

# A SARATOGA FALLS MEMORY BOOK

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BY LINDSEY POGUE



*To my voracious readers.  
You are such a gift and the reason I keep writing.*



## AUTHOR INTRODUCTION

As you are probably well aware, these characters have and will always be very near and dear to my heart. I have lived and breathed them for years, even before I sat down to take this “writing thing” seriously.

After completing Nick’s story and bumbling around with which backstories I should show on page and which ones I should withhold, I went with a third option altogether. I present to you, dear reader, the Memory Book. I’ve included the most fun and important stories that I hope will be a happy farewell (at least for now).

So, there you have it. I’ve hinted at some of these reflections throughout the three books, like the fateful day Sam, Mac, Nick, and Reilly met and the summer that changed everything.

I hope you enjoy these fun little tidbits as much as I loved writing them.



AUTUMN



ONE  
THE PLAYGROUND  
MAC

Fourteen Years Ago

There comes a time in every little girl's life when she has to ask herself a very important question: do I run or do I fight? While fighting might never be ideal, running was never an option when your dad was one of the town's biggest hardasses, your oldest brother one of its known troublemakers, and you had a family reputation to uphold. Well, admittedly, I didn't think much about that when I was in third grade, but I chose to show my fangs all the same—I chose to fight, or at least threaten it.

I might've been young on that cool October afternoon, but I've always been bold. When some kid threw a piece of lunch meat at the small, blonde girl sitting at the end of my table, I had something to say about it. She'd been timid since first grade, and I saw loneliness in her eyes that reminded me of myself sometimes, even if I refused to show it. So, when her brown eyes grew the widest I'd ever seen, and her cheeks reddened, bright as a crossing guard sign, I knew it was only a matter of seconds before she broke down in front

of everyone in the cafeteria, and I couldn't allow that. Not when I could do something to help her.

Call it self-preservation, having grown up with a bully for an older brother, but fighting back was in my blood, and I couldn't allow the blonde girl who was always on the outskirts, always quiet, to feel alone against that freckle-faced ass-hat who was harassing her. So, I stood up and cursed the eight-year-old twerp.

"Ricky Icky, you're such a jerk!" I shouted. The rickety metal table shook when I jolted to my feet.

Ricky was one of those spoiled kids whose mom always packed him a meat and cheese sandwich, no crust, along with a bag of chips, sliced fruit—not the fruit cup kind—and a juice box. Every. Single. Day.

I tried not to hold it against him, even though I'd been making my own lunch for months. It always consisted of a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, string cheese, and a soda pop. The same thing *every single day*, crust and all. "What the hell's your problem, anyway? Are you such a spoiled mama's boy you don't know how to play nice with others?"

The blonde girl stared at me in amazement, her cheeks red.

I scowled at Ricky, channeling my older brother's meanness and dirty looks so that Ricky would know how serious I was. "If you ever throw anything at—" I looked at the blonde girl. "What's your name again? Sarah?"

"S"—she cleared her throat—"Samantha."

I looked back at Ricky. "If you ever do anything to Sam again, I'll punch you so hard your nose'll bleed."

"You can't hurt me," he bit back.

I leaned forward. "You wanna bet? I have an older brother, what do you got? A mommy who still wipes your butt for you? Oooh, I'm so scared," I deadpan. It was a safe

threat because Ricky lived on my street, so I knew he didn't have any siblings. Not to mention, I wasn't the only one who thought my brother was a jerk. David was a big guy, already in middle school, and he had a lot of friends who wore dark, scary clothing with chains and spikes and had crazy hair. Even I was scared of most of them.

"Shut up," Ricky grumbled, but I knew he wouldn't pick on Sam again. He mumbled something else as he collected his lunch box and jacket, and his scrawny little friend followed him out of the cafeteria.

The rest of the table went back to eating their fruit snacks and talking about their Halloween plans, but I looked at Sam, then at a piece of what looked like bologna laying on the table in front of her. "Next time he does that, throw it back in his face," I told her. "That's what I'd do."

Sam's brow crinkled before she nodded. I doubted she'd do it, though, even if it would make him think twice about throwing anything at her again. She might've squeaked out a thank you, but I was too busy being grateful myself—grateful that my impulsiveness didn't backfire horribly. The last thing I wanted to have to do was ask David to beat up an eight-year-old. He would've laughed in my face.

