look because I see it every day in school. I just never thought my own mom would feel something like that for someone other than my dad.

And that it'd be for Layla's father.

I cringe at the thought of seeing them kiss.

Luckily, I don't have to endure that for now. I have other plans. There's only one thing on my mind right now, and that's getting my laptop back. Nate hasn't shown any remorse or intent to hand it back to me, so I guess I'll have to go get it myself.

Besides, it'll give me a great opportunity to get back at him.

I park outside his house and stare at the front door. They'll never let me in that way, especially not Nate, so I gotta figure out another way. I pull out my phone and take a few pictures, then park somewhere else so Nate doesn't see my car. Then I sneak up to their gated property and grab the fence. It's sturdy enough, so I take the risk and make the climb.

It's the stupidest thing I've done in a long time, and my mom would kill me if she found out, but at least it's for a good reason. And my mom's definitely not gonna find out because I won't get caught.

Someone looks through the windows, but I hide in the bushes like a real burglar. Or a bad one, I can't tell, but at least they can't see me. It's Nate's dad, and he briefly peeks at his garden through his living room window before closing the curtains in the middle of a bright day. Weird.

I check the rooms out from a distance until I find one that looks like a boy might live there, as there are awards hanging from the wall.

When the coast's clear, I move on and sneak to the side where Nate's room is just a few feet up above. There's a window right above me and some vines I can climb up to reach a part of the roof. It should be enough to get there, so I rub my hands and then jump up into the vines.

No one prepared me for the thorns sticking out, though, and it fucking hurts while I try to climb.

What I do in the name of the truth, goddammit.

I finally make it up to the roof part below his window and take a few seconds to breathe before I continue. I look around to see if anyone noticed me before I run and jump up against the window. I pull myself up with ease and tumble into his room.

Lucky me, there's no one there, and lucky me, I also knew that before I attempted the climb. I didn't just take a couple of pics; I made sure I had the entire room on my phone to see if Nate was there. I'm not interested in a showdown right now. I just need to grab my laptop and get the fuck out of here.

But where is it?

It's not on his gigantic bed, nor is it on the hardwood floor. There's a bunch of lights stuck to the ceiling and a lot of expensive-looking decals on the walls. I can't help but look around at all the tiny trophies either. A lot of them are all stacked on a dusty shelf in the corner. In fact, all of them look as though they haven't been touched in years.

I peek under the pillows and under the bedding. There's a distinct tropical smell coming off them that's dizzying but in a good way. Not overpowering but strong nonetheless, and it reminds me of him ... prowling toward me ... shoving aside chairs to get to me ... ripping off my panties.

I gulp.

Not now, Sam. Don't you fucking dare.

I check his desk and find a bunch of papers with scribbled text, and I can't stop myself from picking one up and reading.

DAY TO DAY

Tryna make Hay

But slowly turning more Cray

I did something Bad

It's turning me Mad

Cuz no one knows it was Me

Wait, wait, don't tell my fucking Dad

He's not a fucking Referee

In this game that I Play

Boys know I Slay

But don't fucking get in my Way

Cuz I'm not fucking Okay

I'm a monster. A motherfucking Monster

And monsters don't play Nice

I'll do anything to get my Ice

I'll pay the fucking Price

As long as I stay on Top

And don't become a Flop

I'll get what I Deserve

Ahead of the fucking Curve

I know you're Unnerved

But listen to me Now

You don't know the Truth

You haven't seen the sweat on my Brow

What I went through to stay with these Youth

Innocent?

Not me

Sinner?

That's a Guarantee

Wow. I check the back, but there's nothing else on there. Is this a ... poem? No, it reads more like a rap.

Did Nate write this?

I frown and gaze at the words that definitely look like his handwriting. I've seen it in class a couple of times when I looked over his shoulder to see what he was writing. He was always scribbling on these tiny notebooks, hiding them from everyone else like they were his secret.

Maybe this is what he was doing.

Nate Wilson, Falcon Elite's best quarterback, writing rap lyrics? Interesting.

Maybe I should take this with me. It might come in handy.

I neatly fold the paper and tuck it into my pants, then I continue my search. I start with the elaborate closet in the corner, but there's no sign of my laptop. Not anywhere, in fact.

He didn't discard it, right? The longer I search, the more anxious I get. There's not much time left. Nate could come back any minute now, so I have to be quick.

I search through his nightstand and rip apart the drawers standing in the other corner of the big room. I pull open the last one on the bottom, the only one I haven't checked, and I blink a couple of times when I discover a whole set of underwear just lying there. I can't help but pick one up and check the size. *Gulp.*

A glint of something at the bottom catches my eye, though, so I push past his undies ... and find my goddamn laptop.

Gotcha.

Suddenly, a creak makes me lean up and listen. More creaks follow. Someone's walking across the hallway.

Shit!

CHAPTER 16



SAM

I GRAB the laptop and race off toward the window, then jump out onto the roof part. The moment the door opens, I lower myself underneath the windowsill and pray no one saw me.

My breathing is fast and ragged, adrenaline spiking hard.

Did they see me?

I could go to jail.

Fuck, I hope not.

I can't help but look up and tuck loose strings of my hair behind my ear when they get in the way. But my eyes are already glued to one thing and one thing only. Nate just walked into the room wearing only a towel around his waist. All the ridges of his abs are visible to the naked eye, each moving with perfection as he walks around the room looking for clothes. The thick slabs of pure muscle on his back move with grace as he opens the closet, and my mouth waters at the sight of tiny droplets of water rolling down into the towel.

That's when he drops the towel, and my pupils dilate.

The ass that appears behind is nothing short of perfection, like a homemade chocolate chip muffin you want to sink your teeth in. Delicious.

I shouldn't be thinking any of this, but I am. I can't help myself. He's that gorgeous.

No wonder all the girls fawn over him. I can see what they're after. They want to squeeze that butt as much as I do ... and see what else he's

hiding.

Suddenly, my eyes travel toward something lying on the floor near the cabinet he's pulling out his underwear from. A scrunchie ... that I recognize as mine.

Shit, shit, shit!

I gasp. The sound makes him turn, and I quickly hide back underneath the windowsill, closing my eyes.

Fuck!

I hold my hand in front of my mouth and stop breathing entirely for a few seconds.

Someone walks up to the window. I can't tell because I'm tucked underneath the windowsill, but I know it's him. My heart almost bursts out of my chest.

Can he see me? Fuck, I hope not. I'm not looking for a confrontation right now, especially not with him dressed in practically nothing.

Sweat drops down my back as I close my eyes and wait for the slow time to pass as quickly as a snail makes a trail across the tree branch. When the footsteps dissipate and a door closes, I breathe out a sigh of relief.

Why did I have to drop that goddamn scrunchie there?

And why did I have to make that sound?

I almost jump out to go grab it, but then stop myself just in time from doing the stupidest thing ever. Nate could come back any moment now, or maybe he's still there ... there's no way I could ever snatch it without him noticing.

God, I'm such an idiot.

No wonder my hair was constantly annoying me. I should've known the scrunchie had fallen out, but I didn't because I forgot I put it in there. That's what you get for rarely putting your hair up.

But what do I do now? I can't fucking go back to get it. Should I just leave it and hope he won't notice?

There's no other option. I don't have a choice. I have to leave it there and go ...

I swallow away the lump in my throat while staring at the laptop in my hands.

One object exchanged for another. I guess that's the price to pay.

But at least I can add a mental picture of that fine ass to my collection because I sure as hell won't ever forget.



NATE

I GAZE out the window again, wondering if I just imagined that sound I heard a few minutes ago. I must've because I don't see anything. Maybe it was a bird or a squirrel. They make their way across the garage roof all the time.

Still, I can't help but feel unnerved, so I close the window and the curtains. The papers on my desk move a little from the last bit of fresh air breezing through. My words scatter across the desk, and my eyes zoom in on them. One of them is missing. The ones I wrote yesterday.

I march to my desk and sift through the papers, but it's not here.

Fuck, why is it not here?

Did I leave it at school? My locker? In the car? No, my bag.

I grab my bag and turn it upside down. Pens, paper, books, notebooks, phone. Nothing else. Where is it?

"Goddammit!" I shout out loud.

It has to be somewhere; it didn't just vanish.

I go to my knees and search my room, and I even peer under my bed. My eyes scan the surface until they stumble upon a strange object they don't recognize lying on the other end of the room just behind my bed. I get up and walk to it to pick it up. A scrunchie? What the hell is a scrunchie doing here? And why does it look so familiar?

"Nathan!" Dad's voice pulls me away from my thoughts, and I open the door, still clutching the scrunchie.

"Yeah?" I quickly snatch the papers on my desk and shove them into my drawer and lock it.

"Can you come down, please?" His tone is very matter-of-factly ... not at all like how he normally sounds.

"In a sec," I reply, hurrying to my closet to put on a shirt and a pair of pants and tuck the scrunchie in my pocket.

I shut the door behind me before rushing down the stairs, but I stop halfway. My dad's at the door, wearing a stern but concerned look on his face. He glances back and forth between me and the man standing on our porch.

A police officer.

“Nate, explain to me why this police officer is here to see you,” my dad says with a darkness in his voice that I’ve never heard before.

Dread sinks into my soul, and I swallow hard.

Time to face my sins.



SAM

I STARE at my phone and all the pictures I took of Nate’s room when I broke in there. It’s been a few days, and I’ve not heard a peep, so I guess he may not have noticed. Lucky me.

My laptop seemed untouched, so I don’t think he actually managed to get past the log-in screen. Goes to show just how important it is to have a proper password. Still, it feels nice to have it back in my possession again. I don’t want the likes of him snooping around my stuff. Now I just have to keep my windows locked at all times to make sure he doesn’t steal it back once he finds out I have it. And I’m sure he will ... someday.

And when that time comes, I’ll be ready for the fight.

I slam my locker shut and go to Monica, who’s still typing furiously on her cell phone.

“Who are you talking to?” I ask.

“Oh, Nadia. Says she had an officer question her today.”

“What? Why?” I ask, clutching my books.

“I don’t know. She says they started asking questions about Nina.”

Nina. The beach, the water. Nate’s deadly stare. Don’t forget, don’t speak, don’t even think about it.

“Something about her knowing what happened. The parents apparently asked for them to launch an investigation into her death.” Mo looks up at me. “They don’t think it’s suicide.”

My lungs feel constricted, so I cough. “Why would they think that?”

“Someone gave them a tip. A student,” she replies.

“What?” I mutter, frowning as I dig around in my own memories.

No one knew, no one saw what I saw ... did they? We were alone on the beach, and everyone else was at the house. No one could’ve seen unless they knew beforehand what was going to happen.

Goose bumps scatter all over my skin.

“Sam?” Mo places a hand on my shoulder. “Are you okay?”

“What? Yeah, I’m fine,” I say, shaking off the chills. “I’m just shook.”

“Tell me about it. They’re actually interrogating people here. Right now. As if we’re all suspects or something. Someone must’ve talked.”

“But she drowned, right?” I whisper. “Everybody knew.”

“Yeah, but now they’re saying she may have been drugged,” she whispers.

Suddenly, a door near the principal’s office opens and out walks a police officer ... and Layla Parker. I look up, expecting her to be in cuffs. Instead, there’s a proud smile on her face while she walks off, and the police officer goes in the other direction.

Oh, my God. Could it have been her? No, it couldn’t have. She would’ve been all over Nate if she were, and he was alone with Nina the entire time. I know because I was there.

I swallow away the lump in my throat. The police officer let her go, which means she didn’t do it. Maybe he wanted more information from her; after all, she used to hang out with Nina all the time. She was part of their clique.

Jenny approaches her and gives her a big hug as though she’s been through the worst. But the broad smile on her face tells me it’s not. It was a victory. Another way to smear another peer ... and get them charged with murder.

Murder. Murderer.

Nate.

Another horrible chill courses up and down my spine.

Layla wouldn’t implicate him, would she? She’s obsessed with him. She wants him more than anything, and she still thinks they’re together. She’d never sacrifice that opportunity to get him behind bars just to spite him. It’s not like her. It has to be someone else.

“Sam? Sam? Hello!” Mo’s waving at me right in my face. “Are you even there?”

“Yeah, sorry. I was just lost in thought.” I blink a couple of times to stay in the here and now instead of spending time in my memories and thoughts.

“You’ve been doing that a lot lately,” she says. “Are you sure you’re okay? You don’t look it. Maybe you should go to a doctor. You’ve been so off lately.”

“What do you mean?” I raise a brow. “I’m fine.”

“Really?” She follows me as I walk to my next class. “Because you don’t seem fine. Ever since that beach party and Nina ... you’ve been acting

weird.”

“I’m fine,” I say.

She suddenly grabs my arm and stops me in my tracks. “Sam.” The look on her face changes as though she’s fearful of something unspeakable. “Are you ... involved?”

“Involved?” I snort. “In what?”

Her eyes glance around before she leans in, and whispers, “Nina’s death.”

I look her dead in the eyes as my heart stops for a moment. “No.”

It’s the biggest lie I’ve ever told her.

But I lie for her own good. And mine.

Murderer.

That same descriptor now applies to me.

Lying by omission makes you look just as guilty.

But we don’t know the full story. Not me, not her, not anyone.

“Hey, have you seen Nate?” I ask Mo.

“What? No, why? Did he bully you again?” She frowns and punches her own hand. “I swear to God, if he did, I’ll take care of him myself. You watch me.”

I laugh and lower her hand. “You don’t have to do that for me.”

“But I will.”

“Stop,” I say, snorting. “Let’s just go to class.”

“What did he do this time?” She raises a brow.

“Nothing.” I sigh.

She pauses and goes to stand in front of me, blocking me from walking farther. “Sam. Spill. It.”

I don’t like this strict Monica, but I guess I had it coming for me. I groan out loud. “He stole my panties.”

“What?!” she yelps.

“*And* hung them on my locker.”

“*What?!*” Each what is louder than the one before.

Her face scrunches up, and she searches her bag for God knows what tool. “That’s it. I’m going to kill that motherfucker.”

I grab her hand and pull it out of her bag, forcing her to stop. “No. Just don’t.”

“That fucker deserves it,” she hisses. “He messes with my girl; he messes with me.”

She's always so protective of me, and I can appreciate that, but it's not helpful. Not this time. "No, please, just leave it. Okay? Please? For me?" I beg.

She cocks her head. "Sam ..."

"I don't want to make a scene. I don't want any of this. If we ignore it long enough, he'll stop."

"Do you think so, or are you just telling yourself that?" she mutters, folding her arms.

"I ..." I sigh again and rub my forehead. "Look, I don't want you involved in this."

She makes a face. "Me? Involved?" she scoffs. "Shit, it almost sounds like you want me gone."

"No, I don't mean it like that," I say, closing my eyes briefly. Goddammit, why do I have to be so bad with words? "I mean—"

"No, I get what you mean. You think I'm going to make a bigger scene than he did. That I'm going to embarrass you."

"I just want it all to disappear," I say.

"It won't when you don't do anything about it," she says. "You're always like this. You let people walk all over you because you're too busy staring off into the distance, fantasizing about your photos and your paintings."

That hurts. Big time. Like full, gut-wrenching heart pain. "You can't be serious." I shake my head and try to pass her. "I'm going to class."

"Sam ..." She tries to grab my arm, but I jerk free and leave anyway.

"Sam! I'm sorry."

Her calls fall on deaf ears while I push in my AirPods and disappear into that fantasy world she talks about. That world where I'm safe and alone, and no one can touch me.

Not even my own disappointment in myself.



I HAVEN'T SPOKEN to Mo for hours. My phone's dead anyway, and I don't feel like charging it. I might charge it later today, but for now, I'll enjoy the peace and quiet ... and the music blaring into my ears while I make these sandwiches.

My boss normally isn't okay with me listening to music, but I'm not behind the counter today, so he's permitted it just for today. He's a nice dude when he wants to be, and I can appreciate that. In fact, this is one of

the best part-time jobs I've had at my age. Not that I've had many, but the ones I can compare (newspaper girl, babysitter, pizza delivery girl) all made me quit within a few weeks.

But I've been working here since before the summer, and I kinda like it, especially when I'm not directly talking to customers like now. Just making BLTs, doing my thing, dancing while I squirt mayo onto the sandwich is the best thing in the world.

No. Not having to think ... *that's* the best thing in the world.

I work into the evening until the sky goes dark and the lights go out. I'm the one who cleans up at closing, and I'm okay with that. My boss pays me extra for the trouble. So when the last customer is gone, I grab the keys to lock the doors and make my way outside.

Right as I close up shop, a car pulls up right in front of the building. Sweat builds up underneath my outfit, but I try to ignore the fear growing in the pit of my stomach. It's dark, and I'm alone outside, a place and time any woman knows is dangerous. So I clench the keys in my hands and prepare to use them as my weapon.

To understand what I'm dealing with, I briefly turn my head. I need to know if they're here for me or for something else. The window rolls down, and a familiar face glares me down. I gulp. Nate ... and he's definitely, one hundred percent here for me.

Two words are all that is needed to make me shudder. "Get in."

CHAPTER 17



SAM

FOR A SECOND, I hesitate, but I know this guy. If I don't do what he says, he'll chase me down until I do. He won't fucking give up, so maybe it's time we had a proper one-on-one talk.

I rub my lips together and tuck the keys into my pocket. My curiosity to know the truth outweighs the dangers rustling my heart, so I approach the vehicle. Nate stares me down as though I'm an escaped convict ready to be cuffed and sent back to the bureau.

Not that he'd ever get a job at a police station with his track record.

Yeah, I'm thinking that. We both are.

He knows just as well as I do what happened last summer, and that's exactly why he's been stalking and bullying me all this time. Trying to push me to submit ... whether I want to or not.

I walk to the passenger's side and get in. It smells of booze and liquor, so I glance around. There's a bottle of Jack Daniels lying on the back seat, half empty. Has he been ... drinking?

He's wearing that signature hoodie of his again, the one he uses to hide from the world. But I notice him; I always have.

"Close the door." I've never heard him speak with that tone to anyone before ... as if he wants to murder and ravage me at the same time. And for some goddamn twisted reason, it turns me on a little.

"Not until you tell me what you're doing here," I reply.

I know it's ballsy, but he wants something from me too, and he knows I won't give it to him if he doesn't give me something back. And I want information.

He pushes a lock. All the doors close. I swallow away the lump in my throat.

The engine revs, and the car drives off. God only knows where we're going.

Damn, how did I get pulled into this mess? I only wanted to be alone at the beach and take some pictures of the sea and the surrounding area. I didn't mean to be a witness to a murder.

Because that's what this is all about. That's why he wants those pictures ... so he can erase them and pretend they never existed. So he can feign his innocence.

But it's too late now. The police are already on his trail, and he's lost all credibility.

"Was it you?" he asks, during the drive.

"What?" I mutter.

"The police!" he shouts, making me jolt up and down in my seat.

I shake my head. "No."

"Bullshit," he hisses, and he keeps driving faster and faster.

"Where are we going?" I ask.

He refuses to answer. All he does is grind his teeth and bite his lip with the occasional grunt slipping out. I can almost feel the burn all the way from here. This is dangerous. I can't believe I actually went with this, that I willingly climbed into his car. I should've made a scene, should've called for help. At least then I wouldn't be sitting next to the world's worst bad boy.

But that's exactly the point ... the reason he's doing this; to scare me. Another tactic to persuade me to give him what he wants. As if those pictures are of any use to him now that the police are on this case. They'll find out sooner or later that it was him.

"You talked to them, didn't you?" he growls.

"I didn't," I say.

He slams his steering wheel. "Don't lie to me!"

"I'm not," I say, trying to remain calm.

He blows off steam and drives even harder.

After a few minutes pass, we're up on a hill overlooking the city. There, he parks the car inches away from a cliff. His face turns to me, eyes like those of a fierce lion ready to pounce on its prey and eat it alive.

"You'd better be telling me the truth," he says.

"Oh, like you are?" I raise a brow.

"Don't mess with me," he says. Suddenly, he pulls out a knife.

My pupils dilate, and I raise my hands. "I swear. I didn't."

His nostrils flare. "Then who did?"

"I ... I ..." I gulp. "I don't know."

He takes in a deep breath and slams the steering wheel again. "Bullshit!"

I've never seen him this volatile before, this upset. It's as if he's ready to burst out into violent screaming and crying all at the same time. His head lowers, and he takes a couple of deep breaths. The knife remains firmly clenched between his fingers as they rest on the steering wheel, and I briefly contemplate stealing it from him. But that would probably put me in more danger than I wanna be.

"The police were at my door today," he grumbles, sweat dripping down his forehead. "Asked me about the party ... Nina. Everything."

So they finally caught on to his scheme. Who could've told them? Did anyone else see?

Because if that's the case, they would've also seen *me*.

I gulp in some air. "Did you tell them about me?"

"No," he says, glaring at the blade.

Then he tucks it away in his pocket and grabs the bottle of liquor instead. He unscrews the lid, swallowing down several gulps. When he keeps going, I snatch the bottle from his hand.

"Hey!" he spits.

"You're not fucking drinking and driving," I say. "Not on my watch."

He tries to snatch it from my hand, but I quickly roll down the window and chuck the bottle out. It shatters on impact.

"Fine," he growls. "You're even worse than Layla."

I snort. "Thanks. I'll consider that a compliment."

He cocks his head, and says, "Why did you get into my car?"

"Because you asked so nicely?" I raise a brow.

He snorts and shakes his head while fishing something from his pocket. "Because I'm dangerous." There it is again, the knife. Always looming in

the background. "And I'm really going to need those pictures now."

The knife flickers as he points it in my direction. I swallow away the lump in my throat. "What are you going to do if I don't? Cut me?"

"Don't ask questions you don't want the answer to," he replies with a dark voice.

"I don't have them on me," I say.

"Your phone. I know you keep them in there," he says.

I shake my head.

"Lie," he says.

"They're in a secure cloud," I say. It's the first truth I've given him. "What happened to you, Nate Wilson? You're threatening to hurt me with a goddamn knife."

His nostrils flare. "People change."

"No, they don't. Not like this. People look up to you. You're everyone's idol, and you're acting like a fucking idiot who actually *wants* to go to jail." I know I'm stepping on dangerous ground here, but I need to get through to him.

"Don't call me a fucking idiot," he says through gritted teeth.

"Why? Does it hurt? Well, so does being bullied by the school's biggest athlete," I reply.

"Bully? You think I'm bullying you?" He narrows his eyes as though he's actually interested in the reasoning behind my words.

"You stole my laptop, ridiculed me in front of other classmates, threw me in a pool, and hung my panties on my locker. That's bullying to me."

He licks his bottom lip and sucks in a breath. "A bully ..." He shakes his head and leans away for a second, allowing me to breathe just a bit more. "The school's biggest athlete everyone looks up to," he repeats. "Yeah, well, this star athlete isn't someone anyone should aspire to be. Ever."

"I know," I reply.

His face crumples as though he's been sliced by his own knife, wounded by the words he knows are true.

"I'm dangerous," he murmurs, gazing up into my eyes with beauty and pain all mixed into one still-life painting. But this boy is no canvas, and I'm not the painter. He made his own decisions but led us both into disaster.

"You were right. You should fear me," he adds, the knife still in his hands, still the central focus of this conversation. "I'm a bad motherfucker."

I don't respond. I don't know what he wants me to say.

"I suppose you're glad you at least got your laptop back," he muses.

"I'm surprised you noticed," I retort.

"I found a suspicious item lying on my floor." He fishes something out of his pants. My scrunchie. "Yours?"

I snatch it from his hand and tuck it into my pocket. I won't answer his question because that'd be admitting to a crime, and I'm not fucking doing any of that.

"I guess I had it coming," he muses, casually toying with the knife, flicking it back and forth in his hand.

"It was *my* laptop. How dare you come into my room and steal it?" I say.

A devilish smile forms on his lips. "How dare you come into *my* room and steal it back?" He leans in. "I know you were there. I heard you on my roof. I didn't know what it was at first, but when I found that scrunchie, I knew." He grabs a strand of my hair and tucks it behind my ear. Goose bumps scatter on my skin. "It was you ... watching me after I came out of the shower."

The memory of his tight ass reappears in my mind.

No, don't fucking think about it, Sam.

He leans in even farther, the knife still dangling from his fingers like an omnipresent threat. "Did you like seeing me naked?" he whispers in my ear, setting my body on fire.

I'm conflicted by the emotions clashing in my heart.

My inability to answer makes him laugh, and he leans away again.

"Don't laugh," I say.

He rolls his eyes. "Oh, I'm not. I'm just amused."

"It's not funny. None of this is," I reply.

He looks up. "I know."

Now I'm even more confused.

The pointy end of the knife is right against his index finger as he spins around the knife. "Tell me what you know. What you saw at the beach."

"I ..." Can I really talk about that without being in danger?

"Go on ..."

"Not until you put away that knife," I say.

"Oh, this?" he muses, looking at it. "You think I'll hurt you?"

I lick my bottom lip. At this point, I don't know anymore. He's flip-flopping around so much that it's giving me whiplash.

"My life is on the line. You know that, right?" he says.