I zipped up my sweatshirt and picked up my sandwich. The bread was stale. Great.

Sam didn't say anything else, but I felt her eyes on me as I finished eating my lunch in silence. I'm not sure when I stopped hanging out with Claire and Anna Marie, exactly, but I only missed them sometimes. Like when strange girls were watching me and there was no one to talk to, to distract me.

"You're staring," I said without looking at Sam.

"Sorry," she muttered and stared down at her lunch.

I glanced over at the table next to mine, at Claire and

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Anna Marie talking with the new girl, Bethany. We used to be inseparable, at least until my mom ruined everything.

At first, my friends looked at me with sympathy when they found out what happened, which I didn't like. Eventually, they stopped understanding me at all, said that I had changed, which was fine. I wasn't even sure I liked them anymore anyway, and we drifted apart.

Instead of thinking about it, I savored my string cheese one thready piece at a time.

When I finally finished, I tossed my paper bag and trash into the garbage can and headed out toward the playground. In my backpack, I'd brought one of the magazines from the shop to read, which would keep me busy until the bell rang and we went back to class.

There was a pitter-patter behind me in the breezeway, but I pretended not to notice. Sam didn't say anything either as she followed me toward the playground. Her silence wasn't surprising, but she'd never followed me around before. When I reached the blacktop, I turned around, confused. She wrapped her arms around herself, but I stood there, waiting impatiently for her to say something.

Her cheeks were still a little red, and after a few heartbeats, I couldn't stand it anymore. "Well?" Resting my hand on my hip, I studied her jeans and boots. I'd never seen someone wear muddy boots to school before.

Sam swallowed. "I just wanted to say thanks," she finally said.

I shrugged, like it was no big deal. "Ricky's like that with everyone. He's an asshole."

Her eyes widened at my cursing. "Not with you."

"Ha. He stole my bike last summer."

"He did?"

“Yep. He’ll never do it again, but like I told you, he’s an asshole.”

Sam smiled a little for the first time, and her brown eyes crinkled in the corners. She didn’t say anything else though. Instead, she looked down at her feet and picked at the crack in the walkway with her toe.

“Why are your boots so dirty?” I asked. “Did you walk to school in the mud or something?”

Sam stared at her feet, then looked at me with a crumpled brow. “It’s from the ranch,” she said, so matter of fact. I helped my dad at the garage sometimes, but I didn’t wear greasy clothes to school. I shrugged and let it go.

“So.” I crossed my arms over my chest. “Why don’t you, you know, talk and stuff?” I looked at her skeptically. “You might make a few friends if you did.”

*“You don’t have any friends.”*

I narrowed my eyes at her.

Sam’s expression wilted, and she fidgeted with the hem of her pleated shirt, contemplating something before she finally managed to say, “What’s the point?”

“What do you mean, ‘what’s the point’? To communicate, obviously. To not seem like a weirdo so boys like Ricky won’t push you around.”

Sam shrugged. “No one listens.”

“Well,” I said, rolling my eyes. “Maybe if you talked louder than a whisper they might actually hear you—”

But Sam was shaking her head before I could finish. Her eyes turned shiny again, and I thought she might really cry this time. “She’s gone, even though I begged her to stay.”

“What are you talking about? Who is?” I couldn’t help the knot that formed in my stomach and moved up into my throat.

“My mom.”

“What happened to her?” I whispered.

Sam didn’t look at me when she finally spoke.  
“She died.”

Those two words broke something inside me. A crack deepened in my heart, letting out a pain I’d become so good at ignoring all those months.

*Sam’s mom died, mine chose to leave.*

I looked over at the weed-covered soccer field, over at the playground and the monkey bars, then back down at the asphalt, not wanting Sam to know that I knew how she felt. Sort of. “Oh,” I said dumbly. There was nothing else I could say. Everyone was always sorry and it never helped anyone, so I didn’t bother saying it. “That sucks.”

Tears filled the creases of her eyes, and just as Sam turned to leave—or maybe run away—I told her something I hadn’t said out loud to anyone. “My mom’s gone too.”

She looked back at me, wiping the tears from her eyes.  
“She is?”

Uncertain why I’d told her that, I nodded once. “She left. I’m sure you already knew that—everyone seems to.”

Sam shook her head and turned to face me fully. “I didn’t.”

“Yeah, well, that’s a surprise. And she did. Just disappeared one night. She totally sucks.”

Sam and I stood in silence, with only the sound of kids laughing and screaming on the playground to fill our ears.

“Anyway—” I was ready to walk away, but a male voice startled me.

“Hey!” a boy called down the breezeway, followed by boomerang laughter. Both Sam and I looked over to see two fifth graders walking toward us.

“You sure ripped that kid a new one,” said the dark haired one. His grin was wide and his hazel eyes smiled

with it. “That’s the best thing I’ve seen all week—all month, actually.” He shoved his friend’s shoulder with amusement and looked back at us, registering our confusion.

Fifth and sixth graders had a different lunch hour. And they definitely didn’t talk to third graders.

“I was sneaking into the cafeteria to steal a cookie and saw the whole thing. It was epic.” He lifted up the palm of his hand, waiting for something, then his amused expression faded and he rolled his eyes. “All right, no high-five then. Way to leave a guy hanging,” he grumbled and shoved his hands in his pant pockets.

“We better get to class,” the boy beside him said. His eyes were bright blue, his hair short and blonde. They were both *really* cute.

The smiley one nodded to his blue-eyed friend. “This is my paranoid buddy, Josh. I’m Nick.”

Josh gave us a slow wave before his eyes narrowed on me, singling me out. “Doesn’t your dad work at that car place?” he asked.

I was going to nod, when Sam said, “Yeah, he owns it.”

Looking at her, I frowned. “How do you know that?”

“I might not talk a lot but I’m not stupid,” she said, causing Nick to chuckle, and I almost smiled.

“You live next to Josh, right?” Nick looked at Sam.

She shrugged. “I don’t know.”

“Yeah, she does,” Josh said, sounding a little impatient. “I’ve seen you and your dad driving up the road. I live on the other side of the lake.” The conversation was getting more interesting by the minute, and I tried not to let my eyes dart too frantically back and forth. Fifth graders were talking to us—cute ones. Boys.

Sam frowned. “I thought mean Mr. Reilly lived in that

house. My dad says he's sad and angry all the time and I should never bother him."

Nick and Josh exchanged an awkward look. "Yeah," Josh said. "He is angry all the time." He nudged Nick. "And I really don't want to get in trouble." This time, Josh's words were more urgent.

"All right," Nick groaned, like talking to third graders was the most normal thing in the world. "See ya around."

"Bye!" I chirped as my backpack slipped off my shoulder. Sam and I watched them head back toward the portable classrooms, where the higher grades were, in silence.

When they were out of earshot, I turned to Sam. "Josh is your neighbor, and you never said anything?"

Sam looked confused and opened her mouth to say something, but I pulled her with me as I walked toward the playground. "Come on."

"What—where are we going?"

"To the swings. You're going to tell me everything you know about Josh and Mr. Reilly. I'm fascinated."

"But I don't know anything about him—"

"He's the cutest, most popular boy at this school and you live right next to him. I need all of the details." Although I did think Josh Reilly was cute, I mostly just wanted to talk to Sam more, plus, I was always in need of a new distraction. Sam and the boys seemed like just the thing.

"We're going to make it our mission to find out more about them," I told her. "You live next door to Josh—they both go to this school, and they both seem cool. *None* of the guys in our grade are cool."

"That's true," Sam said, and the instant she did, I knew

she was onboard. She might've been a complete stranger, but there was something about her that was comforting.

“So, this is what we’re going to do . . .”

I never really knew if it was my false bravado mixed with her timid personality or if it was that we both shared some unspoken kinship given our motherless upbringing that made us such fast friends, but as I tugged her adamantly along that day, the relief in her eyes endeared me to her then and there. An unexpected weight lifted from my heart, too, and she’s been my best friend ever since.

TWO  
BIRTHDAY SURPRISE  
MAC

Seven Years Ago

My muscles were like Jell-O and sweat crystallized on my skin in the crisp fall air as I jumped out of Mr. Miller's truck, in front of my house. Friday at school—done. My track meet—finished without making a fool of myself. Birthday celebrations—well, they would commence after I helped my dad at the shop for a little while. At least, I'd hoped.