"That doesn't justify murder." I swallow.

"Murder?" He narrows his eyes, nodding a couple of times. "Is that what you think I did?"

I frown, rubbing my lips together. "I don't know."

"That's right. You don't know. You don't know the full story," he responds.

"Tell me the full story then," I say.

He looks at me like I just spoke literal sin.

"I wish I could." He shakes his head and looks down at his hands, the knife resting there as if he's about to drop it.

"I won't tell a soul, I promise," I say, inching down so I can look him in the eyes.

Even though he's been an asshole to me just so he could get his hands on the pictures I took, I don't think he wants to be like this. And though I don't know why, it hurts to see him this way.

"If you say you're innocent, I'll believe you," I add, cocking my head too.

He looks up at me, the desperation settling in his eyes.

But then he lunges toward me, grabs my face, and presses his lips to mine.

The knife drops to the floorboard.

I'm stunned, completely frozen in my seat as his lips consume mine. His kiss is hard, rugged, unfathomable to my heart, which practically beats out of my chest. Time feels like it doesn't exist anymore. My mind is numb from the way his lips connect with mine. When they briefly pull back, I suck in a breath. Another kiss follows, but my brain can't process this information, so I shove him away.

Seconds feel like minutes in the awkward silence that ensues. My lips are red and swollen and so are his, but there is a hunger in his eyes that's almost irresistible ... and scary.

What the hell just happened?

I don't know what to think or what to say, but when his lips part, I immediately press the unlock button of the car and rush out. I run off

without thinking, without even knowing where I'm going. All I know is that I need to get away from ... *that*.

Temptation.

Filthy kisses under the night sky.

And a bad boy whose dangerous gaze would make any girl's heart crumble.

I can't fall in love with *him*.

Anyone but *him*.

CHAPTER 18



NATE

I DON'T KNOW what I was doing or what I was even thinking when I kissed Sam.

No, scratch that, I wasn't thinking at all.

Clearly. Otherwise, I would've never done it.

But I just can't resist her. I can't get enough of that face, that smile, those eyes, and those goddamn delicious lips. I want it all. But she's *that* girl. The girl who knows all my secrets and could ruin me with one click of her finger.

And maybe she already did.

Who knows, she could've been lying about not going to the police. Maybe it was her all along, and she's just playing me to get away with it. How would I know? No one would ever try to tell me the truth; not when they know the police are looking into me.

I'm the suspect, the boy who did all the bad things.

No one knows shit. They all think they do.

I shake my head and finish my cigarette before getting out of the car. Dad must be worried by now. I've been avoiding home for a long time, but I can't stay away forever.

Man, I should've gone after Sam. Maybe I could've gotten some answers, something ... anything would've been helpful. Now I'm left in the dark with nowhere else to turn except my dad.

I close my door and throw the cigarette on the ground before I go inside the house. It's dark and quiet except for the light in the kitchen. I go there not because I want to but because I know he's waiting for me.

But my eyes still widen when I go in. Not because of my dad, but because there's someone else, a guy in a suit, sitting on a chair with a giant briefcase in front of him.

"Son?" Dad scoots back a chair. "Sit down."

"Who's that?" I ask.

The man closes his briefcase and places a whole stack of papers on the table while my dad never takes his eyes off me.

"My name is Todd Cook. I'm your lawyer."

Cook?

As in Sam Cook's dad?

A lawyer?

I hesitate for a moment. Maybe I should run back out again, take the car, and flee.

Would it save me from this possible doom?

No, it would only make it worse.

I swallow down my fears and sit down in front of the lawyer. I stare him down with all I've got to give.

"To begin with, tell me everything you know," he says.

I look up at my dad who's right behind me, and he clutches my shoulders, and says, "Tell the truth, son. He's here to help you."

I curl my fingers together and glare at the guy again.

"I didn't do anything," I say.

The guy frowns, then snorts. "That's what they all say. But please, do tell. I can only help you if you're truthful with me."

My dad's fingers bury in my shoulder. "Nate ... please don't disappoint your mother any further."

It's not the lawyer's words that hurt me; it's my dad's.

Mom ... I've disappointed her so many times now, I've lost track. Drinking before eighteen, driving while intoxicated, bullying a girl I like just to get her to do what I want, failing my grades and my future career ... and watching an innocent girl die.

It's all part of my resume now, and no matter how hard I try to scrape off the stain on my soul, it only becomes bigger and bigger until it's one gaping hole. An abyss I'm staring into with eyes wide open.

And now, more than ever, do I wish she was here to pull me back out again.



SAM

WEEKS ago

THE LAST DAY of summer is always the hardest, but none have been as cold or harsh as this one. I stare at the casket as it's being lowered into the hole. Friends and family are hiding their tears behind tissues and sunglasses while the rest of us look on in sorrow.

Grief is a strange emotion to witness as an outsider. I never know whether to offer a hug or stay away and let them be. These tears don't stop. Even when we manage to quit crying, our soul continues to weep. Grief is all-consuming and all-encompassing, always pointing a dagger near the heart.

Grief is everywhere, but it's hidden all the same. People never talk about it, never speak another word about the pain they feel watching a girl my age being buried underneath mounds of sand.

A bright girl with a promising future cut away from life as though she never existed. But the fear, doubt, and heartache remain in those left behind. And it's hard to look at them. To watch them throw pink poppies all over the grave to signal the end of her journey.

These flowers will shrivel up and blacken until there's nothing left but mush.

Just like her ... just like me, one day.

I shiver at the thought.

Death is such an indescribable thing. An intangible threat looming over us every second of our waking life. Control is an illusion. All we can do is hope life won't end too soon.

Unlike Nina's.

This funeral, my very first, is one I won't forget anytime soon.

Because when I turn my head, there is one other person who can't look at the pile of sand hiding a body. Nate Wilson. And his eyes, filled with inner turmoil, don't let go of mine.

And I know then and there that he won't ever let this go.



Now

I WAKE up covered in sweat. The whole bed is soaked. Damn.

I get up and take my temperature, but everything seems fine. Must've been a nightmare.

"Oh, Sam, have you got any laundry—Wow, you're soaking wet!" she says, immediately barging into my room even though I'm dressed in only a teeny tiny shirt and underwear.

"Mom, I can do that myself," I say as she takes off my bedding and sheets and stuffs it into her basket.

"Are you feeling okay?" she asks, placing her hand over my forehead.

"Yes," I reply, leaning away. "I feel fine, Mom."

"Well, you've been acting so strange lately."

I raise a brow. "Me? Strange?" I take in a breath. I know where this is going, and I don't like it one bit. "If you wanna talk about your boyfriend again, I'm not interested."

I walk into the bathroom and lock the door behind me before she has a chance to berate me again.

"Sam, we need to talk about this," she says.

Oh God, not this again. I thought I had made my point clear after the last time I ran from the house, but I guess not. "No, we don't need to talk. He needs to leave our house."

"Sam, you can't just ask me that," she says.

"Yeah, I can. I'm your daughter." I start brushing my teeth, hoping the noise will drown her out because I really don't want to think about the situation between me, my mom, and her boy toy right now. I don't have time for this. I need to get to school.

"And he's my new ... lover."

I almost choke on my toothpaste.

"Mom!" I shout.

That's the last word I thought I'd ever hear coming from her mouth.

She sighs. "Look, I want what's best for all of us."

"You mean for you." I spit into the sink. "None of this is good for me."

"Well, it could be."

I make a face at myself in the mirror. "How? In case you forgot, he's my archenemy's dad."

"Archenemy?" Mom laughs. "Really, Sam?"

“Yes, really. She’s a bitch.”

“Sam ...”

“She is. You don’t know her, Mom.”

“Who, Layla? She was always such a nice girl back when—”

“No, she wasn’t. She’s always been a bitch.” Mom thinks she knows her from way back when we were still young. But things change ... Layla’s changed. “She just knew how to hide it before, and now she doesn’t care.” I wish she would just stop talking right about now, but I know this’ll end in another fight just as usual.

“I think she does. You two just need to find a new common ground.”

Common ground? *Gag*. “Trust me, Mom, the only thing we’ve got in common is our hate for each other.”

“Hate? Well, that’s a harsh thing to say.”

“Life’s harsh, Mom. You of all people should know that.”

I pause and look at myself in the mirror. It’s quiet, too quiet, and I know why.

Opening the door, I find my mom standing there with tears in her eyes. Shit.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean—”

Mom raises her hand. Then she turns around and walks downstairs, leaving me be ... complete with the misery I caused because I couldn’t keep my shit comments to myself. Fuck.

I slam the door shut behind me and shove my disappointment on a neat little shelf in my brain and pretend it doesn’t exist as I put on my clothes and get ready. I run downstairs and grab a banana. When I turn around and head toward the door, I hear their voices coming from upstairs. Mom and Randy are in the bedroom arguing.

“What do you want me to do about it?” the guy says.

“Well, maybe you could talk to her. Ask her to be nice to Sam.”

“You don’t know my daughter if you think that’s gonna work.”

“You could at least try,” Mom says.

“No. I’m not getting in the middle of this. It’s not my problem those two fight.”

I can’t see them, but I can tell he’s as stubborn as always, probably throwing his hands up in the air too.

“She’s *my* daughter. You should care about this.”

“Look ...” He sighs. “I’m just here for you.”

“No, don’t touch me,” she says. “Not now.”

“C’mon, let’s not talk about this.”

“We need to talk about this. You know my daughter’s not in a good place right now with her father—”

“Can we not talk about that schmuck? He left you for a reason.”

I can’t believe they’re talking about my dad.

“Excuse me?!” Mom shouts.

“I mean, he cheated on you and then ran off! Who cares what he thinks?”

“This isn’t about you! Or him! But he’s still her father, and she’s still his daughter, and that whole situation is already difficult enough as is,” Mom says. “And you’re not helping out here.”

“So what are you saying? You think I’m a burden? Is that it?”

God, I hate him, always playing the victim role.

“No, that’s not what I’m saying, but you could be ... you know ... a little more helpful. More involved.”

“Eh ...” Something squeaks, so I hide behind the stairs and pretend to be eating a banana. “I’m not sure I want to be,” Randy says.

Ouch. That’s got to hurt.

“I think we should have this conversation another time,” he adds.

After a few more seconds, the guy comes pounding down the stairs. He doesn’t look at me, doesn’t even acknowledge I exist even though I’m sure he noticed me standing here since he went into the kitchen to grab his briefcase and turned around to walk toward me. But he keeps going right past me straight for the door. No matter. The devilish smile is still cemented on my face. Thank fuck that asshole is gone. Let’s hope it stays that way.

I grab my coat and put it on.

“Sam.”

I spin on my heels. Mom’s standing at the top of the stairs with tears in her eyes. The vicious glee growing in my heart pops like a bubble. I’m gutted.

“Sam ... I ...” She walks down the stairs, a little unsteady on her feet. She’s trying to keep it together but falling apart all at the same time. And I catch her at the bottom as she wraps her arms around me.

Sometimes, it’s the mother that needs the consoling instead.

“I’m sorry,” I mutter.

She wipes her face. “It’s okay.”

“No, it’s not okay. What I said was wrong,” I say, swallowing away the impending tears. “I hurt you.”

“No, you spoke the truth,” she says. “It just took me a while to realize it.” She leans away and smiles a fake smile just to make me believe she’s okay. “I’m fine.”

“Are you sure?” I ask, raising a brow.

“No,” she adds, and she licks her lips. “But I’ll be fine. I’ve always been fine. I get through it. As we all do.”

I nod. “You’re a fighter, Mom.”

“Just like you,” she says, and she plants a kiss on my forehead. “So kick some ass today.” She leans back, grabs my shoulders, and stares into my eyes. “And if she’s such a bitch, you give that girl hell.”

I smirk. “Oh, I will.”

CHAPTER 19



NATE

AT SCHOOL, everyone looks at me as though I'm a criminal. A convict. A monster.

Maybe they're right, and maybe I am. But it still stings.

I feel ostracized ever since I had that conversation with the police and my lawyer. My friends don't talk to me anymore, and my teammates give me the cold shoulder.

Even though I didn't tell anyone what happened at the beach last summer, everybody seems to know. Gossip always travels like wildfire, but I never thought I'd be the subject.

I wonder who told them, and what everyone knows. If they think she died by drowning, or if they think I murdered the girl.

No one knows. They just think they know.

I walk through the hallways, trying to ignore the people whispering behind my back. It's as if it's everywhere around me, and the noise just won't quit.

No one understands what I did. What I *had* to do.

And in the end, it was all for nothing.

My scholarship is probably not happening anymore.

My dad's disappointed, and my mom ... I can't face the shame.

Only one thing can fix all of this—Sam Cook and her photos—but she won't give them to me without a fight.

I pass her painting class again, and lo and behold, there she is. I pause. Of course she'd be here. Where else would she be? Painting ... photography ... she has a thing for creativity. And I have to admit, she does it well.

Watching her paint is like hearing someone sing. Her movements are fluid and erratic, poignant and violent. Beautiful in its chaotic nature. The longer I stare, the more words come to mind—so many I could even write a song about it.

Fuck, she could be my muse.

I smile to myself.

Lyrics are just that ... lyrics. They're not the road to a scholarship, to my dad's pride, to my reputation. Sam is. She's the one who holds my freedom.

I go inside and take a closer look. Not only the way she paints is beautiful ... she is too. Even though I've told myself again and again not to feel when I'm around her, it overwhelms me, consumes me. Greed and lust rise to the surface when I watch her flick the paint onto the canvas, and it makes me wish I could flick my tongue against her body in the same way.

Shit. I'm fucking messed up. Everyone knows.

Even Sam ...

I wish she hadn't seen what she saw, that I could take the memory away and keep it all to myself, but no one can change history. All I can do is make sure the future isn't ruined as well.

I approach her and peek over her shoulder at the painting. There's a man pictured with a poppy in his hands while he stands beside a hole in the ground. I know that man. I know him better than anyone else.

But she sees me in a way that no one else can, and it makes me choke up.

She adds another stroke of paint, and I lick my lips, thinking about that moment when we stood by Nina's grave. It was the first moment I couldn't keep my eyes off Sam. I haven't been able to look away since.

"Like what you see?" she murmurs.

A smirk forms on my lips. Of course she'd know I was here. She always notices. Just like I notice her wherever she goes. The air crackles with electricity whenever we meet, as it does now.

I place my hand on her hip, and lean in to whisper, "Very."



SAM

HIS TOUCH BURNS MY SIDE, and a need I've never felt before combusts in my core. I can feel his shallow breaths against my ear, his whispering resounding over and over again. I can't let go, can't let him do this. He's not here for me. I have to remember he only wants the pictures.

"Thanks," I say. "It's one of my favorite paintings. But I know you're not here for that."

"I wasn't talking about the painting." His guttural voice sets my senses on fire.

Fuck.

Shoot me straight in the heart, why don't you?

Why do I have to feel this way when I'm around him, like some little girl fawning over her idol? It's wrong.

"Don't play with me, Nate Wilson," I reply.

His fingers slide a few strands of my hair aside, and his lips graze my neck ever so slightly as if he's contemplating but then hesitating at the very last moment, waiting for me.

"I don't wanna play. Playing means staying nice, and I don't wanna be nice," he whispers, planting a soft, delectable kiss on my shoulder.

I shiver with delight. I shouldn't, but fuck, I can't control my body.

"I know you're not nice. You've already shown that to me many times," I say, trying to maintain my composure, but it's damn hard when his lips are drawing a line on my neck.

"You're right. I am bad for you," he says, and I can feel him grin against my skin. "Imagine how much worse I could be."

Fuck. I have to stop this before it goes too far. Before we end up like last time when he threatened me with that knife in his car ... and then kissed me.

He's a sinner, a cruel boy, someone no one should ever want, yet everyone craves, including me.

My fingers curl around the wooden brush so tight that it almost snaps. I spin on my heels and paint his face again.

He looks up, the look on his face a mixture of surprise and amusement. And fuck me if that doesn't make him look even hotter. A dirty smile forms on his lips. Why did I do this? He actually thinks it's funny. Fuck him.

“Ooh, threatening me now?” he muses. “You did that before, Sammie-Sam. It’s not gonna work a second time. It’s not a knife. You’re not gonna hurt anyone with a brush.”

“Fuck you,” I growl, and I try to paint him again, but this time, he grabs my wrist tight and holds it in the air. I struggle to free myself, but he’s much stronger than I am. Instead of fighting me, he takes a step closer into my space, up until the point that he could grab me and kiss me or push me up against the painting, break it into pieces, and fuck me on top of it.

Shit.

Don’t you fucking dare have these thoughts, Sam.

“What are you gonna do? Knife me? Try it. I dare you,” I growl.

I don’t know where I get this sudden bout of dumb courage and rage from, but it’s invaded deep in my soul, and it needs to be let out.

“You think I wanna hurt you?” he muses, and he grabs my chin with his free hand. “That I’d actually be capable of that?”

My lips part, but I don’t know what to say to that. It’s a possibility that it was all a farce, an unfounded threat, but it felt real to me. And that’s exactly what he wanted; fear. But I didn’t cave. I didn’t give him what he wanted, and now he’s here for round two.

So I reach for the bucket of red paint standing on the stool and chuck it right at him.

He releases my wrist and looks down at the pool of paint and his completely drenched, now red shirt. Some spats landed on my floral top too, but that’s a cost I can live with to see that look on his face right now.

He deserves it.

He wipes some of the paint off his face, but it only smears more. The marks left are none as big as the splash on his shirt, and his eyes follow the trail all the way down.

I was expecting full, unbridled anger.

I was not expecting him to lick his lips while his hands move toward the buttons. Instead of scolding me, he starts unbuttoning his shirt, one by one, all the way down to his V-line, which appears behind the stained shirt. He pulls it off slowly as though to torture me just a little bit more. The paint-covered shirt drops to the floor, leaving his naked, trained abs on full display.

I gulp and lean back against the painting as if it’ll provide more stability to my shaky legs. My eyes try desperately not to look at his naked torso, but

he makes it so hard when every move he makes ripples through his shredded muscles. It's like watching a painting come to life.

Him ... he's my muse. It's always been him, from the day I first saw him until now. He's my painting come to life ... the troubled bad boy always looking for a fight. The boy who sets my soul on fire with a simple, scorching touch. And when the tip of his fingers brush along my cheeks, I melt into a puddle of paint myself.

The paint smudges on his face don't stop him from getting closer. A whole bucket of paint didn't even stop him from advancing. And when his face is mere inches away from mine, hot-headed breathing from both sides, my brush drops from my hand ... and I let him kiss me.

CHAPTER 20



NATE

AT FIRST, I hesitate, gently placing my lips on hers to test the waters and see if she'll let me. She doesn't protest, doesn't fight me anymore. Paint may have been her weapon, but red smudges all over my body and clothes won't stop me from wanting to get close. *Nothing* will ever stop me from wanting to kiss her. So I do. I kiss her like a lover would when he sneaks into her bedroom to whisk her away. That could've been me ... if only our circumstances had been different.

But I still claim her mouth like I own it because I want to. Right now, I don't care about what should and shouldn't happen. Fuck wrong or right. I want what I want, and I want it right fucking now.

My mouth latches onto hers, unable to stop. Even though I know I'm here with a purpose, my brain goes haywire the moment our lips touch. Her brain mesmerizes me to the point that it drives me insane. I don't want her because she's pretty or because she's the most popular girl; I want her because she hates me. Because she makes my blood boil and my heart beat fast all at the same time ... because she's perfectly imperfect.

The longer I kiss her, the more delirious I get. My hands clutch her face, slide down her neck, and graze over her perky tits. Greed fills my veins with lust. I want more. I want everything.

My hand flicks open a button on her top and slides inside to cup her breast. A soft moan emanating from her mouth makes me rock hard and ready to go.

Fuck.

I want to rip the clothes off her body and set her down on my cock. I want to fuck her against the painting and mess it up until it's covered with unbridled passion. I want to do so many things to her, but we don't have time.

Our lives weren't meant to entwine.

Not like this.

Not with this dangerous secret we both harbor, one that could ruin us both.

I have to know the truth.

So I lean in to her just so I can slide my hand into her pocket and steal her phone. She doesn't seem to notice as it slips out of her pocket and into mine. But then her eyes widen, and she leans back. I'm expecting a slap. A yell. Anything.

Instead, her pupils dilate as she stares at something over the edge of my shoulder.

I turn my head, and my jaw drops. "Layla?"



SAM

I THOUGHT he'd closed the door behind me, but maybe he forgot. Well, fuck.

"NATE!" she screeches. "*Her?* You kissed *her?*" She marches into the room, glaring at me as if I'm the devil incarnate. "Get your filthy hands off him." She stomps toward Nate, shoves him aside, and goes straight for me. "This is all because of you."

Before I know it, she's grabbed me by my top and throws me against my painting, cracking the canvas from my weight. Adrenaline and rage mix as I glance over my shoulder at my beautiful creation, now soiled and destroyed. All because of *her*.

"You bitch," I growl, and I lunge at her.

I punch her in the gut and grab her hair to pull her down a notch. I've never wanted to do anything worse than this, but she pulled it out of me like blood underneath my nails. She'll feel the pain now.

"You ruined my painting!" I yell.

She scratches me in the face and kicks me in the shins with her Louboutins. "You ruined my perfect relationship!"

“Excuse me?” Nate says.

“Stay out of this!” we both say.

Nate makes a face, raising his hands as Layla and I go head to head. She’s had it coming, and I don’t intend to hold back. Hours of my time I can never get back wasted on that painting. I don’t fucking care anymore. All gloves are off.

“Fuck you,” I growl at Layla, and she slaps me in the face so hard that it burns.

I hit her back, and she hits me back, and we go on and on until we’re both grabbing each other by the hair and pushing each other to our knees.

“No, fuck you! You stole my fucking boyfriend,” Layla hisses.

“He’s not your boyfriend anymore, bitch!” I yell back. “And I didn’t fucking steal anything.”

“He’s not fucking yours either,” she spits back.

“Good, I don’t want him!” I growl. Everyone’s watching us from the hallway, but I don’t care, and neither does she, it seems.

“You *kissed* him!”

“No, I fucking didn’t,” I reply. “*He* did!”

She gazes at Nate who’s like “not me” with his gestures.

Then she returns her attention toward me. “You’re just like your goddamn mother, stealing boys who don’t fucking belong to you.”

Now she’s gone and done it. I punch her right in the cunt.

She rolls around over the floor in sheer agony while I’m on my knees panting from all the fighting.

“What’s going on in here?”

Someone enters the room. A teacher. No, scratch that ... the fucking principal.

“Oh my ... Stop!” the guy yells, marching toward us. He picks me up from the floor and drags me away from Layla. “What the hell is going on here?”

“She started it,” I say. It’s the goddamn truth.

“You hit me!” Layla hisses as she crawls up but she slips on her high-heeled Louboutins and falls to the floor again.

Nate tries to offer her a hand, but she swats him away. “I don’t need your help. Get off me.”

He lets go of her, and when she drops to the floor again, I can’t help but snigger.

“Stop that,” the principal says.

“Sorry,” I mutter.

Not sorry.

“What is wrong with you both? Fighting on school grounds? This is no way to behave,” the guy says, grimacing at the sight of Layla’s bruises as she finally manages to get up and stay up. Then he gazes at Nate. “And what are you doing? Letting these girls fight over you? You know better than to involve yourself with this, Nate. Shame on you.”

Nate clears his throat. “Sorry. I should’ve intervened.”

“Yes, you should’ve,” the principal says. “This school’s got enough to deal with without you three making a scene.”

“She hit me first,” I say, shrugging. “I didn’t do shit.”

“You little bitch,” Layla says, almost ready to attack me again, but the principal pulls me away.

“No. This ends now.” His fingers dig into my shoulder as he pulls me along. “You two,” he says, turning around only to point at Nate and Layla, who seem completely befuddled. “Detention. Now.”

“What?” Layla exclaims, making an o-shape with her mouth as though she’s surprised.

“You heard me,” the principal says, eyeballing her. “Go.”

She rolls her eyes but then leaves the classroom without protest.

“Layla, oh my God, I was so worried about you,” Jenny says, who’s apparently also part of the crowd watching us.

Layla raises her hand. “I don’t wanna hear it.”

Yikes. Guess that friendship has also gotten cold as ice.

Nate goes straight for the door, but the principal stops him before he gets there. “Put on a shirt, for heaven’s sake.”

I peer over his shoulder at all the girls chuckling and grinning to themselves as they watch Nate pick up his shirt from the floor and put it on. I can’t blame them. His abs are a distraction to literally everyone around him, including me.

Nate passes us but still glances at me over his shoulder before he goes into the detention classroom. Suddenly, the principal drags me into that same class and pushes me inside.

“Sit down and wait. Someone will be here in a minute to talk with you all.”

Well, that’s just ... great.

CHAPTER 21



NATE

THREE PEOPLE in a classroom have never sat this far away from each other. I can guarantee it.

Sam in the left corner, Layla in the right corner, and me in the middle at the far end of the classroom. No way am I going to sit between those two. Coming close means risking my own head getting bitten off. I'm not gonna risk it. Those two can fight out their problems on their own.