"Happy birthday, Machaela," Mr. Miller said, just as Sam shouted, "See ya!" from the bench seat of her dad's truck.

I tugged my backpack on and pulled my ponytail out from under the straps. "Thanks, Mr. Miller." I grinned my appreciation, and winked at my best friend. "I'll see you tonight, Sam."

She rolled her eyes. "There's no surprise party, Mac. It's just a low-key dinner at the Turners'. You know how they are. You need to give it up already."

"Okay, whatever you say, Sam." I winked again and waved as I headed into the house. "Ta-ta!"

I eyed the empty driveway. Dad was always at work and David was never home, which meant there was plenty of room for my soon-to-be car. Since I was officially sixteen-years-old, soon I'd have enough money saved up to buy that Datsun I'd been jonesing for since last summer. The bigger question mark was, however, how would I convince my dad to let me buy it? He'd always been all about the classic cars, but the moment a baby blue, '69 Datsun 510 passed through the shop and I'd said I wanted it, I could practically feel his cringe.

Per usual, I struggled to get my key to work in the front door. The cool breeze came up, wracking my body with chills. Sticky keys and struggling on the stoop. The story of my life. Finally, after a wiggle, a curse, and a final jiggle, the door opened and I nearly fell inside.

Knowing I needed a shower and to finish my inventory project at my dad's shop, I hurried past David's room and into mine. Closing the door behind me, I tossed my backpack onto my bed victoriously. I'd made it through the school day without getting an embarrassing birthday spanking from someone. There were no awkward moments in class or horribly out of tune serenades, wishing me a Happy Birthday over and over again.

I peered up longingly at my future husband, Damian Tate. He smiled down at me with dark, devious eyes from the poster on the wall. Although I knew he'd get hordes of girls vying for his hand in marriage, I also knew that I had the most ambition and determination. I figured that if I could ever make it to Los Angeles, I'd find him. I'd just have to try not to get arrested in the process.

But alas, my trip to L.A. would have to wait until the Datsun was mine and the keys were in my hand. Well, any car would do, actually, but if I was going to fork out the money, I might as well get something I loved, and the pretty Jeep Wrangler I saw at the dealership—bright yellow with shiny wheels that shouted *Fun, with a capital F!* was just too much money.

Sighing, I stared into my closet. It was time to shower and change for the night's festivities. I didn't care what Sam said. Dinner at the Turners was still a birthday dinner, special for me, and likely the only one I would get. I wanted to dress the part, even if I was going to finish inventory at the shop first. Plus, I needed my dad to give me a ride to Nick's, even if he wouldn't have time to stay.

For the briefest of moments, I thought about my mom. Did she know that it was my sixteenth birthday? Did she even care? My chest tightened, along with my fists. I hated her for leaving me. For leaving all of us. I didn't care if she was sick or if her leaving was for the best. The best for who, exactly?

Staring at a rainbow of shirts and sweaters, I decided a cardigan, skirt, and boots would be dressy enough for my birthday dinner, and would keep the chill of autumn at bay, too. It was the perfect ensemble, whether or not my dad's opinion would match mine was the only uncertain variable.



Finally, almost too warm in my cardigan and boots, I made it to Cal's Auto. The one place in the world that felt equally like home. When I walked into the shop, the sound of air compressors, drill guns, and rock 'n' roll greeted my ears.

I glanced around the shop. “Dad!”

Felix, my dad’s best friend who was like an uncle to me, rolled out from under the Cadillac in his stall. “Hey, kid,” he said, a bit more surprised than I’d expected. He glanced to the back door, then back to me. “Your dad stepped out for a minute, but he should be back soon.”

I shrugged, still a tad bitter that he had so much work to do on my birthday. I’d only been waiting all year for it. No big deal. “I just came to finish up the inventory. I’ll be in the back.”

I headed to the cooler and poured myself a cup of water. I wasn’t so much tired from the mile and a half walk in the fall air, as I was rethinking my shoe choice. A boot with a slight heel was cute, but not so conducive to a brisk stroll.