Layla sighs out loud. "This is taking too long." When no one says a word, she continues, "Nate, can't you just come sit next to me so we can talk?"

"No way," I reply, folding my arms.

"Why not?"

Her voice makes me cringe. "I don't wanna talk. And especially not to you."

She grimaces, and Sam snorts, which only makes her grimace harder.

"Fuck you," Layla hisses under her breath.

Sam sticks up her middle finger. "Right back at you."

"And that's why I'm sitting all the way back here," I say, letting out a breath.

"You're scared of two girls?" Layla says, adding a tsk sound. "Boring."

"Comments like those are why I quit hanging out with you," I say.

"What?" she utters as though it's the first time she's heard me say I'm no longer interested. It's the goddamn truth, and it's about time she faced it.

“You’re always acting like a bitch,” I say.

Her eyes widen, and her jaw drops, while Sam is actually sniggering.

“Shut up,” Layla says, and she throws one of her pens at Sam.

“You deserve it,” Sam says.

“No, you do. You both deserve each other,” she says, making a face at me and Sam.

“You could’ve been nicer, but you chose not to,” I say.

“You started it!” she says, turning around in her seat so she can look at me. “You were taunting her. You started making fun of her with Daryl and Robby. You even threw her in the pool,” she exclaims, crossing her arms. “You’re no better than me.”

I swallow. I don’t like confrontation, especially not when it’s about all the things I did to Sam. I did them for a reason, but I can’t ever tell Layla that. I’m already a suspect in Nina’s death. I don’t want to become a literal criminal. I’m sure Layla would go straight to the cops if she knew the truth. She’d grab a chance to hurt me back with both hands if she could.

“What I do has nothing to do with you. You made your own choice,” I say, tapping my pen on the table.

“You hate her. We both do,” she says through gritted teeth. “Why would you even want to hang out with her, let alone kiss her?”

“Because I’m cute, and you’re not?” Sam interjects, and I snort a little.

“Don’t. You’re not cute. You’re a freak. He’s only with you because he pities you,” she spits.

Sam cocks her head and looks at me with a raised brow. “I don’t know, Nate. Why *were* you kissing me?”

I can feel the heat coming off both of them from all the way over here.

“I don’t know. Maybe I like easy girls,” I say, raising a brow back.

Her pupils dilate, and now Layla laughs. “Slut.”

“Or maybe ...” I add, glancing at them both. “I do what I want when I want for no goddamn reason.”

Layla’s smile dissipates, and Sam rolls her eyes. Layla reaches into her purse and fishes out a mirror and some powder, and she starts touching up all her bruises and hissing along with them as if they’re painful, then patting on some powder to cover them up.

“Make sure you cover them up real good,” I mutter. “No one wants to see you with flaws.”

“Oh, shut up,” she says, making me grin. I know I’m a pest, but I can’t help it. Women make me insane.

“Sorry, Lay-Lay. I’m sure you’ll forgive me, right?” I say.

She shuts her mirror and groans. “Ugh, you’re such a goddamn womanizer.”

“Tell me about it,” Sam says.

“No one asked you shit, twerp,” Layla spits.

“Well, no one asked you to barge in on us either,” Sam retorts.

“I wouldn’t have had to if the door was actually closed and you two weren’t making out in front of the entire school.” Layla clutches her table as though she’s holding herself back. “You’re just as bad as your mom.”

Sam grabs a pencil and threatens Layla with it as though it’s a knife. “Take that back, or I swear to God—”

Suddenly, the door opens and in steps the principal. “Or you’ll what?”

Sam lowers her hand and sits back down again. “Nothing.”

“Exactly.” The principal holds the door open farther, and our school counselor steps in. “Mrs. Jones will have a talk with you now.”

“Oh God,” Layla mumbles, sighing out loud.

I just lay low in the hopes I won’t get too much punishment. I’ve already got enough on my plate as it is.

The principal throws a wet towel onto my desk. “Clean yourself up, boy.” Then he looks over at Sam and Layla for a second before clearing his throat. “I’ll leave you to it.”

He closes the door behind him. Too much of a pussy to deal with a girl fight. I don’t blame him, though, because no one would want to throw themselves between this. *No one*. But I don’t have a fucking choice in the matter; I’m the object of their affection and the reason behind their straight-out brawl.

The counselor walks in front of the desk and leans back against it. “So ... anything you three wanna tell me?”

Everyone looks at each other, but no one opens their mouth. Good.

“No? Because you don’t wanna know the amount of damage control I had to do to keep you all at this school.”

“What?” Layla gasps.

“Yes,” the counselor says. “That’s what you get for fighting in front of the entire school.”

“The entire school?” Layla mutters. “We didn’t—”

“Shhh!” The counselor places a finger against her lips. “I don’t wanna hear it. No excuses. Now, whatever it is you thought you had to punch each other for ... it wasn’t worth it. And you of all people should know that, Miss Parker.”

Layla folds her arms and leans back in her chair.

“You two aren’t off the hook either,” the counselor says, crushing all my hopes. “Detention the rest of the week, every day after your classes.”

“What?” we both say.

“Zip it. I don’t wanna hear it unless it’s an explanation for why this took place.” She cocks her head, gazing at each one of us as though we might talk if she stares long enough.

But I know these two better than anyone else. They’re not gonna spill. I know what pride feels like, and they’re not willing to give it up.

“No one?” the counselor asks. “Because the principal is ready to make you do community service for the school too. Maybe cleaning up trash will put things into perspective for you.”

“What?” Layla says again. “No way. No fucking way am I touching trash.”

The counselor glares at her. “Maybe you should have thought of that before getting into a fight with another student.”

“No, she started it,” Layla hisses.

“Started what?” The counselor raises her brow.

“Nothing,” Sam says. “Absolutely fucking nothing.”

“Ah,” the counselor interrupts. “No swearing. Not in my class.”

“Fine.” Sam rolls her eyes.

I can tell Layla’s biting her tongue, but neither of them talks even though a much worse punishment hangs over their heads.

“You’re not exempt from this, Mr. Wilson, so stop gloating.”

“What?” I plant my hands on the table. “I didn’t do anything.”

“You stood by while they were fighting,” the counselor says. “Something tells me you’re involved.”

“That’s bullshit,” I say, making a fist. “And you know it.”

“Language, Nate,” the counselor says. “Anyway, we’ve got witnesses to your scuffle. Don’t think I don’t know what happened.”

I gulp, and Sam sinks into her chair as though she’s been caught.

“I don’t need you to talk to know exactly what transpired in that room.” The counselor clutches the table firmly. “I was hoping you would tell me

personally, but I guess that's too much to expect from you three."

Ouch ...

The counselor sighs. "If there's anything you want to talk about, to me, personally, you can always, and I mean always, knock on my door." The counselor walks up to Sam. "No matter what it is. You can tell me anything. No one will know."

I curl my fingers and entwine them, saying a silent prayer in the hopes that Sam's endurance won't falter now.

Please don't talk. Please don't fucking tell a soul. No matter how cruel Layla is, don't let her ruin us both. Don't be persuaded to talk to him about what you saw ...

"I'm good, thanks," Sam says, and I breathe a sigh of relief.

The counselor pauses for a moment, staring her down, but Sam won't budge.

"All right." She walks off to the desk and fishes something from her bag. "Your detention starts now." A stack of paper is thrown onto our desks. "Extra coursework for English, courtesy of Mr. Flanagan. Finish this and leave it on his desk for him to check. You can leave when you're done and not a second sooner. Got it?"

Layla grumbles and picks up her pen to start.

"You'll be here every day at the end of your scheduled classes for the entire week," the counselor continues. "And report to Mr. Davids for cleaning duties this Wednesday. If you need to talk to me, you know where to find me." Before she leaves, she pauses again, and says, "If we find out you've been fighting again, there will be *no* second chances."

Then she shuts the door and leaves us all alone in a cesspool of hatred.

What a fucking day.



SAM

"WHERE WERE YOU, man?" Robby yells at Nate when he walks up the field.

"Detention. My bad. Should've texted," he answers.

"Because of those chicks?" Robby says. "I heard they were fighting over you." He punches Nate's shoulder and winks. "Chick magnet."

"Nah, they just have issues and involved me," Nate replies. "But enough about that. Let's smash some heads in." He and Robby bump their

helmets against each other and then put them on, running onto the field.

From a distance, I watch Nate play. He's still as devoted as ever even though I can tell from the look on his face that he's not enjoying the game. He never did. Despite the sweat on his forehead and the bulging muscles rippling as he runs with the ball in his hands, his head isn't in the game.

Because every so often, when the ball hits the ground and he's done celebrating this practice-victory with his friends, he glances my way and stops in his tracks. Our eyes connect and an untold story passes between us like the wind breezing across the field, letting the wisps float in the air, disappearing as quickly as it came. The wisps always fall to the floor, but their story never ends there. They bury underneath the ground and spread their seeds until something new grows. Something beautiful and perfect ... and just as in danger from that passing wind.

I take a deep breath and continue drawing him on my notepad. I'm lost in thought, lost in a daydream about that forbidden kiss we shared. My head is still spinning, my heart still pounding away as I remember the way he touched me ... his lips claiming my soul.

God, I wish I could feel them again.

Is it that wrong to want something that's bad for you?

Maybe. But sinners deserve love too.

And only I know what kind of man he really is.

Nate Wilson is the devil, but at the same time, there's something irresistible about him that I can't wait to explore. A dangerous fling that could get me in trouble, but it would be so worth it.

And maybe, if I get close enough, he'll tell me the truth.

The only worry I have is what that would mean for my time at this school. Would my reputation be tarnished? Would my grades suffer if I hang out with him? Would Mo hate me if I tried?

God, it's so silly to even think about this, but his lips ... If that knife didn't kill me, his lips sure as hell did.

Maybe if I explained it right, Mo would be okay with it. I don't need her permission, but I'd be happier if she knew and wasn't angry. Besides, it's about time we made up from our last fight.

I sigh to myself and reach into my bag to try to find my cell phone so I can text her and tell her what happened, but I can't find it anywhere.

"What the ...?" I mumble, turning my bag over and dumping it in the grass.

My cell phone is missing.

Shit.

I never noticed it went missing. Did I leave it in art class or at detention? I don't remember when I last checked it. Fuck.

I groan to myself. Guess I'll have to go visit each of my classes from today.



I CHECKED EVERYWHERE I've been today—all the classrooms, my locker, the benches outside, and even the toilets—and don't find one sign of my phone. I'm sure I had it on me when I left home. There's no way I'd leave it there with no way to check my schedule and text with my friends. But then where the hell did it go?

It's not even in art class. I checked everything, including the buckets of paint and the one I chucked at Nate. I checked everywhere except with him.

What if he took it?

Shit. Maybe he did.

I shove my books into my locker and slam it shut. Almost all the students have gone home already, so I hope I'm not too late. I march through the empty hallways and head straight to the boys' locker room. I know I'm not supposed to be in there, but hard times call for desperate measures. I need my goddamn phone back.

The whole place is musty, the smell of cologne and aftershave lingering in the air. There's only a tiny open window in the top left corner of the room; everything else is shut tight. It's as if they don't like oxygen in here. Or maybe they're scared someone will hear them discuss field tactics.

In any case, I have to hurry up. Just because most people have left doesn't mean someone couldn't come in here. This is the only place I haven't checked yet where Nate regularly comes to do his thing. He wouldn't be dumb enough to store my phone in his personal locker, but maybe he would hide it here. It's worth checking out.

I know by heart which one is Nate's. The number on the locker is the same as the one on his shirt, and I find it within a few seconds. I pick at the lock, trying to open it to no avail. There's a combination lock on it, so I guess I have to enter a number ... but what? His birthday? A special date?

"Looking for something?"

I squeal and jump up in terror, immediately turning my head.

It's Nate, and he just shut the door behind him and locked it.

Shit.

CHAPTER 22



SAM

“UH ...” My whole face turns red.

Especially when he starts pulling off that tight football outfit. He throws his shirt in the corner and walks up to me. I barely manage to step aside as he opens his locker and throws in his shoes. His shoulder pads and helmet were already in there.

“What were you doing out there?” I mutter, flabbergasted that he’s still here.

“Running some laps after practice. You?” He raises a brow.

Well, shit. My lips part, but I don’t know what to say. Instead, I peek into his locker to see if I can find my phone without having to ask him. “Ah ...” I don’t see anything, so I fold my arms and clear my throat. “Did you by any chance steal my phone?”

He stares at me and then laughs a little. “What? You’re serious?”

“Yes,” I say, trying to maintain my posture, but it’s ridiculously hard with this beast of a man standing in front of me half-naked. Every time I look at him, all I see is that guy who seduced me into kissing him.

“No,” he replies.

“You sure?” I raise a brow.

“Yeah ...” He nods jokingly. “Pretty sure.”

I narrow my eyes at him as he turns around to face away from me.

“I don’t believe you,” I say.

Suddenly, he starts taking off his pants right in front of me. It's hard, so damn hard to look away, but I do it anyway because I must. For the sake of my sanity ... and to protect me from my own lusting body. Jesus Christ.

"Your phone is missing, and you think I took it?" he says, chucking his pants into his locker too before closing it. "I guess I deserve you thinking that."

"I ... " I don't know what to say. I sound like a bumbling mess. I have a hard time not looking at his boxer shorts right now.

"It's okay, you're right. I'm the biggest suspect. To everyone, it seems." He licks his lips and nods a few more times, but all I can see is a whole mountain of unspoken thoughts running through his head. And it hurts to see that. It hurts because I know what he's talking about. And no one but him knows the actual truth.

"Your phone's not here. I'm sorry to disappoint you," he says, stepping closer. "Anything else I can help you with?"

"I ... uh ... " God, why am I this way around him? It doesn't make any sense. He's a bully. I should hate him. But oh my God, I want to kiss him so badly too, and it shows.

For every step he takes closer, I take one back even though my body hungers to get close. I shouldn't give in; it's not right. Everyone in this school thinks he's guilty. Hell, maybe even I do. I don't know yet.

But what I do know is that he's beyond bad, and I'm melting into a puddle just from that dirty look in his eyes as he traps me in a corner. No way out. This is it. We're in the showers backed up against a wall. Hormones rage through my body as he places a hand on the wall beside me and cocks his head.

"Are you still scared of me?" he asks.

I rub my lips together. I can't say because I don't know the answer.

"I don't ... know. I don't know anything anymore," I whisper.

"You don't know, or you don't want to know?"

I try to find the truth in his eyes, but all I find is hunger ... a kind of hunger that you can feel in your bones and consumes your every waking thought.

"You're scared that you actually like me," he murmurs. His forehead leans against mine. "You're scared of what might happen if you let me kiss you," he whispers, his mouth a hair's breadth away from mine. "You're

scared of what might happen if you let me have you ... If you become mine.”

Suddenly, the showers turn on right above us. Fuck, I must’ve hit them with my back. We’re getting soaking wet, but he’s not moving ... and neither am I.

“You threw me in the pool. Hung my panties on my locker. Made fun of me in front of your friends,” I mutter, trying to create more distance, trying to push him away, trying to make up reasons this shouldn’t happen. “You heard Layla when she said—”

He places a finger on my lips, droplets of water dripping down onto my skin. “I don’t give a fuck what Layla says or thinks. I only give a fuck about what you think of me.”

His words strike me to my core.

Never in a million years did I imagine this happening, that I’d be standing here getting soaking wet in the locker rooms with Falcon Elite Prep’s worst bad boy, the star athlete, and most popular guy at school ... and that I’d want nothing more than to kiss him.

“I did those things to get my way, to get you to fear me, to get you to submit ...” he murmurs. “To get what I want.”

“The photos,” I reply.

“And you,” he whispers, gazing straight into my eyes, setting my heart on fire. “I want you, and I know you want me too.”

Our lips touch, and sparks fly. The first touch is always the best, where our lips still linger on should-I-or-should-I-not. But we both know that phase has long since passed. I can’t say no to him anymore.

And suddenly, his kisses aren’t so soft anymore. His mouth claims mine with a greed I’ve never felt before, and it excites me to my core. His hand is on my waist, his body against mine, and I can feel every ridge of his muscles, every inch of skin against my own ... and the bulge poking against my belly.

It turns me on like nothing else ever has.

The hand that was on the wall entwines with mine as our tongues lock and engage in a battle of lust. Suddenly, he grabs my wrists and pins them up against the wall, and I can’t. Fucking. Breathe.

He showers me with kisses all over; my neck, my chin, my collarbones, and even the top of my breasts. I know they’re visible through the fabric of

my top, and the moment his eyes settle on my nipples, I'm acutely aware of myself. I've never had anyone get this close to my naked body.

His hands slide down my arms, and I completely forget all the worries and hesitation. His kisses numb my thoughts, and his touch evaporates any doubts I have. He rips open the buttons on my top, destroying it in the process and exposing my bare skin.

The groan that emanates from his mouth makes me all hot and bothered. I didn't know I could have such a reaction to a boy, let alone someone like him.

"Hmm ... So beautiful," he murmurs, and he grabs a handful and sucks hard.

My eyes almost roll into the back of my head.

"So sensitive too," he muses.

I grin as he does the same to the other breast too, toying with my nipples as though he's done it before. He probably has, but I definitely don't want to know.

If I'm gonna do this, I have to keep my mind on zero and my heart locked down.

While he kisses me, wetness pools between my legs, and I don't know whether it's from the shower or because of him. He's wearing nothing but boxer shorts, and it's hard not to peek down every once in a while and gulp at the size of him.

I've only ever seen them in dirty pornos I watched online... but none of that prepared me for the real deal. And if this is the real deal, then holy shit, I'm in for something big.

As his hand travels down my body, he grabs my chin and smashes his lips on mine. Suddenly, his fingers are right there, between my thighs, and I fight hard to keep the moan from spilling out.

"Hmm ... Now what are we going to do about this?" he murmurs, his finger curling around my panties. Within a second, he's ripped them off my body and chunked them into the corner. "I'll tell you a secret ... Last time I did that, I wanted to do *this* as well."

His fingers move down my mound and slide into my wetness, and I gasp. He touches me in places I've never been touched by someone else before, and it feels so damn good I don't want him to stop. I know what we're doing is wrong. We're not good for each other, and I know he knows it too. But he doesn't care, and neither do I. What we want and what we

should do are two completely different beasts, and I'm not listening to the right side now.

I want him to do me dirty. I want him to be filthy. I want him to take me whole.

"Still scared of how I make you feel?" he murmurs, his fingers playing with my clit.

I suck in the air. "I ... I ..."

"That's it, Sam ... Come all over my fingers."

He alternates finger thrusts with circling right on the edge, and I'm losing it. I'm coming apart, and it's not even been a few minutes. Just seconds. Fuck.

Am I that easy, or is he just that good?

Every flick of his finger is another wave of ecstasy until I fall apart right in his arms, my body collapsing against him.

"Fuck," I mutter.

When his finger disappears, I'm left with a wantonness I can't describe.

"Your face when you did that just now was amazing," he whispers, pressing a kiss to the side of my neck. "So how was it?"

I just moan out loud with my eyes closed.

"Can't speak? That good?" he muses. I don't need to look at him to tell he's gloating.

"Fuck you," I say, which makes him laugh.

Still, he forces me to stand, and he kisses me hard. His lips are so good I forget everything circling in my head about him. And damn, it only makes me wonder more and more how good he'd be with his dick.

When our lips briefly part, he murmurs, "Hmm ... virgin, right?"

My eyes spring open. "What?"

"Oh, you think I couldn't tell?" He raises a brow, still flicking me.

I pause with the kisses and look at him. "How?"

A defiant smirk forms on his face. "Because you're soaking wet, and I don't mean the water. You've been fawning over me for a long time ... and every time I touch you, something goes off inside you like a goddamn volcano."

If I wasn't red before, I am the color of a fucking beet right now.

I close my eyes and sigh, completely embarrassed.

"Shit," I mumble.

"What? I don't mind," he muses. "I like it. And I think you did too."

I make a face. “That’s not the point.” I shove him away and move before he gets the chance to convince me to do more than what he did just now. This has already gone too far.

“Where are you going?” he asks.

“None of your business,” I reply, grabbing a random shirt lying in the corner so I can put something on and not look like a goddamn half-naked porn star walking through the hallways. Even though it smells like hell, it’s better than nothing at all.

“What are you doing? You can’t go out like that. You’re completely wet. Your skirt and your shoes—”

“Watch me,” I reply.

He grabs my shoulder and forces me to turn around. My eyes can’t stop themselves from following the trail of water all the way down his delicious abs to the erection hiding behind the thin fabric of his boxer shorts.

And that ... made me do a double take.

Fuck. Me.

I need to get out of here fast.

“I wasn’t finished.”

“I am,” I say, taking off my shoes so I can pour out the water. “I’m done with this.”

“I’m sorry for what I said,” he says. “I didn’t mean to make you uncomfortable.”

It’s the first time he’s said the word sorry, the one I’ve craved so long to hear. It does make me pause, but it still does nothing for me.

“Stay,” he says, still holding my arm. But when both our eyes linger on his hand, he lets go of me. “Please,” he adds.

I lick my lips and think of the amazing orgasm I just had ... and how much it was ruined by what he said. Was I just another girl he conquered? Another stripe he can add on his long list of exes? I’m nothing, a nobody, and he managed to persuade me it was something more than that.

“I have to go,” I say, and I turn around and walk off.

“Sam! Don’t, I—”

But I’ve already closed the door and left him and my heart behind in the cold, watery mess. Where they should be.

CHAPTER 23



NATE

I HOLD her panties close to my nose and take a whiff, the smell like cocaine to my soul. I don't know why I'm so obsessed with her. Maybe it's because she's so weird, or because we shared a common experience, or maybe it's because she defies expectations too.

Whatever it is, I know deep down this is about more than just pictures. But how do I prove to her that it's the truth? I made her believe my attention was all because of the photos. That was my choice, and now I gotta live with it.

But dammit if I didn't feel angry with myself for letting things escalate the way they did. I shouldn't have hurt her. I did so many things to get in her way just so she'd do what I wanted, and now it's getting in my way of doing exactly that.

I wish my kisses alone could convey how badly I want her, but my greed won't help me here. She won't allow herself to be loved by me. I'm the bad guy. The criminal. The murderer.

In her eyes, I'm the worst thing she could ever want.

I sigh out loud and lie down on my bed, clutching the panties I stole from the locker room floor.

At least I have another memory I can add to my collection.

Someone stomps up the stairs, and I barely have enough time to hide the panties underneath my pillow before the door opens.

"Nate, what is this?" my dad holds up my shirt that's covered in paint.

“I, uh ...” What do I tell him exactly? I don’t want him to know about her yet. It’s too fresh, too early, and I’m not sure I want to explain to him why I’m involved with her. “Paint.”

“Yeah, I can see that,” he says, making a face. “Why is there paint on your shirt?”

He sounds disappointed, and if there’s anything I hate, it’s that voice.

“I guess I missed the canvas,” I say, laughing, but I’m terrible at making up excuses on the fly.

Dad sighs out loud. “Nate, I can’t deal with this.”

“Why not? Laundry should work,” I reply.

“No.” He frowns. “This. Your attitude. What you’re coming home with.”

“Sorry,” I say, sitting up on the bed. “I didn’t mean to. It just happened.”

“You keep messing around as if it means nothing,” he says. “As if school means nothing to you.” He chucks the shirt in the corner. “Do you have any idea what I have to go through to keep you in that school? The number of calls I’ve had to field to prevent you from getting expelled?”

Wow. He’s never said a word about any of this. All I know is that lawyer showed up to talk to me about Nina, and I told them I was innocent, but I never explained why. I didn’t see the guy again, but I guess it didn’t stop there. Shit. I should’ve asked about it.

“I ... I’m sorry,” I say, burying my head in my hands to run my fingers through my hair. “I didn’t mean for any of this to happen.”

“But it did. And you keep leaving me to deal with all your shit,” he growls. Wow. My dad rarely swears. “Why can’t you behave? Why can’t you just play football, work hard, and be nice to the people around you? Why is it so difficult?”

I suck on my bottom lip and run my fingers through my hair. “I don’t know.”

I do know, but I don’t want to say it out loud. I don’t want to be in this position. I don’t want to actually play football. I just want to write my lyrics and be a goddamn rap god, but that doesn’t happen overnight. And it’s certainly not a career to aspire to when you know a high percentage of those trying don’t actually make it.

Football gives me a scholarship. I should be grateful—happy—but I’m not. Especially not with Nina’s ghost following me around wherever I go. Fuck.

“Nate, step it up,” my dad says. “For your mom.”

“Don’t,” I say, looking up into his eyes. “Don’t bring her into this.”

“Don’t you want her to be proud?”

“Of course I do!” I get up from the bed. “I’m doing my best.”

“I don’t think you are,” Dad says, making a fist, the look in his eyes stabbing like a knife straight to the heart. “You keep involving yourself with bad people.”

“I’m not,” I reply. “And you don’t know anything about that.”

“What about that girl then? Nina? You can’t tell me that was healthy,” he says, and I try to pass him, but he blocks the doorway with his hand. “I’m not done yet.”