Walking into the parts room, I collected my clipboard and started counting the individual fuses again, right where I’d left off the day before. Then, I moved on to the hose clamps, nuts, and bolts. I’m not sure how much time passed, a half hour, maybe, when I heard my dad’s heavy footsteps and his voice rumbling through the shop.

“Machaela!”

“Yeah, Dad?” I dropped a bolt into the bin, counting one by one in my head. *Seven. Eight. Nine. Ten. Eleven—*

“What are you doing here? I thought you had a track meet?”

I glared at him over my shoulder. “I did. It’s over. I’m here, killing time while I wait for you to take me to my *birthday* dinner at the Turner’s tonight.”

His face fell a little and he stepped further into the room and kissed me on the forehead. “I’m sorry, sweetheart. Happy Birthday. How was school—” He stopped short and eyed my attire with a frown.

Naturally, I rolled my eyes. *Here we go . . .*

“Why is your skirt so short?”

“Oh my God, Dad. Really? It’s down to my knees. What, do you want me to dress like a nun?” I turned back to counting.

“I want you to dress appropriately at the shop. You’re only fifteen.”

“Sixteen today, actually.” I grumbled the reminder, more than disappointed. I knew he was busy, and I knew that he loved me more than anything, but somehow it still hurt that he hadn’t quite grasped how important a girl’s sixteenth birthday was. *He* should’ve been throwing me a party, not Nick’s parents. “Besides, don’t you trust your staff?”

His glare spoke volumes.

“Dad,” I growled. “I didn’t want to wear stupid jeans and a ginormous t-shirt to my party, okay? Geez.” I noticed the grease on his arms and hands. “You *are* still taking me tonight, right?”

He looked conflicted.

“Come on, you can break away from here for a minute at least, can’t you? I know you’re a workaholic and all, but it is your *only* little girl’s birthday today. I would think you might make an exception this one time.” *To put me first, for once.*

Felix stepped into the room to grab an air filter. “I can drop you off at your party on my way home, Mac,” he offered. “That way your dad can finish up here and maybe get home at a decent time tonight.”

Regret deepened my dad’s furrowed brow, and I knew in that moment he was going to pass the buck now that he had a backup. Maybe he was so used to letting me do my

own thing that he didn't know how to be a real dad anymore. David had always acted like he didn't need my dad around, and with me always looking after Bobby, my dad was never really around much for the daily, family routines.

"Thanks, Felix," my dad finally said. "That would be great."

Not wanting my dad to see the tears pricking the backs of my eyes, I turned back to the cubby of gears and grease, and pretended to continue counting.

If I'd had my own car, I could've driven myself to Nick's and brought myself back. The Datsun had felt so attainable when I'd woken up at 7:00 a.m., freshly turned sixteen. I could practically smell the fuel, pumping into my first car during my first refill. It had only taken hours to seem like it was never going to happen.

When my dad didn't say anything else, I glanced back at him, feeling awkward as we stood in silence. "What are you staring at?" I asked with more attitude than he appreciated, but I was pretty sure he deserved it. His eyes were still on my clothes. "Dad, it's a skirt and boots. My chest is covered, so get over it. It could be worse, I could be dressed like a hooker."

He blanched and nearly stumbled back, trying not to laugh. "Excuse me? A hooker? How do you even know what that means?"

"We've been through this. I'm sixteen, and I have an older brother and cable television—oh, and I'm in high school, so there's that."

"I'm not sure if I should be worried by that statement." After rubbing the side of his face, he shook his head and muttered something to himself. Finally, his hands fell down to his sides again. "How many of Nicholas's friends are

going to be at your party?” he asked reluctantly. “Is the whole baseball team showing up?”

“No, it’s a dinner, like with his parents. Besides, even if the baseball team was going to be there, you know Nick and Reilly would look out for me and Sam. They always do.”

With a bushy, lifted eyebrow, my dad crossed his arms over his chest. “Remind me to tell Nicholas that if anything ever happens to you, I’m holding him personally responsible. You’re at an age now where—”

“Dad!” I screeched, increasingly mortified with every word he uttered. “I’m not eight anymore. Please, don’t start with the sex talk, that only makes it more awkward.” I turned to face him. “I know how things work, *and* I’m not stupid. I know what guys are like in high school. I’m *in* high school, remember?”