“I am.” I glare at him from the corner of my eyes.

I push past him and walk down the stairs.

“You can’t keep running from this, Nate!” my dad calls after me. “Sooner or later, you’re gonna have to tell the truth and face the consequences.”

I throw my hood over my head and stop listening. I don’t want to talk to him about this. Anyone but him. The actual truth might destroy him too.

It’s raining outside, but I don’t feel like driving, so I walk instead. The cold water pouring down on my head is refreshing, the noise drowning out the voices in my head. I love the darkness in the sky and the water cleansing the ground. All the dirt rinsed away like it never even existed. Sometimes I wish that was possible for me, but those are impossible dreams.



SAM

I GAZE AT MY LAPTOP, but I can’t get myself to open Facebook and message Mo. Maybe that’s petty of me, but I don’t know what I’d say to her. I feel lost. My emotions are all over the place, and I can’t explain that to her. I can’t talk to her without feeling like I’m hiding a part of myself.

No one else knows what I know or has seen what I’ve seen.

Except him ... Nate. He was there with me at the beach that day and all the days after that. He’s everywhere, around me, in my head, and I can’t get rid of him, no matter how hard I try. And Lord knows I’ve tried ... so hard ... but it only made it harder to get away.

This room in my home is suffocating me, so I need to get out.

I walk out the door and come face to face with Mom, who just came out of the shower. “Hey! Where are you going?” She twirls her hair into a wet towel.

“Out,” I say.

“Oooh, meetup with Mo?”

“No,” I reply.

“Who then?” she asks.

I frown. “I didn’t know I was being interrogated.”

Her lips part, then she pauses for a moment. “Oh, I’m not, sweetie. I just ... well, I just asked.”

I smash my lips together. “I’ll see you at dinner.”

As I walk down the stairs, she says, “Uh, actually, I’m going out.”

I spin around and raise a brow at her. “Wait ... you’re going out with *him* again?”

“Well, it was a long time ago since I last went out, and—”

“Really? I thought you two were done.” I sigh and turn my eyes away. “You know what? Never mind. I don’t wanna know.”

“Sam ...” Mom sighs, trying to follow me downstairs, but she’s still in her bathrobe, and none of the window drapes are closed. “Sam. I’m an adult. I can make my own decisions.”

“I know you can, Mom,” I say through gritted teeth. “That’s exactly the point.”

“What?”

“You can make a choice,” I reply as I grab my coat. “You made one.”

Then I open the door and slam it shut behind me before she follows me outside too. I don’t think she will because it’s not her style to have the whole neighborhood see her half-naked. But at least I’ve now closed off the window of opportunity.

I just wish she did too.

That fucker who cheats on his wife so he can pork my mom on his off days doesn’t deserve her.

It’s raining hard outside, so I zip up my coat tight and jump into my car. I don’t know where I’m going, but I need to go for a drive to clear my mind a bit. I start the engine and drive off slowly, not aiming for any single place. Driving around town eases my mind. It’s one of the few things, along with painting and drawing, that sets my heart at ease. I don’t do it often anymore because I’m always carpooling with Mo, so this is a nice breath of fresh air.

There's a 7-Eleven up ahead, and I park outside. I could go for some chips and a Coke right now. Right as I pull my key out of the ignition, I spot someone familiar standing at the counter inside.

I swallow hard. Nate's buying a whole six-pack of beers without speaking to the cashier. And the cashier hands it to him in a brown paper bag as if it means nothing. But I know for a fact he's not old enough to drink yet.

Nate grabs the bag with a surly look on his face and marches out the door. I watch and hide my face as he passes my car and walks off through the rain. I wonder where he's going. Instinct tells me it's dangerous to follow him, but my heart has already made up its mind.

I open my door and jump out, pulling my hoodie over my head before I trail him. He opens one of the cans and starts drinking while sauntering down the sidewalk. Even though I know it's none of my business, he doesn't seem to be in a right place, and for some reason, that doesn't sit right with me.

I know he's an asshole who teased me and seduced me into letting him touch me, but that doesn't mean I have to be the same. Sometimes people do cruel things because they're scarred and trying to mend their wounds by lashing out at others. But that never worked well for anyone.

I sigh. If only I could get through to him.

My feet traipse behind him, careful not to give my cover away. He walks up to a fence and opens it, going inside. The graveyard. A place where all the dead lay buried, including Nina. Is he going to see her?

I lick the droplets of rain off my lips and keep walking. I don't know why I care so much, but I want to know what he's going to do. Maybe he plans to desecrate her grave, and I'll need to stop it before it happens.

With that in mind, I hold open the fence before it closes and makes a noise. Then I slip inside and softly close it behind me. The leaves crackle under my feet as I gently tiptoe around, looking for him.

When I find him, he's hunched over a stone standing in the far corner of the graveyard, but he's not anywhere near Nina's grave. My brows draw together as I step closer and partially hide behind a tree to watch him.

Nate clutches the stone, and suddenly smashes his fist against it.

"Why? Why did you have to leave me?"

The broken sound of his voice hurts to listen to.

Tears well up in my eyes.

“Why? Why now? I fucking need you, and you’re not there for me!” he yells, punching the stone again and again until he sinks to the ground in front of it. An empty can of beer lies beside him with five others stacked up next to the stone. He buries his head in the palms of his hands, hiding himself and his pain from the world.

It’s hard to watch, hard to swallow. My feet start toward him before I realize it, toward the pain and suffering. Even though I know I should turn away, I can’t.

And as he sits there, hugging himself, I approach him from behind the tree and kneel in front of him. I grab his hands and pull them away from his face. Tears stain his cheeks, and he makes no effort to brush them off. He stares right back at me unapologetically. Without looking away, he forces me to witness the pain in his eyes.

Without saying a word, I wrap my arms around him and pull him against me.

CHAPTER 24



SAM

“WHY ARE YOU DOING THIS?” he murmurs against my shoulder. “I hurt you. I’m a fucking bad guy.”

“Even bad guys deserve a shoulder to cry on,” I reply, smiling gently.

He leans back. “I don’t want to. I want to scream.”

“Then scream,” I say, shrugging.

And he does. So loud that the birds fly out of the rustling trees. The sound is like that of a wounded lion roaring in pain. His chest deflates slowly, and I watch the energy dissipate.

“Feels good, right?” I say. “I do it sometimes.”

“When?” he asks.

“After my dad left.” I suck in a breath and tuck my hair behind my ear. “When he met another woman. He never came back to us.”

The silence following my words is deafening.

“I’m sorry,” he says after a while.

“Don’t be. I’ve made my peace,” I say. “Besides, he’s still living his life out there, somewhere, even though it’s without me and my mom.”

Nate nods. “Must be hard.”

“It’s fine ... It’s not as hard as what you must be going through right now,” I say, cocking my head. “Are you okay?”

He closes his eyes and takes a deep breath. Raindrops fall down onto his face, but he doesn’t seem to care. “Does it matter?”

“Yes, it does,” I say, pulling off my hoodie. If he’s gonna get wet, then so am I.

“Why do you even care?” He rubs his forehead with his thumb.

I shrug. “Because I just do.”

He snorts and shakes his head. “Stop lying.”

“I’m not,” I say.

He smiles, but it’s not one of pleasure or happiness; it’s one of pain. “If you’re here to see me at my worst, have at it.”

I grab his hand and hold it tight, forcing him to stay and look at me instead of constantly walking away from things. “Tell me what happened.”

“Why? Is it any of your business?”

“You’re crying at someone’s grave with a six-pack of beer.” I glance at them. “Are you going to drink those all by yourself?”

“Well, I was until you showed up.” He laughs, but it dies off quickly. “How did you find me, anyway? Did you follow me?” He raises a brow. “Little stalker girl ... all grown up.”

A blush appears on my cheeks. I never fucking blush. “I saw you at the 7-Eleven. It wasn’t on purpose, believe me.”

“Right,” he muses. “Yet you followed me here anyway. Sounds like you’re obsessed.”

“I’m not!” I reply, frowning. “You’re trying to avoid the conversation again.”

“You’re right because I don’t wanna talk about my dead fucking mom, okay?”

I pause and hold my breath. Wow.

“I ... I’m sorry. I didn’t know,” I say.

“No, you don’t know. And it was supposed to stay that way,” he says, rubbing his face.

“Why?” I mutter.

“Because you’re all up in my business. Everywhere I go, you are there. No matter what I do, you’re always there, invading my memories and my mind. Everything.”

I swallow away the lump in my throat. “Sorry.”

“Don’t be. It’s my fault. I just gave you more ammo.”

“Ammo?” I make a face.

“Don’t pretend you didn’t think about it. It’s why you followed me here, right?” he says, tilting his head. “Just to spy on me to get dirt.”

“No, I—”

He laughs and grabs another can of beer and opens it. I quickly snatch it from his hands and chuck it away.

“Hey! Again with the drink stealing,” he growls.

“You need to quit. Right now,” I say, and I get up and pull at his arms. “C’mon. Get up.”

“No, what are you doing?” He grunts, putting all his weight to remain seated, but I won’t give up.

“Fucking get off your ass, Nate Wilson,” I say. “Whatever you think you’re doing, it’s not fucking worth it.”

“What? Drinking until I’m smashed?” He snorts. “Not as if I haven’t done it before.”

“Stop it,” I say, and I tug as hard as I can.

“No,” he says, trying to reach for another can.

I swat him away and take ahold of his hands, pulling him halfway off the ground. “Goddammit, Nate Wilson, just stop!”

“Why?” he growls. “Give me one good reason.”

“Your mom wouldn’t want this for you.”

“Don’t talk about my mom,” he hisses.

“Do you think she’d be happy to see you like this?” I spit. “You can do better than this.”

“Don’t,” he hisses. “Don’t you fucking dare.”

“Or what? You’re gonna hurt me?” I pull so hard he finally budes. “Stop disappointing her.”

Something ignites within him as he gets up and immediately grabs my throat. I cough and grab his hand as it squeezes tightly around my neck. Fury burns in his eyes.

“Nate,” I choke out, barely able to breathe. “Stop. Can’t ... breathe.”

The look in his eyes suddenly changes as if he’s regained his consciousness, and he instantly releases me from his grip. I cough hard and grab my throat to make sure it’s still intact.

I was taunting him on purpose to get him to fight back against his need to self-destruct. But shit, I never expected him to do that.

“Sorry,” he mutters, lowering his head.

He can’t even look at me when he says it.

Can’t admit his mistakes, the flaws within his soul.

But I don't want him to hide. I want him to show me. I want to see the naked truth as rough and as bad as it can get. I *need* to know, even if it hurts me in the process. I've made my peace with that. The moment I took those pictures that day at the beach, I already knew I was going down a rabbit hole that might be inescapable. But I went there anyway, willingly. And I'm not about to give up on finding the bottom now.

He rubs his forehead again and glances at the beer cans littered across the ground near his mother's grave.

"Leave them," I say. "Someone else will pick them up."

"I ..." he murmurs.

I place a hand on his arm. "It's okay. I'm not mad."

He looks at me with disdain in his eyes. "You should be. I'm not good for you."

"You aren't," I say, smiling. "But I don't care."

"Why? I don't understand," he says.

But I don't know the answer to that question either. All I know is that I'm looking at a boy who's not ready for the world he created, a boy who can't face his own sins. A boy whose youth was taken from him too soon, whether by force or by choice.

A boy in need of a girl to help him out.

"You're not the only one with secrets," I mutter. "I guess we're all bad guys in our own story. And ... I'm sorry I talked about your mom."

"I get it." He nods a few times. "I'm sorry about the other day. In the locker room." He clears his throat. "I didn't mean to chase you off."

If it wasn't for the rain cooling me off, I'd probably be as hot as a volcano right now, that's how embarrassed I am.

"I don't wanna talk about it."

I turn around, but he grabs my hand and stops me from walking farther. "Wait."

Should I stay, or should I go?

Right now, I have two choices, but I can't decide. Either one is bad for me. My heart lingers to stay, but my brain knows he's bad for me.

He lets go of my hand slowly, but I remain where I was frozen to the ground. His body presses against my back, his hands wrapping around my body. My heart swells as his head leans down on my shoulder, and he presses a kiss to my cheek.

"Thank you," he says.

It's the best thank you I've ever heard.

My eyes trail down to the hands firmly wrapped around my waist. Blood on his knuckles mixes with the droplets of rain, falling down to the ground. I can't leave him like this.

"We should get you fixed up," I say, and I lean away. "I'll drive."

He nods against my shoulder, and says, "My house."

His house.

My heart begins to thrum.

The last time I was there was to find my laptop.

Alone.

But I'm not alone anymore.

He follows me to my car and slips into the passenger's seat without saying a word. There's an uncomfortable silence as I drive back to his house, and I clear my throat when we finally arrive.

He steps out of the car, and so do I. It's still pouring outside, so I put on my hoodie as he opens the gate with a key card in his pocket. I follow him up to the giant house, but my eyes can't stop looking at his botched-up knuckles that drip blood. I hope they have some bandages and supplies in the house.

Nate sticks his keys into the lock and opens the door. "Dad?"

No one replies. We go inside. The house is dark; no lights are on. Nate walks into the kitchen and picks up a note lying on the counter. He sighs when he's done reading and throws it in the trash.

"He's gone."

"What, forever?" My eyes widen.

Nate snorts. "No, course not. He's just ... gone shopping or something." He shrugs. "I don't really care."

"You ... and your dad don't get along well?" I ask.

"I got into an argument with him," Nate says, tossing his keys up in the air and then catching them. "Doesn't matter."

"Yeah, of course," I say, smiling. "So where do you keep the bandages?"

"Uh ... bathroom, I guess."

Sounds as if he doesn't know. I tag along with him to the bathroom and look inside the cabinets. There's a first-aid box in one of them, so I take it out and open it up. Just a small bandage is all I need. "Perfect."

He sits down on the toilet while I grab a bottle of disinfectant and pour some on a cotton ball. "This is gonna hurt."

He hisses a little when I dab it onto his bloody knuckles.

"Sorry," I say.

"Don't," he mutters, gazing straight into my eyes. "Just don't say that word."

I nod and remove the wrapper and place the bandage around his knuckles. It's a painstaking process because I'm not at all good at it. My mom only showed me how to do it once, so I hope I'm doing it right. I fasten the bandage with a bit of tape, and say, "Done."

"Thanks." A brief but gentle smile appears on his face.

"You're welcome." I don't think we've ever had a more civilized conversation than this one right here.

But the silence that follows is awkward and overwhelming, and I don't know what to do or say. After a while, he gets up and turns off the light in the bathroom, then walks off. Only after a few seconds do I follow him. He's standing in the doorway to his room, glaring at something.

When I pop up behind him, he moves inside and picks up something from his bed.

A pair of panties.

My panties.

He clutches them tight, and I swallow hard. Everything from that day in the locker room comes flooding back. The search, the kissing match, him touching me everywhere ... and all the ways he made me feel good.

Fuck.

I thought I'd put it behind me, but apparently, I'm incapable of doing so when it comes to him.

"These were under my pillow ..." he murmurs. "Dad ..."

"What?" I look over his shoulder.

"It's nothing." He turns around to face me and tucks the panties in his pocket.

"You took them from the locker room," I mutter, staring at his pants, wondering why he won't give them back.

"Yeah," he says, a smirk forming on his face.

"As a trophy?" I raise a brow.

His tongue darts out to wet his lips. "Because I like the scent ..."

My whole face turns red as a beet again.

“You’re soaking wet,” he murmurs, and even though I’m sure he’s talking about my clothes, my pussy can’t help but clench.

His hand rises and almost touches a strand of my hair, but I lean away and swat him away before he has a chance. I don’t know why I’m so defensive. Why I’m so terrified of him touching me. Maybe it’s because I know I’d succumb to his seduction.

But the grim look in his eyes after I decline makes me regret my action. “I ... have something of yours,” he says.

He fumbles in his pocket and takes out a familiar phone ... mine.

I narrow my eyes as he hands it to me. “So you did have it.”

He doesn’t say a word. The guilty need none. My nostrils flare as I take it from him and tuck it back into my pocket. “Got what you wanted?”

Again, not a word.

Fuck him.

I slap him right across the face.

The moment passes in a second, but after, it feels like minutes.

I can’t believe I actually did that.

And fuck me ... I’m still not over him.

Because the first thing I do after his skin glows red is kiss him right on the lips.

CHAPTER 25



NATE

WHEN HER LIPS land on mine, I lose all sense of reality. The way her mouth moves in sync with mine, her arms wrap around my neck, her hands lock behind my back, and her heart beats against mine.

I'm hooked.

Never before has my heart thumped in my throat the moment a girl's lips landed on mine, but hers did ... And fuck me, there's nothing in the world that could make me happier than this.

I'm lost in her mouth, and I can't help but grab her face and push her against the door and take over. My mouth claims hers as though it always belonged to me. And fuck me if it doesn't now.

My hands are all over her—down her neck, her arms, her luscious body, and all the skin between. I want to touch it all. I want it to be mine. Would she mind? Would she be angry with me if I took it all?

I pause and look her in the eyes. "Are you mad at me? Is this a hate kiss?" I murmur, grinning.

She closes her eyes, and growls, "Shut up and kiss me."

She's right. I shouldn't think about it. I should just kiss her ... Take what I want and make it mine. *Her.*

I don't want to be that boy—that bad boy everyone warns you about and that bad boy your mother wants you to stay away from.

But I can't help who I am. I can't help what I've become, or what I've done.

All I can do is give it my all ... and fuck me if I don't give her everything I've got.

My fingers curl around her hoodie, and I pull it over her head and throw it on the floor. She glares at it for a second, and I wonder what she's thinking. If she's worried it might leave a stain on the floor ... or if she'll ever get it back. Or maybe she's worried about how far this'll go. But I know exactly what I want. And I think she knows that too.

I tug at my shirt and rip it over my head, throwing it on top of the pile. Her eyes now gloss over my body, every inch of my muscles, and she visibly swallows. I love that hungry as hell look in her eyes. And my lips slam back onto hers.

I fumble with the button on her pants and pull them down, cupping her ass with both hands. The feel makes me groan into her mouth, and her body pushes up against mine, desperate for more. Instinctively, I pick her up and put her down on my dresser, pulling off her pants and chucking them into the corner. Then I ravish her legs, kissing her everywhere, all the way down to her feet and back up to her panties again. She squashes her legs together, almost as if she's afraid she'll do something she'll regret.

But I don't regret a single second. All my interactions with her have led to this moment. Despite the fact I was an unforgivable asshole to her, she still fell for me. And that fucking means the world to me.

She doesn't know how badly I tried to push her away, how I tried to make her hate me and fear me, just so I could get my way. Instead, she wormed her way into my heart until even I couldn't stop myself from feeling like I needed her.

And I fucking need her as much as I need to breathe.

I suck her in as if she's my oxygen, kissing her until she gasps for air. I can't get enough, can't stop my tongue from circling around hers, can't stop my fingers from caressing her body. We gaze at each other for a moment because I don't want her to run like last time.

I don't want her to think I'm only in it to hurt her. To add her to my collection like some goddamn prize. She's so much more than that. I wish she could see.

And even though I can barely contain myself, I must for her.

But she immediately grabs my neck and pulls me toward her, and I kiss her fiercely, hungrily.

If she wants me, she can have me all the way.

My fingers fumble with her bra behind her back, and when the clips unfasten, I tear it away from her body and cup her tits in both hands. She's gorgeous, perfect, and I can't get enough.

I lick and kiss them, sucking on her nipple and tugging at the other until she moans out loud. Fuck, I love that sound.

"Finally, you're mine," I murmur against her skin as I come up to kiss her again.

Adrenaline guides my hand as it dives between her legs, where her panties hide the best treasure yet. The fabric is completely wet, and her muscles tighten when I touch her there. I love her hesitance, the way she pauses and bites her lip as I slide my finger down her slit. And I love the way her eyes burst open, and her lips form an O when I reach her clit.

"God, I fucking hate you," she whispers.

A wicked smirk forms on my lips. "Heard that one before. Don't believe it anymore."

Her lips and willing body tell me the truth. She's greedy for more, and I know just how to give it to her.

There's no way back. No way out. No way to escape this madness that is us.



SAM

I WANTED TO HATE HIM. Wanted so badly to scream at him.

But all I could think of was kissing him ... of falling so hard I could never get back up.

He's ruined me. Destroyed whatever was left of my pride, my dignity ... my resolve.

I melt in his arms, desire consuming my every waking thought. Hormones take control of my body and invade my mind. All I want is for him to take what he wants and leave me with nothing.

My body zings wherever he touches me, and I can't get enough of how good it feels. My mouth is addicted to his as he positions himself between my legs and clasps my thighs, fingers digging into my skin.

I used to fantasize about this moment, about Nate Wilson bringing me into his house just to kiss me, touch me, and make me scream his name. It's like a wet dream come true.

Danger attracts me like nothing else ever does. Is it so wrong for me to want the bad boy? The one who pierces hearts and never lets them go?

My momma always said to protect myself, but it's already too late. My heart is already bleeding with desire, and all it wants is him. Nate Wilson with all his rough edges, all his dark tendencies, all his dirty secrets, all his heinous crimes. I want it all, even if it'll kill me. And I almost want to ask him ...

Am I next?

I suck on my lips as he sinks his teeth into my shoulder and makes me groan.

Damn, the pain is addictive just like his mouth and literally everything about him. From those thick abs, to the dark wavy hair, to the sharp cheekbones and the filthy look in his eyes. I'm getting high on the pleasure, and I can't get enough.

"You're such a dirty girl," he whispers. "If I'd known you were like this, I would've done you before."

"Stop talking," I reply between kisses. "And just do me."

A devilish smirk appears on his face. He takes a step back and unbuttons his pants. Just as before, his boxers are tented to the limit and almost make my eyes pop. Damn ... he's packing.

He continues, and I swallow away the lump in my throat as he tugs down the elastic band over his bump. My mouth waters at the sight.

Bad girl, Sam! Bad girl. Don't be so fucking horny.

But I am. No porn could ever prepare me for this.

It's about to go down, but I'm not afraid anymore. And the closer he gets, the more excited I get.

He leans in for a short kiss while his fingers curl around my panties and slide them off with ease. Then he comes back up, nudging my legs aside. He wraps one arm around my back and cups my face with the other, claiming my mouth, taking away any lingering doubts.

Suddenly, Nate lifts me off the dresser. I squeal, and he laughs. He carries me to his bed and throws me down.

He puts my arms above my head and pins them down, planting kisses everywhere. I'm delirious with lust as his erection pushes against my thigh. It's really happening now, and I want nothing more than to know what it feels like.

With his teeth, he tugs at my bottom lip, and whispers, “I’ll go easy on you first ...”

But the moment his tip is at my entrance, I gasp. It feels huge as he enters me, and I close my eyes and let the feelings wash over me. He’s slow and so gentle with me, fingers entwined with mine. And when he’s all the way in, I open my eyes again and come face to face with the sweetest eyes I’ve ever seen. He’s never looked at me that way. As though he’s filled with so much love.

And he leans toward me and places the softest of kisses on my top lip, gazing at me as though he’s asking me for my permission to continue.

“Fuck,” I murmur, and it makes him pulse inside me. I feel everything, and it’s so damn tight but nice too.

“How does it feel?” he whispers back.

I don’t wanna talk about it. I don’t want it to be a big deal. I want him to do me like he’d do anyone else. As though I’m just another girl, and none of this means anything. Because if it did, my heart wouldn’t be able to handle it.

So I lean in to whisper into his ear, “Fuck me.”

And when he does, my jaw drops. He thrusts in and out, the motions powerful and amazing even though it hurts a little too. But the excitement is too much, and it’s unlike anything I’ve ever felt before. Like the fusion of two bodies, locking in sync. And when he kisses me passionately, everything falls into place.

This is how it was meant to be.

My first time.

Every thrust is a little quicker than the one before, and I find it hard not to get lost in the sensations. Our bodies collide, and my hips grind into his. Sweat drips down our backs, our sex indescribably fierce. Animalist and raw but, at the same time, intensely tender just as I imagined Nate to be. He kisses me everywhere—on my jaw, my cheeks, my collarbones, and leaves lingering kisses on my lips as we both veer closer to the edge.

My fingers dig into his back, and my eyes roll to the back of my head. Fuck, if this is what it’s like, I should’ve done this a long time ago.

In a moment of pure lust, I manage to push him off me, and I crawl on top.

“Whoa,” he groans, but I silence him with a kiss. My hand lingers on his lips as I lean back up and start riding him, slowly at first but then faster

with each stroke.

I want him to look at me, to see the desire in my eyes, to see what he's done to me ... what he's reduced me to. A hungry fucking mess of a girl who just wants to come all over him.

And right as his hands clasp around my waist and dig in, I come. It's the most powerful orgasm I've ever had, and I own it out loud.

He smiles broadly and lets his hands roam freely across my body, the touch only magnifying the pleasure I'm feeling right now. And I continue to drive him insane, plunging him in and out of me until his face contorts ... until I can feel the warmth explode inside me.

Holy shit.

He moans out loud while pumping inside me, his whole body tensing up. I revel in the sight, the power. I never realized it could feel so good and so empowering. Damn.

Nate's panting as I tumble off him and land on his bed, completely out of breath. He props himself up on his elbow and gently taps on my belly, trailing a line all the way up like a spider all while staring at me as if I'm some kind of weirdo.

"What?" I say. It's almost like he's judging me.

He shrugs. "Nothing." He smashes his lips onto mine, and all my worries fade away.

I lie in his bed and stare at the ceiling, wondering how I'm supposed to feel. I don't feel any different, but at the same time, the whole world has shifted on its axis. How odd.

I close my eyes and breathe out a sigh.

"Can you stay?" Nate suddenly asks.

My eyes whisk open, and I stare at him for a moment before pulling the blanket on top of my naked body.

"I don't know," I mutter. Would my mom mind? She'd probably be mad as hell, but I'm not sure I'd care. All I know is that my heart fluttered the moment he asked. I wanna say yes so badly ... So why not?

"Okay," I answer.

He doesn't say another word, but the smile that follows is enough to fill my heart with a warmth I've never experienced.

Nate grabs me and pulls me closer toward him, and I curl up against his warm body. With his hand around my waist and soft breath in my neck, I fall into a deep, wonderful sleep.

I don't know how long we lie here together in his bed before the door is abruptly opened on us. The bright sun shining through the window makes me blink a couple of times. Did we sleep through the night?

Someone clears his throat. It's not Nate. "Ahem."

I roll away from Nate and grasp the blanket, pulling it up to my neck before looking up to see who it is.

Nate's face turns white. "Dad?"

Well, shit.

CHAPTER 26



NATE

HOW TO RUIN the world's best after-fuck sleep? Your dad walking in on you will do the trick.

Short of actually having sex, there's nothing more embarrassing than your dad catching you in bed with a girl, and not only that, but that judgmental look on his face will set the tone for the next few days, and I can't fucking wait.

Great.

"Nate," he says with a stern voice. "What is this?"

"It's, uh ... you know ..." I roll my eyes. He wants me to feel ashamed.

"Who are you, young lady?" My dad cocks his head.

"Um ... Sam Cook. Nice to meet you." She gives him an awkward smile and waves at him, and I can tell from the glance she throws me that she's begging me to rescue her from this situation.

"Um ... Dad, could you maybe give us some privacy?" I ask, and I add, "Please?"

He frowns but then eyeballs her and immediately steps back and closes the door. "One minute."

It's enough for us to giggle at each other and grab our clothes.

"No fondling," my dad calls out.

And we both snigger quietly.

We throw on our clothes just in time before he opens the door again. He eyes us down as we're both sitting on the bed acting like nothing ever

happened. But something big did happen ... something I would say was amazing. And whenever I throw a glance at her, I hope she can feel it too, that buzzing feeling, the thrum of our hearts.

Even though the odds are stacked against us, even though it's all kinds of wrong to be together right now, none of that matters.

"So ... can you explain to me what just happened here?"

"No," I say. "No, thanks."

Sam snorts and hides her laughter behind her hand.

My dad silently judges her with a look. "And you, Sam ... care to explain what you're doing in my house?"

"Dad, don't," I say. "This isn't on her. It was my idea."

"Right." He narrows his eyes. "Did you forget the deal we made? No girls in the bedroom until you were done with high school."

Goddammit, I hate that he's bringing that up with her here. "I didn't forget. But it just ... happened." I shrug it off and glance at her. Our hands graze against each other, and my pinky briefly touches hers.

"Whatever this was, it's not happening again," my dad says, holding up his hand. "And I don't want to hear complaints."

I suck it up, holding my breath. I don't want to make a scene in front of her.

"Time to go home, Sam." Dad steps aside, allowing her to exit without even looking at me. When she's gone, all that remains is a warm spot on my bed and all the memories she left behind.

I didn't want it to end. I had so much more to give. So much more to tell her. Minutes weren't enough.

"Nate, you know better than this." My dad taps his foot on the floor. "Goddammit. I come home and find you naked in bed with a random girl?"

"She's not a random girl, Dad," I reply.

"She needs to stay away from you."

"Why? It's my choice to be with her." I get up from the bed. "I don't need you lecturing me on who I can and can't date."

"You *will* listen to me. As long as you live under my roof, you'll respect my rules and authority."

"You can't stop me from seeing her. If I can't do it here, then I'll do it somewhere else. Is that what you want?" I say. I know I'm all up in his face right now, but I can't help it. He's trying to ruin this for me, and I won't let him.

“Dammit, son, why can’t you let this rest?” my father shouts. “She’s just a girl.”

“She’s the only good thing I have in my life right now,” I yell.

He makes a face. “What about your promise? You told me you’d stop. Dammit, Nate, we talked about this. Your lawyer said you needed to lay low.”

“Well, I’m not hanging out with Layla anymore, so you should be happy,” I exclaim. “At least it’s not her.”

“That doesn’t make it any better, and you know it,” he says, shaking his head. “What about the promise you made to Mom? That you’d do better, remember?”

“Don’t bring her into this.” I point my finger at his chest. “Don’t make me feel guilty for trying my best ... for actually loving someone for once.”

“Don’t you point your finger at my chest.” My dad swats my hand away. “Show some respect.”

“I can’t give respect when I’m not shown how it’s done, now can I?” I retort. “I can’t even love the girl I choose.”

He makes a tsk sound. “That girl doesn’t know what she’s got herself into. Doesn’t even know what you’re capable of,” he responds.

“Wow ... Thanks for the vote of confidence.” I can’t believe he just said that.

My dad’s revolted face tells me enough, so I try to push past him, but he keeps blocking my way.

“Ah-ah. Keys.” He holds up his hand and waits until I do what he says. “If you’re not gonna listen to me, then no car.”

I roll my eyes and fumble in my pocket, slapping the keys in his hand.

When he lowers his arm, I immediately run off. I don’t care if he steals my keys, I’ll fucking walk if I have to.

“This conversation isn’t over, son. You can run away all you like, but sooner or later, the truth will always come back to bite you.”

I know he’s right, but I don’t wanna hear it right now. Not when he insulted my ability to make the right choice, to stand up for my needs as a grown man ... to stand up for the girl I want to be with.

Fuck this. I’m going to see her.



SAM

WHEN I GET HOME, I'm still giddy and feel like screaming. I don't know why. It shouldn't matter that much, but it does. I just had sex with Nate Wilson, and it was amazing, and all I can think about is kissing him and then doing it all over again.

But at the same time, this little lingering voice in the back of my head keeps telling me that what I did was wrong. That he's a stalker, a killer—someone to fear, not to love.

I sigh. I wish it wasn't this difficult.

I need someone to talk to about what just happened, but it can't be my mom. Anyone but my mom. There's only one other person in this world I could ever tell, so I guess it's about time I fished my phone from my pocket and texted Mo.

SAM: Hey. Can we like ... talk?

Mo: Hey. Of course. I just wanna say ... sorry for the other day. I didn't wanna hurt you on purpose.

Sam: Me too. I'm sorry for fighting. Can we call it a tie?

Mo: Yes, please. OMG! I miss my bestie.

Sam: Same! I have something amazing to tell you.

Mo: What?

Sam: I'm not a virgin anymore.

SUDDENLY, my phone begins to buzz, and I pick up.

"Shut up! Shut the fuck up! You did not just say that!" Mo yells, making me laugh. "Is it true?"

"Yep," I say, snorting.

"Who?" she asks, always the nosy type, but I don't mind.

"Don't be mad." I swallow away the lump in my throat before saying, "Nate."

"Nate?" She sounds like she's in shock. "You're kidding, right?"

"No," I say. "It's true."

"Nate fucking Wilson? Noooooooo. I don't believe it."

"I'm telling you, it's the truth."

"You two banged each other?" She still sounds like she can't believe it. "Oh my God, Sam. Nate? No."

"Yes," I say, snorting. "Totally yes."

"But you two hate each other? And he bullied you."

"I know, but it's different now." How do I even explain everything that happened between Nate and me? I can't put it into words over the phone.

"I don't get it," Mo says.

I shrug. "I guess that's just it."

"What? That I don't get it or ...?"

I laugh again. "No, I mean that I can't explain it either."

"But ... how?" She sounds so befuddled that it makes me laugh.

"I don't know. It just happened," I say. "One minute, I was bandaging him up, and then the next, we were kissing, and it all happened so quickly."

"Wait, wait, bandaging him? For what?" she asks. "Girl, you can't drop this bombshell on me and expect me not to want all the fucking details."

I grin like a dumbass. "Yeah, yeah, nosy lil bitch, I'll tell you everything ..."

She sighs. "But?"

"But I have to go inside. My mom's probably waiting for me."

She sighs a little louder. "Yeah, yeah, sure, bail on me now after dropping a *bomb*."

"I'll tell you everything, I promise. Just not now."

"When are we meeting? I'm not waiting for all that tea," she says.

"Tomorrow?"

"Tonight?" she says. "There's a party at Robby's house, and he invited me to come, so ... are you coming too?"

Wow, she forgave him quickly. "Ah, no thanks. I'm kind of done with partying for a while."

"Aww ... you sure?"

"Yeah, yeah, I'm sure," I answer. "But you go have fun."

"All right. I'll wait until tomorrow to see ya, but you'd better bring all the deets."

"Course," I say. "Love ya."

"Love ya too."

I hang up and get out of the car, slamming the door shut behind me with a big smile on my face. I sneak inside the house, hoping my mom didn't see me come in. I didn't tell her where I went or that I'd stay the night. I'm sure she's pissed, but I'm not looking for a fight right now, so I immediately go up to my room. I lie down on my bed with the worst of giddy smirks on my face I could possibly have. I roll around on my bed and bury my face into my pillow to scream.

When I look up, my mom's standing in the doorway, staring at me with one eyebrow raised.

"I just got a phone call from a certain Mr. Wilson ..."

Oh, shit.

She plants her hand against my door opening, and says, "Anything you wanna tell me?"

Certainly shit.

CHAPTER 27



SAM

I BLUSH LIKE CRAZY. “I can explain—”

She raises a finger and then lowers her cell phone and approaches me. She grabs my hands, clasps them together, and says, “All I wanna know is was it safe?”

I rub my lips together, trying to fight through the shame. When she releases my hands, I bury my head in my hands. “I don’t ...”

She fishes something from her pocket. “Here.” I look up at the pill she’s holding. She sits down beside me and lowers her head. “It’s okay. Take it.”

“What is it?” I ask, still completely zoned out from my mom knowing I had sex.

“A morning after pill. It’ll stop you from getting pregnant,” she says.

“Oh ...” Well, fuck. I should’ve thought about that. “Shit.”

“I know, honey.” She places a hand on my knee. “It happens to a lot of us. But it’s okay. Take this. I’ll bring you a glass of water.”

She smiles and walks off again.

This whole exchange was really, really weird.

Like, my mom just found out I had sex for the first time ever, that her precious little girl is no longer a virgin ... and all she does is give me a pill and smile at me? Is this even my mom?

She comes back with a glass of water and hands it to me. I stare at the pill and then her for a little while longer.

“No condom?” she asks, and I shake my head. “You weren’t on the pill, right?” I shake my head again. “Then take it,” she says, nodding at the pill. “We don’t want you getting pregnant from some jock now, do we?”

Did I ever tell him about her?

Maybe ... or maybe not. I can’t remember the last time I had an actual conversation with my mom that wasn’t about Randy, so this feels like a breath of fresh air. And honestly, I miss this mom. The mom who understands, who’s there for me and doesn’t judge.

“Thanks,” I mutter.

“Of course, honey.”

I swallow down the pill and pause for a few seconds to let it sink in.

“Mom ...”

She sits down beside me.

“Aren’t you mad?”

She shakes her head. “Maybe, a little bit,” she says, snorting. “But I did the same thing when I was your age, so I get it.”

“Ah, okay.” Well, that makes sense. “I just ...”

“You don’t have to tell me everything,” she interjects. “Whatever you want is fine, but ... I just wanna know if it was good. If it made you happy.”

I nod and smile, and so does she, and she wraps her arms around me for a sideways hug.

“That’s all I wanna know,” she says, sighing out loud. “My little girl ... all grown up.”

“Mom, stop,” I groan, but she laughs.

“What? I’ve always wanted to say that.” She continues hugging me, but I still feel a little uneasy about the whole pill thing.

“Mom, why do you have those pills?” I ask.

“Just in case.” She shrugs. “You know ... ever since Dad left, I needed to feel secure. You know I have a man in my life.”

“Right,” I mutter. “And you don’t want another kid in your life.”

“Oh, Sam.” She hugs me even harder, almost choking the life out of me. “I love you so much, but I can’t, not at this age.”

“Okay, Mom, I get it.” I push her away before she suffocates me.

“Do you wanna talk about any of it?” she asks.

“What?” I raise a brow.

“Sex.”

My face feels like it's bloating right now, but that must be the embarrassment. "No, please, God no."

"Just asking," she says, giggling. "I mean, I know a thing or two."

"Mom, stop," I groan. "I don't wanna know."

"All right, all right." She leans in. "But tell me ... is he cute?"

"Yeah, yeah," I answer. "But you're not going to embarrass me."

"Aww, Sam, c'mon. Let's invite him over for dinner."

"No, absolutely not," I say.

"Why not?" she says, looking at me as if I've lost my mind.

As if. We've only just kissed and had sex. It's not like I know him that well; never mind the fact that we're not even defined as boyfriend and girlfriend. And now she already wants to meet him? No way.

"It's too ... soon," I explain, rubbing my face, and I get up from the bed. "Besides, I gotta take a shower. I smell like a dead fish."

"That's what sex does," Mom muses.

"Mom!" I shout. "Oh my God."

She keeps laughing as though it's the funniest thing in the world, and I get it. But to me, it's all brand new and too exciting to talk about. I need some time alone, especially after last night, so I go into the bathroom and lock myself in.

That's when the doorbell rings.

My eyes widen, and I immediately unlock the door again and rush downstairs. Too late. My mom's already right there, opening the door ... for Nate.

Well, fuck.

This is going to be awkward.

"Nate," I mutter. "What are you doing here?"

"Nate, oh! Interesting." A definite smirk appears on mom's face. "So you're the guy, huh?"

"Mom!" I push past her so I can talk with Nate directly.

"Can I ... come in?" he asks. "Sorry to ask."

"Of course!" my mom says, shoving open the door wide. "Come in, come in."

"Mom," I hiss over my shoulder.

"What?" she replies, but I ignore her.

I lean in, and whisper to him, "Is everything okay?"

"Dad argued with me and stole my car keys," he whispers back.

“Fuck,” I mutter.

“Something wrong?” Mom asks.

“No,” I say. “Nothing.”

I don’t wanna embarrass Nate.

“I won’t stay long, Miss,” Nate says.

“Oh, it’s fine. Stay as long as you like,” she says, beckoning him to come in. “C’mon, c’mon. Welcome to the Cook mansion. It might not be much, but it’s our home.”

Mom acting like our home isn’t still giant makes me snort. It’s only a tad smaller than Nate’s home, but still. We’re rich, and I won’t complain. Or at least, Mom is ... and she knows it. That’s what you get for marrying a rich asshole lawyer who runs off with his mistress. He leaves you with a big house and a hefty monthly pay.

“Hi.” Mom holds out her hand. “Debbie.”

“Nate Wilson.” He shakes her hand and scratches behind his neck. “Sorry for the intrusion.”

“Oh stop, Sam’s boyfriend is more than welcome here.”

My eyes widen, and my lips slam shut. Nate stares at both of us and hides his laughter in his sleeve.

“I think we’ll go upstairs,” I say, trying to mitigate the damage. “C’mon.” I grasp Nate’s hand and drag him with me.

“Sure, honey! I’ll prepare some sandwiches for breakfast. If you need them, there are condoms in the bathroom closet.”

My face practically turns into a strawberry, that’s how mortified I am.

“What the—?” Nate mutters.

“Thanks, Mom!” I shout back from all the way upstairs.

In my room, I lock the door and pant against the wood. “I hope it takes her a long, long time to make them. Geez.”

Nate laughs. “Your mom’s a charmer. She knows about us?”

I make a face. “Unfortunately ... yeah. Sorry about that.”

“Don’t be,” he says, and he steps toward me, grabs my face, and kisses all the worries away. “So, boyfriend, huh?” The cheeky, boyish look on his face has my heart pounding and my body melting into a puddle all over again. What is it with him and his ability to turn me into a meek little lamb? Every kiss he gives me makes me feel a tiny bit weaker until I’m ready to fall into his arms and beg him to do me all over again.

He’s the first to pause, the first to breathe, and I follow reluctantly.

"I couldn't hide this from my mom," I murmur against his lips.

He leans back and raises a brow. "Was she mad?"

I shake my head.

"Weird."

"I thought so too, but it's actually the opposite. Wanted me to tell her about the whole shebang. Embarrassing," I say.

He scratches his neck. "Better than my dad, I guess."

"Yeah ..." I make a face. "I'm sorry. I should've left when I had the chance."

"No, it's not your fault." He grabs my hands and squeezes them. "It was my idea for you to stay in the first place."

"But I liked it," I say, smiling at him like a dumb teen. "A lot."

"Me too," he says.

"So ... is this a thing then?" I ask.

He gives me another smug smile. "If you want it to be."

I cock my head and sigh. "Really, Nate? That's your response?"

"What?" He shrugs, and I push him off me and walk past him. He sits down on the bed while I clean up my room a bit. It's a goddamn mess, and I didn't have any time to get my shit together before he came.

"Sorry for the mess," I say.

"I don't think it's messy at all," he says. "But you've seen my room, so you know."

I grin at him. "Yeah. I know all about your room. And the rap lyrics you hide in your drawer."

He puts his hands behind his head, and says, "You saw them?"

"Yep," I reply. "They're good."

He perks up. "You think so?"

"Yeah." I sit down beside him on my bed. "Why don't you write more? You've never mentioned them to our classmates either, have you?"

He shakes his head.

"Why not? And there's a writing group at school too, you know. You could join."

He looks away and bites his lip. "I don't know. I guess it just didn't cross my mind."

"Sure, it did," I say. "You're just making up excuses."

"Whoa, calm down there, Sammie-Sam," he says.

“What? I know you’re trying to hide them from everyone. Why else would you stuff them in your drawer and pretend they don’t exist?” I say, and I bump him against the shoulder. “You like writing. You should be proud of it.”

“I am, it’s just that ...” He clears his throat. “I’m expected to focus on football.”

“Football ... because of your family?”

He nods, but the look on his face is grim. “They expect me to excel so I can get a scholarship.”

“But why? Your family’s rich. They could get you into any school they like,” I say.

“It’s not about the money; it’s about the prestige. Reputation,” he explains. “My dad values reputation above all else.”

“Oh, I see.”

“So I can’t ever do something else,” he adds.

“Even if you love it?”

“I don’t ...” He sighs.

The conversation goes quiet, and I don’t know what to say. Part of me wants to encourage him to change, to do what he wants and to be free, to feel happy with himself, because I know deep down that’s what he wants to do. I could see it in his writings; that’s what he loves. And this whole football thing is family tradition, pride, and it’s getting in the way of who he really wants to be. But he refuses to give in because of family. Family rules ... are everything, and it shows.

“Which of my lyrics did you see?” Nate asks.

“Ah ...” I hesitate for a moment. “The one about you being a sinner ...” He nods and rubs his lips together, so I continue. “Is that rap about Nina?”

He looks away for a second and then looks me straight in the eyes. “Yeah.”

A sigh escapes my mouth. I didn’t know it would be that easy.

Didn’t know he would finally let go.

“Did you really do it?” I ask.

I don’t know why I ask. The question slipped off my tongue straight from the little whispers in my head.

“Do you think I did?” he asks, looking straight at me. “You’ve taken the photos. You know a part of the truth.”

“I don’t,” I say. “Not everything is on there.”

“But you saw us. You were there,” he says, his face darkening. “You know what I did.”

I lick my lips, unable to breathe.

“Show me the pictures.”

I gaze down at my feet and pause for a moment.

I guess it was only a matter of time.

So I get up from my bed and walk to my desk where my laptop is, and I open it and turn it on.

“I thought they weren’t on—?” he says.

“They aren’t,” I say, and I open a folder and go straight to my secured private server. “They’re on a server that I keep in my car.”

I smile at him, but it’s wrought with guilt and fear.

Guilt for keeping these from him even though I knew he wanted them all this time.

Fear for what I may find when I look at them once again.

CHAPTER 28



NATE

THE PICTURES ARE ARRANGED by date and time. She opens them and looks at the pictures one by one, starting at the beginning. Each one of them is new to me. I wonder how often she's looked at them, and if every time she looks, she sees something new. The real truth beyond the still images. Mere flashes of a memory no one holds as vividly as I do.

I take a few steps toward her and sit down behind her on the bed, watching carefully as she sifts through the pictures of the party at Robby's dad's beach house. Photos of her and Monica drinking, having a good time. That one photo of her showing her boobs and sticking her middle finger up. Then ... the ocean and the beach itself and all the beautiful underwater pics.

Until the moment that Nina appears. She sits down on the beach. A few more pictures of the underwater world. I join Nina on the beach. Our hands touch. There are a lot of photos of me and her looking ... talking ...

Does she know?

Does she know the words I heard that night?

Every image passes at the same interval, and she doesn't stay on one image any longer than the other. It's as though she's afraid one might tell her more. As if the story could unfold differently if she'd only stop and look.

The boy on the beach is no longer sitting next to the girl, whose lying in the sand as though she's gazing at the stars. As if she knew where she'd be going that night.

More pictures of the ocean floor and the fish swimming around.

There is the boy again, waltzing into the ocean.

A girl in his arms.

The waves crashing into him like an unending scream of terror telling him to stop.

But he won't stop. He can't stop.

It's too late to go back. Too late to turn back time.

And he lets himself be swallowed into the ocean with the girl's lifeless body in his arms.

The final one before he disappears shows him gazing right at the camera.

Sam.

I saw her that night in the middle of the ocean when I brought Nina home.

My lungs constrict, and I stare at the screen as Sam flicks through the images, showing me walking back out again with no girl in my arms. My clothes drenched; my shoulders slumped. And I walk and walk ... I don't stop walking until I reach my car and drive off. I go back home, I lie down in bed, and I stare at the ceiling until I fall into a sleep filled with nightmares come true.

But those last moments aren't captured on camera. Those moments reside only in my memory ... just like so many others. There's a hidden world behind the one we live in, behind what we can perceive. The real truth.

When the pictures stop, she closes down the app and stares at the screen for a while.

"Were those all of them?" I ask.

She nods. "It's all I have from that night."

I nod a couple of times. I should've known. "Then it was all for nothing."

"What?" She turns around and glares at me. "What do you mean?"

"Your laptop, the phone, all the stealing ... it was all for nothing." I shake my head. "I thought these pictures could exonerate me."

"What?" Her eyes widen.

"That's why I wanted them," I say. "They should've shown the truth, but they didn't."

She clasps my hands, and says, "Tell me what happened that night."

The stern look in her eyes is impossible to look away from. It's like justice is staring straight back at me from deep down in the abyss. I've kept this memory to myself for so long. It's time I tell someone.

So I lean back and gaze out the window at the winds blowing outside, and I bring myself back to that night when both our lives changed forever.



SUMMER – BEACH HOUSE PARTY

THE MUSIC IS LOUD, and the alcohol is flowing. Even though we're not old enough to drink yet, no one cares. Robby always throws the best parties at his dad's beach house. It's the perfect place to host the final party of the summer before school begins.

I'm dancing to the rhythm, drinking from one cup to the next and getting drunk and high on the beat. I'm living the life while I still can because I know when the football season starts, I'll be working hard toward getting that scholarship. This is the only time I have to relax, so I'm going to enjoy it the best way I can.

I sit down on the couch, and one of Robby's friends, Kevin, offers me a smoke. Weed. I cough as I inhale, and it makes them laugh, but I love the taste. He always brings the good shit to the parties. The dude even has grade A cocaine on him, and he shows me a package.

"Sweet ..." I don't know what I'm talking about, but I'm high with delirium, so I take a package off him and give him some cash.

I continue drinking and watch Robby smooch up with a girl in the corner. Nina. A girl from my class who I've talked to a couple of times. She was always so nice to me, and she always managed to make me smile. I once thought about kissing her myself ... but I guess that opportunity has now passed.

They go up the stairs, probably to his room, and I turn my head away so I can focus on the conversations around me.

Layla hangs around me, constantly touching my leg, and I love how it feels, but maybe that's because I'm drugged out of my mind. She grabs my face, and in a bout of drunken rage, we kiss like a mad couple. Everyone around us cheers. I grin when she dry humps me even though I know there will be pics of this the next morning.

But I don't care about tonight even though I should. I definitely should.

When Layla pulls away to get more alcohol, my mind lingers on her sweet body, and my eyes follow her ass into the kitchen. Right then, Nina appears again. I don't know how long she was upstairs, but when she came down again, her mascara is all messed up and runny. For some reason, out of everything, that's what I notice.

Her skirt is also on backward.

I swallow away the bile that rises in my throat.