My dad actually looked relieved . . . and exhausted . . . and conflicted. “Just be careful, Mac. You’re my baby girl. I don’t want anything bad to happen to you.” He stepped closer and pulled me in for a side hug. “I know it sucks that I have to work tonight, but I’ll make it up to you, I promise. I know how special today is, and how hard you’ve been working for your new car, not to mention how excited you’ve been. We’ll do something special this weekend, okay? Your choice.”

“Ha! Don’t make promises you can’t keep,” I warned.

He chuckled and shook his head. “You’re going to make me pay for this, aren’t you?”

“You bet,” I chirped, finally able to smile a little.

“I have to make a house call. If I don’t see you before you leave, I’ll be sure to pick you up tonight. Okay?”

I nodded in defeat. “Okay.” And just like that, my dad walked out of the parts room, leaving me to stare at a wall of cubbies and small car parts that most boys my age wouldn’t

even recognize. Even though I sometimes got angry at my dad for being too much of a guy and having double standards for me and my brothers, I knew he loved me. Even if he sucked at being a single parent sometimes.



Felix dropped me off at Nick's house on his way home, feeding me some crap about my dad being in such high demand around town and how much business is booming. It was nothing I didn't already know. I worked at the shop part time, after all. I helped with inventory and office work since my dad didn't know how to hire a proper secretary. It didn't change the fact that even though I appreciated Felix dropping me off, I still wished it was my dad and that he could've come to dinner.

With a wave and a thank you, I shut the door to Felix's Tacoma, eyeing Reilly's red truck at the curb, and Mrs. Turner's Mercedes in the driveway. I gave myself a pep talk as I made my way up to the front door. *Get out of your funk, Mac. Like, now.* My friends were inside, my *best* friends, that's all that really mattered.

Forcing a smile, I reached for the knob and didn't even bother knocking as I stepped inside.

"Hello, people!" I called out, just as "Surprise!" rang through the living room, making me jump and shout out a "Shit!"

Sam, Nick, Reilly, and Mr. and Mrs. Turner were all smiles in their ridiculous party hats, blowing their annoying party favors, and I loved every minute of it.

My heart swelled. "Wow, you guys sure know how to make a girl feel special," I said happily, and wrapped my

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arms around Sam. “I told you there was a party,” I said victoriously.

Sam only laughed. “Yeah, well, maybe not the party you were expecting, but yes, there is *always* a party—a dinner party, in this case.” There were shiny plastic birthday signs, and pink balloons, and every perfect thing I loved on my birthday. Nick was wearing an oversized sombrero and poncho, and I burst out laughing.

“You look so authentic,” I lied. Tall white boy with hazel eyes and a perfect smile.

I eyed the flashy, wrapped gifts on the coffee table. Sitting on top of them was a bag from Nordstrom. “Let me guess, Nick. That thoughtfully wrapped gift is from you?”

His smile widened. “I ran out of time,” he admitted.

“You don’t say?”

I pulled Sam in for another hug before she could nudge him. “It’s perfect, Sam,” I said, breathing her in. “Thank you for doing this.”

“Wait a second.” Nick stepped up beside us. “This wasn’t all Sam. No, no. I had a major part in this celebration.”

“You mean your mom did?” Sam clarified, she and I laughing at the gibe.

All too willingly, I gave Nick a hug, too. “Thank you, Nick. I appreciate you doing this for me.”

I hugged Reilly next, then Mr. Turner. “Happy Birthday, kiddo.”

“Thanks, Mr. T. I appreciate you letting us have the party here.”

“No problem at all. I’m just sorry it’s not warmer out so you kids can use the pool. I know how much you like that.”

“That’s okay. It’s the downside of an October birthday, I

guess. You get used to a lot of disappointment, sharing your birthday with the goons and goblins of the world.”

I saved Mrs. Turner’s hug for last because she always gave the best hugs, and I’d always had a special connection with her. Call it a motherly fix, or maybe I was the daughter she never had, but she always made me feel special when I needed a little pick-me-up.

“Happy Birthday, Machaela,” she said, squeezing me tightly.

“Thank you, Mrs. T. You smell like chocolate chip cookies . . . which means you made my favorite.”