She waddles off, clutching her shoes, out through the kitchen door.

I get up from the couch and follow her.

I don't know what drives me to do it, but my feet won't stop.

I follow her out into the darkness of the night ... into the wild unknown of the sea beyond. On her bare feet, she traipses down the steps, her body shaking. Every move she makes is shaky, but so are mine, so that shouldn't surprise me. Yet for some reason, it does.

My drunken head can barely walk down the stairs. Nina's steady footsteps are ahead of me, and I follow the path down to the beachfront. Coarse sand bristles against my skin as I walk toward her. She sits facing the ocean, her hands wrapped around her knees, her shoes right beside her. She seems cumbersome ... like something's bothering her, but I can't quite tell what. The fresh air cleared my mind a bit, as much as that's possible, and I sit down beside her.

We enjoy the silence of the outside world for a while. It's far better than the noise inside the house. If I'd known the waves were so peaceful to listen to as they crashed onto the beach, I would've come out here a long time ago.

"It's beautiful, isn't it?" she murmurs.

"Perfect," I reply.

"Mmmhmm ..."

I glance at her and the mark on her skin that's turning more purple as time passes, but I don't ask why.

"Man, I'm so tired," she mutters after a while.

"Oh, yeah, me too," I say, but I don't really understand what she means. Only that I'm so fucking high and drunk, I could lie down and stay there the rest of the night.

"How many drinks have you had?" she asks.

"Too many to count," I say. "You?"

It takes her a while to answer. "I don't know ..."

I lean back on my hands and gaze at her hair, which is all messed up, just like her makeup. “Are you okay?”

She licks her lips but remains quiet for a while.

I don’t know what drives me, but I grab her hand. We stay like this for a few minutes, holding hands and gazing at the ocean like two teens too drunk to talk. Or maybe that’s my fucked-up brain trying to persuade me to see her as the same as me.

Because she’s anything but the same.

Something about her is different from before.

Something ... that’s marked her forever.

“Do you have that cocaine?” she suddenly asks, and I raise my brows at her. “I saw Kevin give it to you.”

I take the bag from my pocket and dangle it in front of her. She immediately snatches it from my hands. “Whoa. You’re eager.”

She doesn’t say another word. Instead, she pours the whole bag out onto her hand and snorts it all up in one go. I stare in amazement, wondering if that’s not too much for a single person to take, especially after drinking as much alcohol as we have.

And it is ... but it doesn’t register with me until it’s too late.

Her eyes roll to the back of her head.

Her body slowly slumps down onto the beach.

She mutters some words. “Robby ... Robby ... Fucking Robby ...”

And I don’t know what she wants—if she wants me to get him or if she wants me to go mess him up.

Her mouth drops open, and vomit comes out. I lean back and watch her convulse. I don’t know what to do. I can’t think straight. Can’t fucking breathe.

She’s dying.

I give her CPR, but I don’t know what I’m doing, and nothing works.

By the time I’m done pushing onto her chest, she’s long gone.

I’m alone in the night with a girl who died ... in my hands ... by my doing.

I shouldn’t have given her the cocaine. Shouldn’t have shown her the baggie. Shouldn’t have said yes.

Fuck. What have I done?

If anyone finds her here with me, I’m dead. My father will kill me. If my mom only knew what I was doing right now, she’d disown me.

Fuck!

I almost yell out loud but then slap my own mouth with my hand to prevent the noise from spilling out.

I can't let anyone find out.

Even if it's not my fault—*she* did this—they'll still assume it was me.

I'll be the killer. The one who pulled the trigger.

I gave her everything she needed. And if I go down for this, my life is over.

No more school, no more football, no scholarship.

Jail.

I can't let it happen.

My body gets up before I realize it. An unexplainable energy rushes through my veins as I prop her body up against my legs. Foam comes from her mouth as I pull her up into my arms. Her lifeless body swings as I carry her toward the ocean. I don't know what I'm doing, and I don't know where I'm headed.

All I know is that I have to stop this.

Bury the evidence.

Bury the girl.

So I walk into the ocean with her in my arms until the water rises against my feet and the waves take me in.

Until I see a pair of eyes ... staring straight back at me from the abyss.

A flash of light follows. It blinds me to the point of letting go, and I drop the body in the ocean.

I peer ahead, but the girl is gone; disappeared into the waves, just like my pride.

Was she really there, or was it a figment of my imagination?

The cold water slaps me against the chest, forcing the air from my lungs, and I force myself to continue. Back toward the surface ... back to my life.

My fingers are entangled with Nina's red hair. I glance back. Nina drifts peacefully in the water while my heart screams out in pain. But I won't let go of this hurt; I'll carry it with me for as long as I live.

Shame on the sinner.

The sinner who buried a body in the ocean knowing it would mean the end.

The end of everything he knew.

CHAPTER 29



SAM

NATE TELLS me how it happened like a string of pictures, an event playing over and over in my head. Everything he says feels so unreal; I question its reality, but it must be true. It's the only explanation for everything I saw that night at the party. But it still shocks me to my core and makes me shake in my seat.

That girl ... Nina ... she took a lethal dose of cocaine, and that's probably what killed her before she even ended up in the ocean. Which means ...

"You're innocent," I mutter.

"Not exactly." Nate sighs. "In my drunken stupidity, I still threw her in the ocean to try to bury the evidence." He rubs his forehead. "I can't believe I was so goddamn stupid."

"Stop." I grab his hand. "Don't punish yourself over this."

"Why not? I should. I'm the one she got the coke from. I'm the one who killed her."

"*She* made the choice." I look deep into his eyes. "She pulled her own trigger by snorting that shit. You didn't choose for her."

"I should've called the cops. Should've called an ambulance ..." he says.

I lick my lips. "Well ... yeah, you're right about that part. But you were drunk and high."

"That's no excuse," he says.

“But you don’t know that the police won’t see it that way,” I say. “If you tell them the full story, maybe they’ll understand.”

“No, they won’t understand, Sam!” His voice is suddenly loud and overbearing, and it makes me jolt back in my seat. “I threw her fucking body in the ocean when she could’ve been saved! That alone will put me in jail.”

He gets up and starts pacing.

“But they have to understand you weren’t capable of making rational decisions,” I say.

“They don’t because I’m just a drunken jock who made a dumb decision, and now he has to pay for it with his life.”

“Don’t say that,” I mutter, as his demeanor gets increasingly worse.

“The police are pinning this on me. My dad even had to get a lawyer for me,” he says. “Your dad.”

My eyes widen. “What?”

“Todd Cook.”

“He’s *your* lawyer?”

He nods, and my stomach turns into knots.

“Fuck,” I mutter.

I can’t believe he’s back in town ... and that he didn’t even bother to say hi to Mom or me. Goes to show he only cares about his work. Fucker.

“The point is, I don’t know the guy, and I don’t trust him,” Nate says. “I haven’t told him anything yet.”

“You shouldn’t. He can’t be trusted,” I say. Everything he touches turns to shit.

“But you don’t know what it’s been like keeping this secret for so long,” he says.

“Why didn’t you tell someone else sooner?” I ask. “Don’t you trust your dad?”

“No, I can’t. Who the fuck could talk about something like this?” he yells.

“Shh ... not so loud.” I put a finger over my lips. “My mom could hear us.”

“Who cares? You already know what I’ve done. You could go to the cops anytime you wanted.”

Does he have that little faith in me? I cross my arms. “Don’t you think I would’ve gone by now if I wanted to?”

“Well, then why didn’t you?” He runs his fingers through his hair. “You had the pictures.”

“Because I guess I never believed you were guilty,” I say after a while, and I tuck a strand of my hair behind my ear.

He pauses for a moment and glances at me, the look in his eyes briefly hopeful. But then that same hope dissipates as though it never even existed. “No. I *am* guilty.”

“Stop telling yourself that,” I say.

“It’s the goddamn truth, and you know it.” He turns toward me. “What I did was unforgivable.”

“But—”

“No. Stop making excuses for me.”

“Those pictures can exonerate you,” I say, trying to talk sense into him.

“They can’t. Don’t you see? All they do is confirm my crime,” he shouts. “It was all for nothing. *Every-goddamn-thing.*”

“What?” I gasp.

“It was all useless ...” With slumped shoulders, he stands near the door, his fingers touching the wood. The words he spoke sink in slowly.

Our time together.

Us.

Useless?

No. Fuck him.

“Get out,” I say.

He glances at me over his shoulder, his face marred with pain and shame. But I don’t feel empathy anymore. He wasted it all.

“I’m sorry. Coming here was a mistake,” he says, and he opens the door and leaves, slamming it shut behind him.

Tears well up in my eyes, but I refuse to let them fall.

Instead, I blink them away, grab a pillow, and throw it at the door.

“Fuck you, Nate Wilson!”

I clench my legs together and force myself to stop crying over a stupid boy.

Right then, my mom comes in with a plate of sandwiches, and she immediately places it down on my dresser, sits down beside me, and holds me tight.



NATE

FOR THE ENTIRE DAY, I practice football by myself on an empty field. The more I run, the better I feel. With every breath my lungs take, I feel more and more alive even though I know I'm approaching the point of no return.

My dad reluctantly gave me back my car keys so I could go to school. But then after a few hours, he called to tell me the police department still has me as the main suspect. Apparently, the lawyer told him to tell me to lay low and provide him with more details. But nothing I share is relevant. They won't believe me, even if I tried to tell them the truth. Not even I would believe it if I were them.

What happened was a fluke ... a giant mistake I wish I could erase, but I can't.

All I can do is move forward and hope for the best.

That, and distract myself from the impending criminal process if they actually do indict me. My mind is going haywire right now, and the only way to destress is by having a good time.

Robby invited me to come to his home for a party. I can't stop staring at the text he sent me, with the picture of him and Layla almost kissing, but I know Layla, and it's all just a farce to get me to come.

Still, I could use the distraction, so I put on my good outfit, jump into my car, and head there. The beachfront used to make me so goddamn happy, but now when the waves crash against the sand, my body becomes rigid and icy cold.

I quickly park the car and make my way inside so I don't have to hear the sound anymore. I'm immediately bombarded by music and people hanging around my neck, pushing beer into my hand.

"Nate! Finally, you're here," Robby says, and he pulls me in for a quick bro hug. "Drink. Drink," he urges, pushing a glass up to my lips.

I take a sip, and the boys cheer, and they finally get off my back.

"What a welcome," I mutter.

"Nice, right? We miss you, bro. It's not the same without you," Robby says, winking. "Too many girls for me alone, you know."

I frown, and the smile that was on my face dissipates. "Yeah, I get it."

"Talking about girls ..." He spins around, aiming for a girl with coppery brown hair standing near the pool. "I gotta go do my thing. I'll see you later, okay? Have fun!"

I swallow away the lump in my throat as I watch him disappear in the crowd. I contemplate following him to see what he'll do.

However, before I can act, someone swings their arms around my neck again. "I missed you."

It's Layla.

And her lips are on my mouth before I realize it.

She kisses me hard and fast, but I shove her away.

"What the fuck, Layla?" I shout.

"What? Can't a girl say hi?" she muses, shrugging.

"No, I'm done with you. Stop kissing me," I say, swiping my lips. "Just stop hanging around me altogether. I don't want to see you anymore."

"Geez, I was only having fun," Layla huffs. "You don't have to be so mean about it."

"Just get out of my way," I say, pushing past her so I can breathe.

She rolls her eyes but luckily doesn't follow me as I go into the kitchen and stare out the window at the ocean beyond, wondering what in the hell I'm even doing here.



SAM

I STACK the boxes on top of each other and wipe the sweat off my brows. Working in the stockroom is one of the worst parts of this part-time job. They're heavy as fuck, and for a small girl like me to lug the boxes off the top of the stands is a little hard, but I manage.

At least I don't have to face customers today. They wouldn't wanna buy a sandwich looking at this face of mine anyway. I think I'd even scare myself if I looked in the mirror. That's how much of a sourpuss I am right now. All because of that goddamn Nate Wilson and his stories. I shouldn't have ever gone with him. I shouldn't have let him into my home or into my heart.

He's stomped on it as if it meant nothing.

All this time, he was only after those pictures, and I was dumb to believe it was anything more than that. Stupid little girl.

I shake my head and force myself to stop thinking about it and focus on my work.

But my phone buzzes in my pocket, and I can't help but check it.

It's Kevin from school, a friend of Robby's ... but he's never contacted me before. What could he possibly want with me, and how did he get my number? I open the message. It's a video ... of Layla kissing Nate on the lips. Just a few seconds, but it's enough to fill me with rage.

Fuck him and fuck that girl who ever fell for him.

Why did Kevin send me this? Is this all a joke to them? Fucking jocks, always playing with girls' hearts.

I chuck my phone in the corner and groan out loud.

My boss walks in. "Sam? I heard something fall. You okay?"

"Yeah," I say, clearing my throat. "I'm fine."

"Are you done sorting? It's almost closing time."

I nod. "I'll finish up quickly."

"Good. If you need more time, I can give you the keys," he says. "Just like last time."

I smile. I'm glad at least someone trusts me. "Thanks."

He places them on the shelf, and says, "I'm gonna go home, 'kay?"

"See you next week," I reply, and he closes the door behind me.

I sigh out loud, looking at the boxes I still have left. Just a few more and then it's done.

However, my phone buzzes again, and my eyes can't help but hone in on it even though it's lying in a far corner of the room. I should ignore it. It's probably another photo or video of Nate and Layla making out, and I really don't need to see that shit right now.

Time to pull my big girl panties up and do what I came here to do. Work.



NATE

I WALK AROUND THE HOUSE, bouncing to the music, sipping my drink. It's nice to drown myself in the noise. It blocks the voices in my head from screaming at me. And best of all, my dad won't be able to bother me with calls. I've put my phone on mute so I can enjoy the time I have left. Sniff the freedom while it's still mine.

Will it be as noisy in jail or as quiet as death?

When is the last day I'll be able to bang a girl?

And how long will it take for the other inmates to murder me?

Fuck. I know the day is coming, but I'm not prepared.

I don't want to be locked away ... And especially not after ruining things with the only person who ever believed I was innocent.

Shit. I shouldn't have ruined things with her. Shouldn't have said those things to her face. It was hurtful, and I know it. I didn't mean it when I said it, but I was overcome with emotions, and I lashed out at her, and that was wrong. I wish I could take it back. Wish she was here right now so I could kiss the pain away and beg for forgiveness.

Fuck.

"Hey, want a smoke?" Kevin's suddenly up in my face, breaking into my chain of thought.

"No, thanks." I clear my throat. "I'm done with that shit."

"What? You sure?" he asks as I pass him. "You're missing out, man."

"Nah, I'm good," I say, waving it off, and I place my drink on a table somewhere.

I don't wanna get smashed or high anymore.

There's only one thing I want, and it's not here, goddammit.

I shouldn't be such a goddamn pussy. I should face her and own up to my mistakes. It's the least I could do, so I march toward the door.

However, a girl with mascara running down her face makes me stop in my tracks. Memories of that night flood back into my mind like a tsunami of torment. But it's not Nina standing near the staircase this time.

It's Monica, Sam's best friend.

CHAPTER 30



NATE

MONICA STUMBLES away from the stairs, and my eyes settle on hers. They scream with the same pain I once saw in Nina.

Monica grabs her phone, furiously texting something. She walks past a few people and into a hallway, disappearing from my sight.

This can't happen again.

I push past all the people standing in my way, wading through the crowd until I've caught up with her. She's on her way outside, one foot out the door, when I grab her arm, and say, "Hey."

She jerks free and pulls her hand close to her chest, glaring at me as though I'm a viper trying to bite her.

"Are you okay?" I ask.

With big eyes, she stares at me without saying a word.

I try to touch her, but she leans away again. "Don't touch me."

"Okay, I won't." I hold up my hands. "See? No touching."

She still glares at me, but the look in her eyes softens a little.

"I just wanna know if you're okay."

"Fine," she says.

"You don't look it," I reply, lowering my head so I can talk without trying to scream over the music. "If you need help, just say it."

Again, she's quiet, but her lip trembles, and it tells me all I need to know.

“C’mon, let’s go outside.” I hold the door open for her and walk with her down the steps of that same staircase I once trod when I followed Nina into the abyss.

But I won’t let that happen now. Not ever again.

When Monica’s at the bottom of the stairs, she stops, and tears start rolling down her face.

“What happened?” I ask, standing in front of her.

“Robby ...” she mutters.

Robby. Every time his name is uttered, a girl cries her eyes out.

This is not okay.

I lean in, and ask, “What did he do to you?”

Her eyes widen. “I ... I ...”

“You can tell me,” I say.

“I can’t.” She shakes her head.

“You can trust me,” I say. “I promise, I won’t tell a soul.”

She licks her lips, tears still tumbling down to the ground. “I thought he wanted to get back together. He said he was sorry, and he was going to do better.” She hiccups. “It was all a lie.”

“Did he hurt you?” I ask.

She nods and then more tears burst out, and she falls against me, hugging me tight while bawling her eyes out.

“Where?” I ask.

“Everywhere ...” She points at her body, but most specifically between her legs.

I hold her and let her cry against me, but rage flows through my veins.

“Fuck,” I growl. He’s done it before ... and now he did it again. Fuck that guy. He’s hurt enough people. “I’m going to kill that son of a bitch.”

“Wait!” Monica grabs my arm before I can walk back up the stairs. “No. Please ... don’t.”

I pause and look at her. “Anything but that,” she adds. “I just wanna go. Can you just take me away from here, please?”

How can I refuse when she’s looking at me like that? This is Sam’s best friend. I can’t say no to that.

My nostrils flare as I suck in a breath, and say, “C’mon. Let’s go.”

I grab her hand and pull her with me to my car, and I help her get inside before I jump in too and lock the doors.

“What’s that for?” she asks, glancing at me from the side.

“So I don’t do anything I’ll regret,” I say, and I start the engine. “Where do you wanna go? Home?”

“Sam,” she says. “She’s working. I texted her, but she won’t reply, and she won’t pick up her phone.” More tears roll down her cheeks, but she swipes them away. “I need her.”

I nod and shift my car into gear. “Okay. I’ll take you there myself.”

She nods too, and I can tell she’s trying to hold herself up and pretend she’s okay even though she isn’t. “You’re gonna be okay, okay?” I say. “I promise.”

She rubs her lips together, her eyes filling with tears. I recognize that pain. I feel it in my bones. But this will pass and so will Robby. Because I will make fucking sure of it.



SAM

WHEN I’M DONE STACKING the boxes and unpacking the supplies needed for the next shift, I clean the clutter and make sure it’s tidy before locking up. I hop into my car and grab my phone to check the missed messages. It’s taken me some time to gather the courage to look at it, but I figured nothing could be more painful than what I already saw. Unless they made a porno next, which I doubt. God, just the thought makes me shiver.

Guess that’s the perk of being a creative; you always see everything and anything as if it’s happening right in front of you, which is both a blessing and a curse.

I take a deep breath and open my messages. Nothing from Kevin, so I guess that’s good. It’s actually from Monica, and she sent it a while back, so that must’ve been the one after I threw my phone in a corner. I open it up and read, but with every passing second, my heartbeat rises more and more than it ever did when Kevin sent that clip.

Mo: Come pick me up, please

Mo: Something horrible happened

Mo: I need u

Mo: Why aren’t u replying

Mo: Sam, please

Mo: Robby’s room ...

Mo: I’m alone

Mo: Help

No, no, no!

Something's gone horribly wrong at that party. Mo needed me, and I wasn't there for her. She's all alone and afraid, and no one's there to pick her up. I should've been there, should've read the messages, should've run to her immediately.

Instead, I was too busy trying to ignore that damn phone because of Kevin's message.

FUCK!

I immediately kick the gas and chase off the road.

No time to waste. I gotta get to her *now*.

I drive as fast as I can, ignoring the speed limits even though I know that's dangerous and bad. I'll deal with the tickets later because right now, I need to get my best friend out of trouble. She's probably crying her eyes out on the toilet right now. Locked the door to be safe.

And I wasn't there to save her.

Fuck!

No time to waste. I get to the beach as fast as I can, but I know it's still not fast enough. After parking my car as close as I possibly can, I immediately jump out and march toward Robby's parents' beach house. The music can be heard from outside, and it pulls in more people than the house can manage.

It's jam-packed when I walk inside, and I can barely find my way through the crowd. Everyone's drinking, dancing, and smoking pot, and I'm wading through trying to find Mo. I call out her name, but there's no reply. I don't recognize anyone here, so I can't ask them to tell me where she is either because they probably don't know her.

I check the toilets, but those are empty too. She's not in the kitchen, nor in any of the many hallways. Where the hell could she have gone? I hope to God no one hurt her because they're gonna fucking pay for it.

Suddenly, someone throws an arm around my shoulder and pulls me in. "Hey there, Sam. Nice of you to come join us too!"

It's Kevin, and I immediately throw his arm off me. "Get off me."

"Aww now, no need for hostility."

"You're a fucking asshole," I spit.

"Hey, I didn't wanna do it," he says, holding up his hands.

“Right, your left hand forced you to send me that goddamn video,” I say with a snarky voice, and his demeanor instantly shifts.

“I didn’t wanna send or even record that shit, but Layla asked me, and I still owed her so ...”

I frown. “What?”

“You didn’t hear it from me.” He attempts to walk off, but I follow him and grab his shirt to stop him in his tracks.

“Wait, did Layla tell you to tape it or to send it?”

He leans in, and says, “Both.”

My eyes narrow. “Don’t bullshit me now.”

“I’m not. I have proof.”

He fishes his phone from his pocket and shows me some text messages between him and Layla.

“See? She literally asked me to do it. I still have the original recording too. Watch.” He clicks away and opens up his files, opening the video again. Seeing them kiss again makes bile rise to my throat, but this one goes on. It doesn’t stop. And it shows Nate pushing her away, angry as hell.

“She set him up,” I whisper.

“Yup. Guess she just wanted to tease you.”

There are a lot of things I want to say right now, but none of them are words I’d say to a lackey of hers. “Thanks, Kevin,” I sneer.

“You’re welcome,” he muses, pretending everything’s fine. Then he fishes a smoke from his pocket, and says, “Want some? You look like you need to relax a little.”

“No, thanks,” I say, walking off.

“You’ll feel much better if you just say yes!” he calls after me.

Sure, Kevin ... I bet he says that a lot. Just like all the other jocks here. They all spin girls around their fingers as though it means nothing, but they have no clue how much damage they inflict.

All they do is hurt people and make them suffer. And now it’s my best friend who got unlucky. Well, I’m gonna find her and bring her home with me.

I search the premises and check every area to make sure I didn’t skip anything, but I still can’t find Mo. The only thing I’ve noticed are the cameras positioned literally everywhere. Were these here too last summer? Maybe they caught something I didn’t ...

Regardless, I have to search for Mo, so I continue until I find a staircase. I go up there, making sure no one saw me before I open the doors for each of the rooms. There are a lot of them, but only one has football posters and trophies. That has to be the one.

I go in and take a look around. The bed in the corner looks unkempt, as though someone recently slept in it, and a closet door is open too. Someone was in here not too long ago ... I hope he's not still here.

I search around and open the shower door, peeking through the crack to see if anyone's there. There's a light on but no one in the shower. Odd.

No sign of Mo anywhere, and I wonder where she's gone or if she's still here. I check out the open closet and spot something shiny in the back behind some clothes. I reach for it and push aside some clothes. It's a camera.

My eyes narrow. *What the ...?*

I step back and look around the room. Another camera sits on top of a dresser, partially hidden in a box ... and it's pointed at the bed.

Fuck.

This can't be what I think it is, right?

I peel open the box and check the camera. There's a card inside, so I take it out. It's still warm to the touch. This thing was on not long ago.

I walk to the desk where a laptop sits, and I put the card inside. I don't know why or what pushes me to do so, but I can't stop. Morbid curiosity overtakes me as I open the folder and search through all the videos on the card.

All the hairs on the back of my neck stand up.

Mo.

I click on it. The video starts. Mo's dragged into the room by Robby. She's not walking properly and has trouble standing. He kisses her. She tries to push him away, but he doesn't listen. The more she shoves him, the harder he grabs her. She slaps him. He wraps her hands behind her back and throws her on the bed. Rips down her pants. Tears off her panties. Pulls down whatever stands between him and her ...

The sight of it makes my eyes tear up.

I can't watch this, but I must. For her. I have to know what happened.

But it's hard, so hard, to just sit here and not be able to do anything because it already happened.

When it ends, he releases her from his grip and moves away. He leaves her on the bed, her body unmoving, almost as if she's passed out. And before he leaves the room, he grins at the camera.

My fist balls. "Motherfucker ..."

Suddenly, the door opens, and I jolt up from my seat and slam the laptop shut.

It's Robby.

CHAPTER 31



NATE

“I DON’T GET IT. She never skips work,” Monica says.

I gaze at the place, which is completely dark inside. It looks closed. “Are you sure she’s here?” I ask.

“She’s supposed to be,” she answers, and she fishes her phone from her pocket. “C’mon, Sam, why aren’t you replying?”

She continues furiously typing a message to Sam, but there’s no response. These two are best friends, so I don’t think it’s likely Sam would ever ignore her.

But what the fuck is she doing right now?

Her friend needs her. Badly. There’s no way anything else is more important than this.

“Shit.” Mo suddenly grabs my arm. “What if she went back there?”

“Where?”

“The party,” she says. “To get me. But I’m not there.”

“Shit,” I hiss, and I shift the car back into gear.

“What do we do?”

“Go back there,” he says.

“But—”

“I won’t let him touch you,” I assure her. “I promise.”

She nods a few times and gazes out the window. “I don’t wanna see him again ...”

“We’ll only go to pick up Sam,” I reply.

“Yeah. We need to find her.” She shudders and glances at me. “What if that asshole already got to her too?”

The fearful look in her eyes increases the fury in mine.

“I’ll kill him.” And I hit the gas hard and speed off.



SAM

I SWALLOW hard as he steps into the room and closes the door, clicking the lock into place.

“Hello there, Sam. Didn’t expect to see you here,” he muses, giving me a vicious smile.

Should I confront him? No, not here. That would put me in danger, and I have no way out.

“What you doing here, girl?” he asks.

“Ah ...”

C’mon, make something up, Sam!

“Just admiring the view.” I smile hard and point at the window.

What an idiot.

Couldn’t you come up with a better excuse?

He rubs his lips together and narrows his eyes at me while sauntering closer and closer. With every one of his steps toward me, I take one back until there are none to take.

“You seem jittery,” he says, placing his beer down on the desk. “I’d almost think you’re nervous because I’m here.”

Asshole. “What? Me? No way,” I say in jest while I look around for an exit.

A devilish smirk forms on his lips. “Oh, c’mon now, Sam. No need to lie to me.” He holds open his arms, and says, “Want a beer? I’ve got more in a secret storage up here.” He winks.

“No, thanks.” I shake my head, but he still comes closer.

“Don’t be shy,” he says.

“Are you drunk?” I ask.

He shrugs. “Maybe a little. Does it matter? Let’s have a good time.” He grabs my arm, and I feel so icky, I jerk free, gazing at the spot he touched with revulsion.

His eyes follow mine, and when he looks me directly in the eyes and sees the disgust, his whole demeanor changes. Within seconds, he’s grabbed

me by both arms and pulled me with him across the floor. I scream, but he covers my mouth with a hand.

“Fucking girls should know better than to come in here without permission,” he growls in my ear. “What were you really doing? Checking out my laptop? I saw you sifting through my shit. You won’t get away with it.”

“Let. Me. Go,” I hiss, and I bite his finger.

He grunts, and I kick backward straight into his nuts. He cries out in pain and releases me. I move away from him and get to the desk quickly. I take out the card and tuck it into my pocket. But Robby’s already blocked the door with his body.

“You’re not going anywhere, Sam,” he says.

“Fuck you, I’m going to the police,” I answer. “You’re going to pay for what you did to Mo.”

He laughs. Louder and louder. “You think I’m gonna let you? You think you’re the only one who ever caught me?”

I gulp at his words, but I remind myself I’m a fucking resilient bitch. If I have to fight to get away, then so be it.

“You think your stupid girlfriend was the first to come here?”

“Don’t talk about her like that,” I growl back, tears streaming down my face.

He laughs, approaching me. “She wasn’t my first, and she won’t be my last.” He holds up his hand. “Now hand me back the card.”

“No. You did this to Nina too, didn’t you?” I say, eyeing the room to see if there’s anything I can grab and use against him.

He licks the top of his lip. “She was ... different.”

So he did.

Nate was right all along.

Everything he told me was true. He just didn’t know how bad it truly was.

Nina never told him what happened to her. What he did that made her so broken. And I bet it’s on the fucking card too.

“You drugged her,” I say, swallowing away the lump in my throat.

He scoffs. “She drugged herself. She took the pills willingly.”

“You gave them to her.”

“Everyone takes them,” he says, shrugging it off as if it’s no big deal. “It’s not a party when no one gets high.”

“She died because of you!” I shout.

He snorts. “How the fuck was I supposed to know she was gonna snort herself to death?”

“You’re sick,” I hiss, and I reach for a drawer in his desk.

“Thanks ... We all are,” he muses.

“No, you just tell yourself that so you can live with yourself,” I spit. “You’re nothing but a vile monster.”

He snorts. “You think I did this on my own? Open your goddamn eyes.”

My eyes widen. “What the fuck do you mean?”

He shakes his head, laughing at me. “Enough talking.”

He suddenly attacks me, throwing himself on top of me, and I struggle with him, grasping at the drawer, for anything. His hands wrap around my neck while I reach out, and I barely manage to hold the drawer. But I can’t breathe, and he’s right on top of me. Him and those filthy hands of his strangling me. The look in his eyes mad with lust and rage, and all kinds of things I never thought I’d see.

Mo trusted him. She liked him and thought he’d be her knight in shining armor.

He’s a fucking sicko who uses and abuses girls.

Fuck him.

I reach for anything I can use to save myself, expending every last drop of my energy on the tips of my fingers. I pull as hard as I can, and the drawer tumbles to the ground. A pair of scissors fall to the ground, right on top of my hand.

I grab them ... and shove them straight into his side.

He howls in pain, and his grip on my throat loosens. His hands move to his side while he rolls off me. I push him away and scramble off the floor, wiping the blood that’s on my hands on my pants. I look at that entitled motherfucker, and with a grimace on my face, I walk up to him and kick him in the side.

“This is for Mo,” I growl while he whimpers in pain. I grab the bottle of beer and empty it out over his painful gash. “And that’s for Nina.”

I chuck the bottle away and then disconnect his laptop and take it with me.

“Wait, don’t leave me here!” he groans as I open the door.

One final glance and I take the key from the door and lock it from the outside. That’ll teach him. It’ll also give me enough time to get out of here

with all the proof before any of his buddies try to bail him out. Because he sure as hell didn't do this all on his own.

He has accomplices. And judging from the admission about the drugs, I have a pretty good idea about who it could be.

I immediately march toward Kevin, ignoring everyone looking at the blood on my pants and hands. I grab him by the shirt and shove him against the wall.

"Whoa, what the h—?"

"Shut up. You fucking helped him, didn't you?" I growl.

"What? What are you talking about?" he scoffs. "Who?"

"You know goddamn well who. *Robby*. You helped him get those girls."

"What? No," he says, frowning.

"You gave him the drugs," I say.

"So? I give everyone drugs," he replies, holding up his hands. "I don't know what you think I did, but I had nothing to do with it."

"The cameras in his room. Do you know what he does with them?"

"No," he says, raising a brow.

"But you knew they were there," I say.

"Yeah, he asked me to install them for him."

My jaw drops, and I point my finger at his chest. "So you *did* know."

"No, Robby never said what he did with them. I knew he was a perv. Everyone did."

I make a face, and say, "Don't you fucking get it? Nina."

His eyes widen. "Oh ... shit."

"Yeah." Man, I thought these boys knew shit, but apparently, they're that stupid.

"Fuck, did he—?"

I rub my lips together. "I'm pretty sure he did. That's also why she died."

"Wait." He leans in, and whispers, "But everyone says she was killed by Nate. Is that true?"

"No," I say. Even though I wasn't sure before, I am now.

"Well, fuck," he says. "If I'd known ... shit, I would've never given him the drugs if I knew what he was gonna do." He rubs his forehead. "Man, I shouldn't have listened to Layla."

I frown. "Layla?" What does she have to do with this?

He leans in, and says, “She was the one who asked me to give them to Robby and Nina.”

Why would she do that?

Unless ...

Nate.

My eyes widen.

This was all about him.

CHAPTER 32



SAM

It's all starting to make sense now.

"What?" Kevin mutters.

"Nothing," I say. I don't want to tell him because he could tell someone else, and I'm not sure yet. There's only one way to be certain.

"Is she here?" I ask.

"Yeah, she's out somewhere near the pool," he says.

"Thanks," I say, and I go in the opposite direction toward the wardrobe area.

I search through the coats on the racks until I find one I recognize. One that belongs to Layla.

"God, please, let it be in here," I mutter to myself.

I fish in the pockets and take out a phone.

Fuck, yeah. I already noticed at school that she had two of them—one she brings everywhere to do her thing, and the other ... I'm gonna find out.

I pull it out and click. There's no password on it, so I check the text messages, opening a conversation with Kevin. I scroll back to the day when Nina died.

LAYLA: You have the pills?

Kevin: Yeah.

Layla: Give them to Robby.

Kevin: Why?

Layla: Just do it.

Kevin: What will I get in return?

Layla: I've got plenty of cash. Meet me outside.

THAT WAS it for that night. I don't see anything else that matters there. Except ... there's also a conversation between her and Robby, and they're pretty recent too. This is from hours ago.

LAYLA: Do you have the camera footage? I want it.

Robby: You know it'll cost ya.

Layla: I'll get u another girl.

Robby: Deal. I <3 brunettes.

Layla: Fine. Just send the video.

Robby: Y do you want it so badly?

Layla: None of your business.

Robby: Fine. I'll get you what you want as long as I get mine.

Layla: Thx

MY PUPILS DILATE.

Layla ... She has a video?

I frantically search through her files until I find it. The one from the night when Nina died.

It shows Nina and Nate together on the beach from a totally different angle, definitely a camera hanging from a wall outside. The two are still holding hands, so it has to be that night as I remember that vividly. But this time, it also shows her taking the cocaine. Her whole overdose is recorded on tape.

Layla got this video from Robby, so Robby knew Nate was innocent. He had this video all along, and he didn't do anything to stop Nate from being hunted down by the police. Why? Robby was his friend.

This doesn't make any sense.

But I have to keep this somewhere in case it's needed, so I immediately grab my own phone and record the screen while the video plays. I don't stop recording, not even as I look further through their messages, trying to understand what happened that night. I don't have much time because Robby will be alerting people any second now. I scroll down to the night

that Nina passed as fast as I can ... And what I find in her messages makes the hairs on the back of my neck stand up.

LAYLA: Pick Nina.

Robby: Why?

Layla: Just do it.

Robby: Okay. What do I get?

Layla: Ass.

Robby: Okay, and how?

Layla: Drug her. You've done it b4. Kevin will give you the pills.

Robby: Fine but you owe me.

Layla: Whatever.

LAYLA. It was her all along.

I thought it was just Robby being a filthy swine and forcing himself onto girls ... Because of him, Nina overdosed.

"What the fuck are you doing?"

I swiftly spin on my heels, hiding the phone behind my back, and tucking my own back into my pocket.

It's Layla. She just entered through the door and shut it behind her. She flicks the light on.

"Sneaking behind people's back in the dark? That's just the kind of thing I'd expect from you," she says.

"Yeah, well ... I guess I'm not the only one stirring shit up," I say, narrowing my eyes at her.

While she steps forward, I stand my ground.

"What's behind your back?" she asks, nostrils flaring.

"Something horrible ..." I sneer. "But not as horrible as you."

She freezes for a moment, staring me down. Then she lunges at me and fights me over the phone. She manages to snatch it from my hand and then gazes at it before slapping me in the face.

"How dare you search my phone?" she hisses.

I shrug, trying to hold my shit together. "Maybe you shouldn't have left it there then."

"Can't trust anyone these days," she replies. "Fucking bitch."

"Says the biggest bitch," I spit back.

"What's your goddamn problem?" she growls.

“My problem is you and your dirty little secrets ...” I say, licking my lips. “Why do you have that video of Nate and Nina?”

“Duh, I asked him to give it to me,” she answers. “It’s none of your fucking concern.”

“Yeah, it is. You knew he was innocent. Why didn’t you tell the police?” I ask.

She makes a face at me. “I told them what I knew.”

“You knew more,” I hiss. “Robby and Kevin told me everything.”

Her whole face darkens, and her muscles tighten into a rigid posture. “What do you mean?” she snaps.

I fold my arms. “Everything from that night ... Nina.”

Her eyes twitch. “Bullshit. I’m done with you.”

She turns around and marches off, so I throw my last card into the game.

“Did you hate her so much for hanging out with Nate?”

She pauses, and I know I’ve got her attention, even if only for a moment.

“She was one of your besties, wasn’t she?” I ask. “Was it worth it?”

Layla glances at me over her shoulder and then struts back toward me. “Listen. Nate’s mine. He’s always been mine. And she came in and tried to swoop him out from underneath me.” She pauses. “You think I’d let her get away with that?”

I’m trying my best not to punch her right in the face. “He’s not yours. He doesn’t want you.”

“You think he wants you?” she yells right up in my face. “Wrong. Nate’s just like any other guy; he follows his dick everywhere he goes. And when it landed on Nina, she hungered for it happily.”

“But you didn’t like that?” I say.

“Of course not,” she scoffs. “Who would? She stole my man. So I had to do something.”

“And you ... told Robby and Kevin,” I say. “Spun them around your finger.”

“I only planted the idea in their heads. Kevin already gave drugs to everyone. I just gave him more cash to give Robby something extra for Nina,” she hisses. “Like you don’t know Robby wouldn’t have already gotten his hands on her without me. It was only a matter of time.”

“But you gave him that extra push to do it that night.”

She shrugs. "I don't care. Try to guilt me, I don't mind. She had a good time with Robby."

"She overdosed on coke," I say through gritted teeth. I can't believe she's trying to talk this right in her head.

"She did that to herself," she replies, raising her brows. "I didn't give her that stuff." She sighs. "I just wish I could've stopped Nate from going down there with her."

Grinding my teeth, I growl, "You're sick."

"Yeah, well, so are you."

"A girl died because of you, and they tried to pin it on the wrong guy," I say. "How can you think that's okay?"

"I didn't kill her," she says.

"Everyone thinks Nate did it," I reply.

"He carried her into the ocean! Of course they do," she hisses, and she leans in. "You know what? I'm done with this. I'm done with you. Don't touch my fucking phone again, or I'll kill you."

When she turns around, I can't control myself any longer.

So I jump on her back and tackle her to the ground. She screams as I jerk her hair and push her face down. She spins around underneath me and tries to slap me. Her nails scratch my face, and I slap her in response. She punches and kicks me, and we roll around the floor in a struggle for domination. She attempts to reach for my pocket, but I head-butt her, and she lands back on the floor again. But after a few seconds, she shoves me off her and crawls on top of me. Her filthy fingers wrap around my throat and choke the living shit out of me.

My neck's still bruised from where Robby touched me, and the mere memory brings tears to my eyes.

"Stop," I gurgle.

"Fuck you! I hope you die," she growls, and she continues squeezing harder and harder.

Suddenly, the door opens, and someone bursts in and throws her off me. I cough hard and breathe in and out loudly while someone drags her off me and shoves her in the corner of the room.

Other people come in and drag me away to the other corner. I can't see who it is, can't focus as my vision is all blurry.

"Sam? Sam?" Mo's face appears in front of me.

I blink a couple of times and then wrap my arms around her. Tears stream down my face as I hug her tight.

"Mo, oh my God, Mo, I'm so sorry ... I'm sorry ..." I mutter.

"It's okay," she replies.

"No, it's not. I know what he did to you," I say. "I'm sorry. I don't know what to do."

Her tears drip down onto my shoulder.

"I'll get through this," she mumbles.

That's so like her to say that. Always so strong even when people try to destroy her.

"I'm sorry, I should've been here. I should've come with you," I say.

"You didn't know he'd do that."

"But I should have," I reply.

"Stop blaming yourself."

I smile and hug her tight.

"I'll be there with you all the way from now on," I say. "I promise."

"I know," she says.

I lean back and watch someone tie Layla up against the coat railing. "What the fuck!" she yells. "Untie me right now!"

"No, you almost tried to kill her."

When the guy turns around, I feel relieved.

"Nate," I mutter.

"Sorry it took me so long," he says as he walks to me. "Are you okay?"

I nod and shake my head at the same time.

I'm not fine, but he came back for me.

"How did you know I was here?" I ask.

He looks over at Mo, who says, "He found me, and I told him to bring me to your workplace, but you weren't there. Since I'd already texted you, I figured you'd come here to pick me up."

I nod a few times. "We missed each other."

"Yeah," she says.

"Let me go, you fuckers!" Layla yells from across the room. "Nate? Please, just let me go, okay?"

"No," he replies. "Fuck no. You hurt her."

Her nostrils flare. "She attacked me! When I get out of here, I'm calling the fucking police."

“Yeah, you do that.” My face darkens as I get up from the floor, and I fish my phone from my pocket and show her the recording. I have it all on tape ... *All* of it.

“Call the fucking police because you’re going to fucking jail, Layla Parker.”

CHAPTER 33



NATE

WHEN THE COPS ARRIVE, they question us, and Sam shows them all the footage she's collected. I's the first time I see it, and it makes me feel sick to my stomach. Robby deserves everything he's got coming for him. And that Layla would go that far just to get to me disgusts me too.

All this time, I believed she was just a popular girl trying to get her way, but she was sick in the head. Everything that happened between her, Kevin, and Robby is sick, and I'm glad the police are finally learning the truth.

Watching the police officers handcuff them is a sight to behold. And a relief ... because now I finally stand a chance to defend myself. With the video and texts as proof, they'll be the ones to go to jail.

And maybe, just maybe, I'll get off with a warning.

I know what I did was wrong. When Nina OD'd, I should've called the cops, but my judgment got the better of me, and I did something stupid that I regret to this day.

But as I stand here, staring at that same ocean where her life ended in ... Maybe she can finally rest in peace. We all know her story now, and no one will ever forget what happened that night.

"You know you still have a long way to go, right?" one of the police officers says to me.

I nod. "I know."

"Community service at the very least," he says.

"I'll take it."

It's the least I deserve for trying to bury her body in the ocean instead of calling 911.

"Hmm ..." the guy mumbles. "Well, I'm not allowed to discuss it right now, but I just wanted you to know."

"I know," I say, glancing at him. "Thanks."

The guy nods. "Go home. All of you."

"We will," I answer, and he walks off toward his buddies, who are putting the three suspects into the car. I briefly glance at the house behind me, where the lights are still on, but there's not a partygoer in sight. After the whole showdown, everybody went home to avoid having to talk to the cops, and I don't blame them. I would too if I had a choice, especially after seeing Robby's condition. He was covered in blood, and I can only imagine what Sam did to him to escape his grasp. She didn't say a lot about it ... just that he tried the same thing on her that he did to Mo, and she wasn't about to let it happen.

I'm proud of her for standing up for herself. But I do worry what digging up this truth has cost her.

Sam walks up to me with a blanket over her shoulders, so I guess the paramedics are done checking her out.

"You okay?" I ask.

"As well as I can be," she replies, staring off at the ocean just like me.

"What about Mo?"

"She'll be all right. She's a tougher cookie than most of us."

I smile. "I hope so." I shake my head. "I should've known about Robby, should've—"

She grabs my arm. "Stop. Stop blaming yourself. You didn't do this."

"No, but I could've prevented it," I say.

"You couldn't see this coming from a mile away," Sam says. "None of us could."

"Nina almost told me." My fist balls. "Almost."

"She didn't want to talk. She just wanted the pain to go away." Sam goes to her knees and touches the sand. "She wanted to go home."

"Home," I mutter, and I sit down on the beach.

"The coke was a means to an end," Sam says.

"And I gave it to her," I say, looking away.

"If you hadn't, she would've gotten it some other way. That, or she could've walked into the ocean by herself," she explains. "And after what

happened to her, I understand.”

I bite my lip and shake my head. “So many should-haves ...”

Sam places her hand over mine. “Her suicide is not your fault.”

I look at her, forcing the tears at bay.

“You did your best with what you had. And you kept doing your best to try to find the truth.”

“I bullied you. I threw you in a pool, threatened you with a knife, hurt you—”

“You did it to prove you were innocent,” she says. “And I believe you. I should’ve believed you all along ...”

She looks away, and so do I, and I listen to the melancholic sound of the waves crashing into the beach. After a while, she leans sideways against my shoulder with her head, so I lean back onto hers.

“I’m sorry for hurting you,” I say.

“And I’m sorry for hurting you too,” she answers.

We both look at each other, and I smile at the sight of her beautiful face. There’s no one else I’d rather have next to me right now. And I cup her face with my hands and kiss her harder than I ever have before.



COMING home has never been this hard. After everything was said and done at the beach, Sam and I went our own ways. Sam needed to take care of Monica and help her out, and I needed to wrap things up with my dad and talk with my lawyer.

But damn, I never imagined it’d be this hard.

I walk inside my house with a heavy burden on my shoulder, knowing I have to tell my dad everything that happened. I close the door behind me and walk into the kitchen. He’s sitting at the table, drinking a cup of tea with my lawyer. That’s odd.

“Nate ... You’re here.” He turns around in his chair, looking not at all surprised. “C’mon. Sit.”

I do what he asks and sit down beside him. Dad scoots a cup of tea my way. “Cops contacted me a few minutes ago.”

“And?”

“They explained everything that happened.”

“And your involvement,” the lawyer adds.

I sigh. “Look, I can explain—”

The lawyer raises his hand. “No need. I’ve seen the videos.”

I frown. "How?"

Dad grabs my hand. "Your friend ... Sam."

My heart goes haywire when he mentions her name.

"She sent us the videos and proof," the lawyer adds.

Dad smiles, and tears appear in his eyes. "It's enough, son. It's done."

"What?" I gasp, completely dumbfounded.

"This is all the police need to prove their case." The lawyer clears his throat. "And it also means you're not longer being investigated."

Dad squeezes my hand. "You're innocent. I knew it. I knew it all this time." And he leans forward and pulls me in for a hug.

It's the most unexpected hug I've ever had, and it's one I'll cherish for the rest of my life too.

CHAPTER 34



SAM

AFTER I HUGGED Mo and told her I'd be there for her 24/7, I dropped her off at home. She told me not to worry, and that she'd tell her parents and get help to process what happened. I believe her. She's a strong girl who knows how to handle herself, and if she needs me, I will be there for her, and she knows that.

When I came home and told Mom what happened, she broke down and cried with me. I don't think I've ever had such an intense cry and hug with my mom, but tonight, we did. And even when I've stopped crying, she can't, and it always makes me laugh.

"Mom, stop," I say, sniggering.

"I just can't. I don't know how," she says, picking up the bottle of wine and pouring herself another glass.

"And quit doing that too," I say, snatching the bottle away and placing it back in the cabinet. "Enough wine for you tonight."

"Yes, yes, you're right. After this glass," she says, taking another big gulp. "Gosh, I can't believe my little girl pounded the living shit out of the popular school kid. And two of them."

"They deserved it," I say, sitting down next to her. "Glad they're going to jail."

"Hopefully, they won't come back to your school," she says.

"Fuck no. I doubt it. After all the proof I sent to the police, they'll surely go away for a long time."

“Good.” She runs her fingers through my hair. “You’ve grown up so quickly. I can’t believe it.”

“Mom, you’re messing up my hair,” I muse.

She shrugs. “Sometimes a mom’s gotta remember what a gem she has.”

“Aww ...” I smile.

“It’s true. And ...” She sighs. “I’m sorry for not being there for you these past few months.”

“What do you mean?” I ask.

“Well ... with my ‘boy toy’ as you call him.” She makes air quotes with her fingers. “I got caught up in my affair with Randy. And I’m sorry about that.”

“Where is he, actually?” I ask, looking around.

“Not here,” she says, blowing out some air. “And he’s not coming here anymore either.”

My eyes widen. “What?”

Is she for real?

“I broke up with him,” she says.

“Noooo,” I say in an exaggerated tone.

She sighs out loud. “You were right. He was a jerk.” She rolls her eyes. “And sometimes, moms really should listen to their daughters.”

I hug her tight and smash my cheek against hers. “I’m proud of you, Mom.”

“Of course you are,” she says.

“No, I mean it.” I look into her eyes, and say, “You deserve a better man.”

She smiles at me, and I kiss her on the cheek.

“You’re sweet,” she murmurs. “And right. I deserve so much fucking better than sloppy seconds.”

I laugh. “Exactly.”

She glances at me out of the corner of her eye. “So you won’t mind if I date around a little to try to find the right guy?”

I shrug. “You date who you want, I date who I want ... Everyone’s happy. As long as it’s not one of my classmate’s daddies. Or my teachers.”

Mom laughs out loud, and then she holds up her hand for a high five, and I hit it hard.

“Sounds good.”



NATE

I PUT on my best clothes and check my phone. There are some new messages from Sam since I went to shower, so I check them out.

SAM: Have u told your dad about ur raps yet?

I SMILE. That's so like her. Always pressing me to plant a bomb and explode shit just to start anew. But I get it.

NATE: Not yet.

Sam: U should. Asap.

THAT WAS QUICK. Guess she was waiting for a reply.

SAM: Just saying. U should do what u like, not what ur forced to do.

Sam: Besides, I think they r amazing.

Nate: Really?

Sam: :D <3 Gimme more

Nate: Sure ... after you give back the one u stole

Sam: Oops ...

HER REACTIONS MAKE me grin like crazy. She was the first to know about my lyrics, but it feels good. Even though she stole one of my personal belongings, I'm not mad. I know she didn't do it to spite me, and I know I'll get them back eventually.