She winked at me. “Of course I did. And, that’s not all.”

I salivated, anticipating how she might finish that sentence.

“I also made you homemade chile verde chicken tacos, just the way you like them, and refried black beans, rice, and, of course, extra guacamole.”

Nick banged on his chest like a ravenous animal. “Time to fiesta!”

“Not yet, Nick,” Mr. Turner chided. “Give the girl some time to walk through the door.”

“But . . . I’m hungry.”

Reilly and I rolled our eyes. “You’re always hungry,” he muttered. “So, sweet sixteen, huh?” Reilly nodded, contemplating something. “Hmm.”

Sam plopped a birthday hat on my head, careful with the elastic around my chin.

“That wasn’t really a *thing* for us guys when we turned sixteen,” he mused. “What’s that feel like, exactly?”

I looked around at the smiling faces. I had family enough present and felt plenty special.

“It’s just extra fun,” I said with a shoulder shrug. “Sweet

sixteen just sounds more interesting, doesn't it? Plus, I get to drive soon." I wagged my eyebrows at him.

"God help us," Nick moaned, and Sam punched him in the shoulder for me.

"It is special," Sam chimed in. "Wait until you see what Nick actually got you." She laughed to herself. "Then you'll feel *really* special."

"Speaking of gifts." Nick eyed my colorful pile on the table excitedly. "You should open yours now."

"Yeah, open them now," Sam reprimed, surprising me.

I glanced at Mrs. Turner. "I dunno, those chicken tacos sound amazing right now." My stomach rumbled on cue. But even if that was true, Sam was making the idea of presents before dinner very appealing with her Vanna White motions over my heap of gifts.

"It's your birthday, you don't have to do things in a particular order," Mrs. Turner said, and handed me a bright pink margarita, virgin of course.

"Yum. Thank you." My eyes widened as I took a sip of sweet raspberry. "Perfecto." I sighed and licked my lips. Glancing around at everyone's expectant faces, I gave in. "All right then. I'm not one to let the crowd down."

Nick tossed the throw pillows off the couch haphazardly, earning a warning from his mother, and patted the cushion in the center. "Your throne, mi' lady."

"Why, thank you, strapping peasant boy."

My remark earned me a narrow-eyed "hey" before he finally took a seat beside me. "Open mine first since it's clearly the best," he said.

"How old are you again, Nick?" Sam asked.

"It's difficult to tell sometimes, isn't it?" Mrs. Turner grumbled, and she wrapped her arm around him.

I peeked inside the Nordstrom bag, barely registering

the knock at the door. Something was wrapped in bright pink tissue paper, and I assumed it was the bathing suit I saw when I was with Sam and the crew at the mall a couple weeks back. That was one thing Nick was the best at, shopping. He remembered everything when it came to *I wants* and *I wishes*.

I unwrapped it in all of its pink and black polka dotted glory, my eyes wide. “It’s exactly as I remember it,” I breathed. “It’s perfect. Thanks, Nick!” I wrapped my arms around him.

“You can thank my mom for actually picking it up. I felt weird buying a girl’s bikini on my own.”

“But it’s the thought—and the wrap job—that counts, of course.”

“Obviously.” Nick chuckled.

“Just don’t let my dad see it. He’ll *freak*.”

“Don’t let your dad see what?” His voice emanated from the entryway. When I saw him standing there in his work clothes, I was a little confused, but happy that he’d made it to the dinner all the same. Dropping the bikini back in the bag, I got up and headed over to him, standing in the entry.

“You came,” I said, more relieved than I’d thought I’d be. Standing on tiptoes, I wrapped my arms around him. “I’m glad . . .” The moment I saw what was outside the door, my thoughts drifted, my heart raced with hope, and my mouth hung open in disbelief and awe.

A new, yellow Jeep sat out at the curb. “What the hell is that?” I gasped.

My dad chuckled and reprimanded me for bad language, but I barely heard him. I was out the door, standing in the middle of the grass, staring out at a Jeep I was ninety-five percent sure was mine.

“You got me the Jeep?” I breathed. I was a spun ball of unraveling glee and I didn’t know what to do with myself. “I—I thought I had to buy my own car?” David had to buy his own . . .