I always thought I'd be ridiculed for my rap lyrics, that I'd become a laughing stock, but the longer I think about it, the more I realize I don't care.

Sam's right. I should do what I love, regardless of what other people think.

So I gather my courage and my notes, and I go downstairs.

My dad's on the couch, watching his usual sports program, and I clear my throat to grab his attention.

"Dad."

He turns around, and when he sees I'm serious, he turns off the TV. "Son?"

I sit down beside him and swallow away the doubts I have. "I've been meaning to show you something." I pull out my papers from behind my back and show them to him.

He takes them from my hands and inspects them, and my whole body tenses up at the sight of his face turning rigid.

"They're rap lyrics," I say.

"I know what they are," he replies.

"You do?" I frown, confused.

"Of course," he says, adding a gentle smile. "I used to write these."

My jaw drops. "What? For real?"

"Oh, you think I didn't do this stuff in my time?" He laughs. "I did all sorts of stuff."

"Really?" I'm amazed. I never imagined my dad actually writing down his thoughts, let alone lyrics. But maybe I don't know my dad as well as I thought.

"Yeah, and to be honest, these are quite good. I already checked them out a few weeks ago."

My jaw drops. "You did what?"

He shrugs. "They were on your desk."

"So? That's my room."

"In my house," he says, raising a brow. "And a dad sometimes has to know what his son is up to."

"You could've just asked me, you know." I snort. Typical.

"You know you wouldn't have told me the truth." He hands the papers back. "Not while that whole 'thing' with that dead girl was going on."

I make a face. "Right." I don't like discussing Nina. Especially not now that I've finally been taken off the suspect list. "Can we not mention her again? Like ever?"

He licks his lips. "Well ... all right. As long as you promise me you won't ever get involved in stuff like that again."

"Of course not," I say. "I'm not saying I'll be the perfect student, but I'll try my best."

"Good," he says, and he pats me on the shoulder. "Then it's all fine by me."

"So you're okay with me writing these?" I ask.

“Of course,” he replies, shifting in his seat. “Why wouldn’t I be?”

“Because of football,” I reply, gazing down at the papers in my hand. “And I kinda like this more.”

He frowns. “You don’t like football?”

I rub my lips together. “Well, I know there’s a scholarship attached, and I’m definitely still going to go for it, but *this*,” I say, pointing at my words. “This is where I leave my soul.”

He takes a deep breath and nods slowly. “If that’s what you prefer, then you should do it.”

I gaze at him. “You’re not mad at me for saying that?”

“No,” he says, casually as if it means nothing. But it means the world to me. He smiles softly and squeezes my shoulder. “I want you to be happy, son.”

I can’t help but wrap my arms around him and give him a big bear hug.

“Thanks, Dad,” I mumble.

“It doesn’t matter what you do as long as you give it your heart,” he says. “Make your momma proud.”

The mere mention of her name makes me tear up but in a good way.

A burden has fallen off my shoulders that I didn’t know I was carrying, and I feel as light as a feather again and ready to face the world.

“I will,” I reply.

And for the first time since she died, I know I mean it, one hundred percent.

I will fight for what I believe in.

I will make my family ... and myself ... proud.

EPILOGUE

SAM

“BLT AND COKE!” one of my co-workers yells at me, and I immediately go to work. I grab the sandwich and layer everything on top, then I pour the Coke into a cup and bring it all to the front. “Here you go!”

“Thanks,” the customer replies, and her smile is enough to make my day worthwhile. Though the cash is definitely much better of course. A girl’s gotta make some cash, after all.

Mom won’t fund my private shopping trips, so I have to make sure I’ve got enough to spend. So I work hard and toil every weekend, knowing this’ll also add a nice line to my resume.

I move back to the preparation area and wait for my next order.

“Can you take over my register?” one of my co-workers suddenly asks, rubbing her stomach. “Sorry, gotta go to the toilet.”

“Sure,” I say, and I take off my apron and move to the counter while readjusting my hairnet. “Welcome to BB’s BLT’s, what can I get for you?”

“I’d like a Sammie Sammie, please.”

What?

I look up and spot a familiar face that makes me grin from ear to ear.

“With some mayonnaise on the side, please,” Nate adds, and he gives me that smirk again, the one that makes my heart flutter and my body sing.

“A Sammie Sammie? Gotta be more specific than that,” I retort.

He leans onto the counter with those big bad muscles of his, flexing them quite nicely as he speaks. “A Sammie with anything and everything

you have,” he muses. “Have you got some Sam-plers?” The way he pronounces the words makes me snort.

“Of course, but it’ll come at a price,” I joke back, leaning against the cash register.

“Oh ... I’ll pay whatever the cost, any currency.” His tongue briefly darts out to wet his lips, and I don’t know why, but I can’t stop staring at it and wondering what else he can do with that tongue of his.

“Okay,” I reply, winking. “A Sam-pler Sammie coming right up ... or down, whatever you prefer.”

“Hmm.” The groan that leaves his mouth makes me weak in the knees.

I didn’t think I could ever love the name Sammie, but it’s starting to grow on me, just like a particular asshole named Nate.

“Yeah, can you guys take it outside?” another customer says. “I’d prefer not to listen to some skeezy shit.”

We both snigger.

“Sorry, sir,” I call out to the customer, and I turn back toward Nate. “I’m a little bit busy if you can’t tell ...”

“Oh, I know, but I have all day to wait for my Sammie Sammie.” He adds an irresistible smile.

“Sam? I can take over now.” My co-worker’s back from the toilet, and she nudges me to step aside. “Isn’t your shift over?”

“Oh yeah, you’re right. It’s Sunday,” I reply, and Nate bites his bottom lip in response. “Early leave time.”

“Perfect,” he says, and he taps the counter with his keys. “I’ll wait for you outside, Sammie-Sam!”

With a big smile on my face, I quickly leave the customers to my co-worker while I take off my outfit and wish them good luck. Then I march outside to where Nate’s parked his car right in front of the door. He throws open the passenger side door from where he sits in the driver’s seat, and says, “Hop in!”

And with the biggest grin on my face, I do.

I don’t know where we’re going or what we’re gonna do, but with his hand on my leg and his lips on my mouth, any place is fine by me. I just know that whatever happens from now on, I can take it all with him by my side.



NATE

I DRIVE us toward the same deserted cliff where we were before, but this time, it's different. Everything's different. With the sunset in the background, it's a beautiful setting for a rendezvous.

"So why did we come here exactly?" she asks as she leans back against the hood of my car.

I close the door and saunter toward her, gazing at the horizon for a moment to appreciate the view.

"No reason. I figured it'd be a great place to start again."

She glances at me with one eye closed and her arms folded. "Start what?"

I lick my lips and stand in front of her, putting my hands down on the hood on either side of her body, and I lean in to say, "Us."

"What makes you think I'll let you?" she muses.

Always the coy girl. "Intuition." I rub my nose against hers. "Besides, we already forgave each other, didn't we?"

"Hmm, we did." She cocks her head and rubs her lips together. "But I never heard anything about *us*."

"Could there be, though?" I ask.

"Do you want there to be?" she retorts, placing her hands beside her on the hood.

I smirk, and I grab her face with one hand, and say, "If you'll have me."

Our lips graze as she says, "Only if you make it official."

I blink a couple of times at the naughty grin on her face. "Sammie-Sam ... will you be my girl?" I ask.

Her tongue briefly darts out as a smile spreads on her face. "I thought you'd never ask."

I smile against her lips and kiss her hard. I wanna kiss her until the sun goes down and day turns into night every fucking day. And I don't stop, not even as my lips travel all the way down her neck to her collarbones. My fingers can't stop themselves from ripping open her shirt and taking what's mine.

And with a giggle, she lowers herself onto the hood and lets me claim her, lets me kiss her body and rip her panties down from underneath her tiny skirt, lets me kiss the secret places between her thighs that no one but me will ever touch.

And I murmur, "Mine."



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Read on for an excerpt of A Debt Owed!

EXCERPT OF A DEBT OWED

Charlotte
Present, Age 23

A bird locked in a cage won't ever be happy. One day, it'll fly away into oblivion.

This diner where my father waits for me makes me feel like a caged bird. His mere gaze makes me choke on my own breath again.

Nothing has changed.

I shouldn't have answered his desperate call and come here. But I can't turn away now. It's too late; he's already seen me.

What if he has something important to say? What if he's sick or dying?

I don't want to be that jerk who doesn't show up when it's the last time you could ever see each other. When it's the last time a father and daughter could make amends. Everyone desperately wants to love their parents, even the damaged ones. The ones who use and break without a single thought. That's my father in a nutshell ... and for years, I let him.

But not anymore. I'm finally working hard and living on my own without his help, and I'm proud of it.

But no pride reflects in his eyes. Nothing exists except misery and hatred.

"Charlotte," he mumbles, and I bend over to kiss him on the cheeks. "Sit down, we have to talk," he says, and he snaps his fingers at the waitress who glares back at him.

Way to get to the point, Father.

“Hello to you too,” I say, chuckling it off.

God, it’s been such a long time ago since we last saw each other, and I’m immediately reminded why.

“How are things ... at *work*?” he asks, clearing his throat while he makes it sound as though he doesn’t believe I actually work.

“It’s fine,” I lie.

The truth is that I quit my job as a daycare provider in order to start my own business to support families in need with supplies and advice. I want to do something more fulfilling, but investors are tough to come by ... especially when they don’t trust me and my idea. For now, I’m pulling money from my savings account to pay for my rent, but I’m not about to tell him that. Even though it’s soon run out, I won’t ever ask him for help.

“How’s Elijah doing?” I ask, avoiding the topic.

“Your brother? Oh, he’s ... well, he’s busy, as always,” my father says, waving it away. “But enough about that. Do you want some coffee?” Father asks. Before I can answer, he’s already ordered my drink for me. “One cappuccino.” I don’t even like cappuccino, but I’ll take it.

“Thanks,” I mutter. “So how have *you* been?”

“Awful,” he says, slurping his coffee. “Just like this coffee. Don’t you have anything better?” he snarls at the waitress.

She shrugs. “Sorry, sir. That’s our best blend.”

“Bland indeed,” he says, rolling his eyes.

“Father,” I mutter.

Has he always been like this? Probably. I made him seem better in my mind just to cope.

“No, they should make better coffee,” he growls while the waitress places down my cappuccino in front of me.

“Why did you even wanna meet at this place if you don’t like it here?” I ask.

“Because it’s the only option I had.” He clears his throat. “Considering my budget.”

“*Budget*?” I frown and lean back in my seat. “Wait, you don’t mean to say—”

“The business is not going well,” he interjects, but it sounds as though he’s grossly understating things. “But you already knew that. I told you a while ago when I asked you for help.”

“Yes,” I say, folding my arms, “and I specifically remember saying no.”

"I know you did, but listen ..." He takes in a deep breath and licks his thin lips. "I'm on the brink of losing everything. I did the only thing I could. I got a loan."

"So? What does that have to do with me?" I ask, not touching my cappuccino. I know where this is going. I'm almost inclined to leave right now, but I don't wanna jump to conclusions too quickly.

"*Everything*," he says. "You're my last hope."

"Really? What about your wife then? Can't she pitch in?" I snort.

"She's left me." He swallows as if he didn't see it coming from a mile away.

I raise a brow. "Let me guess, she ran away with all your money?"

He narrows his eyes at me, but it's all I need.

"Figured." I sigh. "I tried to warn you."

"Charlotte," he says in a condescending tone. "You're my daughter."

"So?" I suck on my bottom lip. He can't play on my emotions, not now.

"A loan always needs to be repaid. And part of the agreement was that you—"

"No," I interrupt, my heart palpitating. "Tell me you didn't."

He closes his lips and stares me down, which tells me he really did do it.

"No, not happening," I say, shaking my head. "How dare you try this on me again?"

"It's too late. The deal has already been made," he replies.

My heart stops. "What?!"

I get up, and with a flat hand, I slap his face. The whole place has gone quiet, and everybody's looking at us, but I don't care. "I am *not* an object you can trade for money! I'm your *daughter*!"

I refuse to become that woman who belongs to someone like some sort of pet. I want to be independent, someone with her own business and her own life. No man will ever make that happen, and no man can make me as happy as my independence does.

Father reaches for my hand, but I pull it away before he can grab it. "Charlotte, you'll be happy with this man. I promise you."

My father has always tried to control me by telling me what school to go to, how to dress, and what to say. When I didn't listen, he scolded me ... sometimes, he even hit me.

And now, he's gone and traded me to some man in exchange for a loan.

“No. You can’t say that. You can’t do this to me.” I shake him off and try to walk away.

Right then, the door to the establishment opens and in walks a handsome, suited-up man with wavy dark hair, a cleft chin ... *and* an insufferably arrogant grin on his face.

My eyes widen, and I begin to stutter. “Easton ...”

Easton Van Buren ... once a simple waiter in my father’s restaurant with big dreams, he’s now a notorious business mogul who opens clubs all around the world. We first met at my father’s second wedding when we were still kids, and now we meet again ... at what seems to be mine.

“Hello, Charlotte,” he muses, his voice still as salacious as I remember. “How nice of you to be here too. Right on time.”

No, this can’t be happening. Not here ... and not with *him*. Even though he sure looks like James freaking Bond when he walks and talks, I know he has an ulterior motive, and it’s anything but good.

He walks toward me and briefly grazes my arm, but the implications are huge.

“You,” I mutter in complete shock. “Why are you ...?”

He licks his lips, and a wicked smile forms on his face. But those eyes ... those dazzling blue eyes only show contempt and vengeance.

“No,” I mutter.

“Yes,” he murmurs. “*I’m* the one who lent money to your father, and I want *you* as payment for that debt.”

For a few seconds, all I can do is stare. Then my palm instinctively comes up to slap him. However, he grabs my wrist before I can even come close.

“Ah-ah, Charlotte. That’s not nice. Hasn’t your father taught you manners?”

I spit in his face. “Asshole.”

He wipes off the spit with one hand. “Now, now ... it seems I’ll have to teach you to behave.”

My father clears his throat as if to grab his attention. “I take it you’ll accept this agreement then?”

“Oh, yes.” The way Easton says it makes the hairs on the back of my neck stand up.

“What?” I mutter. I can’t believe this. He honestly sold me to a rich asshole just to get rid of his loan? “I’m not a bargaining chip!” I exclaim.

“How dare you?”

Easton grabs my chin, and says, “I dare because I’ve wanted nothing more than to own you, and now I do.” The smirk that follows makes me want to smack him, but I don’t think he’d let me.

“I’m not an object. I’m a person, and I don’t fucking agree with any of this,” I hiss, glaring right back at him, so he knows I mean it.

“Tsk ... we’ll have to do something about that dirty mouth of yours,” he growls, licking his lips. “And I know just the thing.”

He grabs my wrist and drags me toward the door.

“Let go of me!” I yell, punching his arm, but he’s too strong for me.

“No, Charlotte,” he says. “You’re mine now to do with as I please.”

“Are you insane? Do you think you’ll get away with this?” I stare him down. “You don’t scare me.”

My eyes widen as he lifts up his shirt to reveal a gun.

“Do I scare you now?” he murmurs.

When I nod, a grin spreads on his lips that remind me of the devil.

“Good,” he says. “Now ... don’t make a scene, and do as I say, and no one will be harmed.”

“You’re trying to sell me! Please, Father!” I call out as a final plea for help.

But my father ignores it. “Charlotte, do your duty to your family.”

I glance at the waitress, the only other person in this diner, but she completely ignores us. Easton probably paid her off to keep quiet.

“Charlotte ...” Father adds. “Do this. For me. Please.”

That last word hits me hard, and I stop fighting Easton. My lungs suck the air in and out like no tomorrow as I gaze into my father’s sincere eyes. He’s never begged me for anything. This is the first ... and probably the last time.

Easton leans toward me, whispering dark words into my ear. “Your father sold his soul to his company, and he paid the ultimate price.”

“What do you mean?” I mutter.

“The only way to pay it off was with you ... Or with his life.”

My eyes widen as I face the guilt laced in my father’s eyes. He’s never looked at me like that ... like he owes me his world. But he does. And now I have to pay with mine.

“No,” I whisper, tears welling up in my eyes. “His life or mine? No, I can’t do this. Don’t ask me to do this, please,” I beg my father, but he looks

away in defeat.

My knees buckle, and I have to fight not to sink to the floor.

“Look at it this way,” Easton muses, holding me tight. “At least now you’ll both live, and you get to say you saved your father’s life.”

I shake my head. I can’t believe Easton’s doing this. How did such a sweet, innocent boy become such an evil man? “You’re a monster.”

His tongue slips out to wet his picture-perfect lips. “Don’t worry, Charlotte ... This monster will take good care of you.” He drags me out of the establishment. “Now let’s go home.”



Chapter 2

Easton

After years of waiting and plotting, Charlotte Davis now belongs to me.

I’m surprised by how easily I could convince her father to give her up. With a little bit of pushing and the obvious threat to his life, he surrendered her as if it were no big deal.

But it is to me. She’s my little treasure to keep and use however I see fit.

A long time ago, at her father’s wedding, that girl stole my heart ... and then stomped on it with her two-thousand dollar high heels a few years later.

I’ll prove to her how good I can be. I can’t fucking wait to get my hands all over her. I wonder if anyone’s touched her, if she’s kissed a man before ... if she’s still a virgin.

That *was* one of the deal breakers for me, and her father knows this, so I hope he was right when he said he’s kept her away from other men for most of her life. It’s unfortunate I could only get to her after so much time had passed. I would’ve stolen her away from that wretched man long ago if I could have, but I simply didn’t have the leverage then that I do now.

And she *will* know the power I’ve accumulated.

A simple glance her way makes her cower in fear as she sits next to me in my car. She’s still looking at me like I’m the devil incarnate.

Sweet, innocent, gullible Charlotte ... she doesn’t even know how lucky she is. There’s nothing to fear. I’ll treat her like the princess she thinks she is, and then I’ll make her grovel and beg me to pluck her cherry. Will she taste sweet or sour? I can’t fucking wait to find out.

But first, we need to eat. I'm famished. I haven't eaten anything since I got off the plane. I had to come all the way from the Netherlands to the United States just to claim my end of the deal ... her.

And now that I have her, I can't wait to take her back to my home and ravage her night after night. But we should fill our stomachs first because we have a long trip ahead of us.

When the car parks outside the restaurant, I clear my throat and wait until she looks at me. She hasn't spoken a word since I forced her into the car, but I'm sure she has a lot of questions.

I haven't decided whether I'll answer them, but she hasn't even tried to ask any. Maybe she'll loosen up once we've eaten. I'm sure she's hungry as it looked like her father didn't give her anything to eat.

"We're here," I say. "Let's eat."

I step out of the car and lock it before going to the other side and opening it up for her. I told the driver to stay inside at all times because I want him available and ready to go. I also want to make sure she doesn't go anywhere should she try to run.

He knows not to mess with me, just like all my other staff. They've been trained from the start to be quiet and respect my authority. It's the only way they get paid their ample salary and ensure their families remain safe.

Threats always work to get what I want, and I don't fucking regret any of them. I've worked too hard for my wealth and power to let anyone touch it. I don't care what anyone thinks of that. I take what I want, and I own it. Fully. Completely. Just like her.

I don't want her because it's *her*, because she's so witty, or charming, or cute.

No, I want her so I can control her. So I can use her for my every desire and make her bend to my will. I'll flaunt her submission in her father's face as the ultimate revenge.

Fuck, I can't wait to see the tears on that fucker's face.

It was already magnificent seeing their eyes connect the moment he gave her away, how her face turned white with betrayal and his filled with wrenching guilt. I could have come right there and then just from watching her squirm.

Yes, I'm an evil son of a bitch, but I don't care.

That man made me into the monster I am today.

Because of him, *my* father is dead ... and he *will* pay.

Licking my lips, I glare at her sitting in the car. Her legs are crossed, and her arms are folded as she gazes out the other window where I was just seated only seconds ago. She can avoid me all she wants, but sooner or later, she's gonna have to come to terms with what her father did. What he gave away—his supposed precious little girl—is now mine to seduce and possess.

“Are you gonna get out?” I ask.

“No,” she hisses.

“Do you want me to drag you like I did in that restaurant?” I narrow my eyes. “Because I will if I have to.”

She sighs and then steps out, bumping into me rudely. I know she's trying to prove a point, but it doesn't faze me. She'll do exactly what I ask her to do because my threats aren't just threats ... I follow through. And I think she knows that right about now.

I hold out my arm in an attempt to remain civil, and she reluctantly takes it. Still, she refuses to even look at me. It's okay ... we'll get to that part later when she's on her knees.

I lean in sideways until my lips graze her ears. “Do not try to escape or talk to anyone. It will get you killed.” Her fingers dig into my skin as I speak the words. “If you behave, I'll treat you right,” I whisper.

She sucks in a sharp breath. “What are we going to do?”

Isn't the answer obvious? I don't know why she asks. “Eat.”

“And then what?” The arrogance in her voice amuses me.

“You'll see,” I murmur, the corners of my mouth tipping up. “Come.”

I lead her into the restaurant and toward a table, then gesture for her to sit down across from me on a comfy leather couch. It's a high-end establishment, unlike where we were with her father. I wanted it to serve as a nice contrast of what I can offer as opposed to what he's given her all these years.

“Do you like the place?” I ask, unfolding a napkin.

“No,” she says bluntly. “When will you let me go?”

I laugh. “Really, Charlotte? You're already talking about freedom?” I shake my head. “We haven't even gotten our food yet. Let's eat first, and then we can talk.”

“No, let's talk now,” she says, sitting back with her arms crossed again in defiance. “Did you seriously think I'd accept this?”

“As a matter of fact, yes,” I say, clearing my throat when the waiter arrives with two plates of giant lobster. “Thank you.”

She ignores her food completely, focusing only on me. “What did my father promise you?”

“You,” I reply, cutting into my lobster to take a bite.

“He’d never agree to that up front,” she hisses. “I don’t believe it.”

“Maybe he did, or maybe he didn’t. It doesn’t change the fact that you’re here *now*, and that you’re *mine*.”

“I don’t belong to anyone,” she replies, staring down at her lobster as if it’s poisonous.

“We’re not leaving until you eat that,” I say, pointing at her food.

“I don’t care.”

“Would you say the same if your father died?”

Her eyes widen. I knew she’d still have a weak spot for him.

Oh, Charlotte ... you’re too sweet and gullible. That old rat has used you, and now he’s thrown you to the wolves, and you still care about him. It’s admirable ... but stupid.

“Is that it? That’s what you’re going to dangle over *my* head?” she asks, resentment showing in her eyes.

Yes. Yes, I fucking am. Because my father died for hers. And I *will* hold the Davis family accountable.

“If you give me no choice, then I will.” I add a smile to be nice because I honestly want to be. Sometimes I can be. But not right now because she needs to learn her place first.

“Great,” she says, rolling her eyes.

“Look at it this way ... you get to save a life,” I say.

“By sacrificing my own,” she replies through gritted teeth.

“I promise you I’ll make it worthwhile. You’ll like it so much you won’t ever want to leave.” Oh, how I’ll make it worth her while.

“You’re sick,” she snarls, turning her head away.

“Maybe or maybe I’m just infatuated with you,” I say. Though she is right ... on some levels, I can be a sick, twisted bastard. “But it’s not me who caused this; it’s you.”

“How? What did I do to deserve this?”

“You know what you did,” I growl. “Now eat your lobster.”

After I raise my brow, she reluctantly cuts off a piece and stuffs it into her mouth. It takes her a while to swallow, but I watch her every movement

and relish the moment she does. It makes me think of all the dirty things I'll make her do when we're alone.

"Why did my father need *your* money? He could've picked anyone who didn't have such an outrageous counteroffer," she suddenly says. "Why you?"

I look up, confused. "He didn't tell you?"

Her nostrils flare as if she's angry with me for her father not talking to her. But that's never been different, and she's ignorant if she can't see that. "No," she replies. "He never included me in his decision-making about the company."

I finish the last bit of my lobster, and say, "The other investors all lost their money. Your father's company went bankrupt."

Her eyes widen. "Bankrupt?"

I'm guessing he never told her that either. "His wife stole everything. But I want assurance that I get my investment back."

"So I'm the bond ..." she says, gazing at her lobster as if it's staring straight back at her.

"Yes, Charlotte. But I never wanted anything else but you."

"As what? A wife?" she jests as she stabs a piece of lobster with her fork and swallows it down.

But this is no laughing matter. I'm serious. Dead serious. And when she realizes I'm not laughing with her, her pupils dilate, and her face turns completely white.

After she swallows, I reply, "Yes. You'll become my wife."

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ABOUT CLARISSA WILD

Clarissa Wild is a New York Times & USA Today Bestselling author with ASD (Asperger's Syndrome), who was born and raised in the Netherlands. She loves to write Dark Romance and Contemporary Romance novels featuring dangerous men and feisty women. Her other loves include her hilarious husband, her cutie pie son, her two crazy but cute dogs, and her ninja cat that sometimes thinks he's a dog too. In her free time, she enjoys watching all sorts of movies, playing video games, and cooking up some delicious meals.

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