I could feel my dad’s gaze as he stepped up beside me, but I couldn’t pull my attention away from the shiny car parked a few yards away.

“You assumed.”

I covered my mouth as the realization began to seep in. As I saw the past week—today—for what they were. My dad was busy sneaking around to buy me my very first, beautiful car.

“It’s so perfect!” I shrieked, barely able to contain myself and the tears filling my eyes. When I heard the jinglejangle of keys, I forced my gaze away long enough to see my car keys dangling from between my dad’s grease-stained fingers.

“Well?” He handed them to me. “Are you going to check it out, or what?”

Without hesitation, I took the keys and ran over to *my car*. Sam and the gang followed behind me, giving me space. None of them were surprised, like I was. “You guys,” I said, almost warningly as I shook my head. “I can’t believe you knew—I can’t believe Sam kept the secret.”

“Me either,” she admitted. “I see you more than any other person, and how I didn’t blow it is a miracle.”

With a giggle, I climbed inside. The scent of new car filled my nostrils and I stared at the dash. It was so different than my dad’s truck. It was smaller and newer, and I knew I could get the hang of it easily enough, even if I did have butterflies, imagining myself driving it on my own.

Nick and Reilly opened up the back doors, chatting amongst themselves the way guys do when they talk about

cars. Sam got comfortable in the passenger seat, clearly staking her claim, which was fine with me, and Mr. and Mrs. Turner watched us with smiling faces from the lawn. If I didn't know better, I would've thought Mrs. Turner had tears in her eyes.

My dad stepped into the open driver's side doorway. "What do you think?"

"What do I think? I think this is awesome. I can't believe you did this. I can't believe I didn't know. I know everything you do, all the time."

"Apparently not," Sam said, snooping in the glove box.

"So, let me get this straight." My hands dropped from the steering wheel, and I rested my head back, looking at my dad. "You let me save my money all this time for the Datsun, and this *whole* time you've been planning to buy me this car?"

"Machaela, there was no way in hell I was going to let your first car be something *I'm* going to have to work on all the time—something that has more potential to breakdown and leave you stuck on the side of the road. Plus . . . you deserve this, kid." The sentiment in his voice was unexpected and brought more tears to my eyes. Different tears this time, though. Not just of excitement and surprise, but of love and gratitude. "You're a good girl and you help me more than you know. So, I wanted to do something nice for you for your birthday."

Wrapping my arms around him again, I squeezed my dad as tightly as I could manage. He grunted and groaned, but I didn't care. "Thank you, Dad." I whispered, my mind still reeling with disbelief.

"You're welcome, sweetheart. Just, don't do anything crazy. I don't need another reason to worry about you."

"Me? Something crazy?"

BY LINDSEY POGUE

He chuckled. "Yeah, it's an outlandish thought, I know."

I squeezed him one last time, then let him go. "It's the best birthday present *ever.*"

"What?" Nick said, with mock surprise and offense.  
"But, what about the bathing suit?"

Everyone started laughing.

WINTER

THREE  
THE WINTER FORMAL  
SAM

Seven Years Ago

“Sam, I thought we had this conversation—I like the teal dress on you.”

“I’d like to leave something to the imagination, if you don’t mind,” I grumbled, even though I appreciated Mac letting me borrow one of her dresses for the Winter Formal. The peach dress looked simple and pretty on the hanger, and would be nearly floor length on me.

“Give me a break,” she groused and took the peach fabric from me. “I wore that for my middle school graduation. We’re sophomores now. You’re *not* wearing it. I didn’t even know I still had it.” Mac tossed the balled-up dress into the closet and handed me the teal one on the hanger. “This isn’t revealing, Sam, it’s pretty. Trust me, there’s a difference. All of these dresses have been approved by my dad, so they are more than appropriate.”

With a snort of laughter, I shook my head and eyed the sparkly teal fabric again. In matters like these, I trusted

Mac, even if it was a little girlie for my taste and definitely out of my comfort zone.

"All right, if your dad approves, then I guess it's fine."

Mac groaned, all too familiar with my reservations for large crowds and tight clothing. Leaning closer to her vanity mirror, she applied the last of her eye makeup. "You're the only girl in the world our age that would ever utter those words together, Sam. Sometimes, it worries me."

Peeling off my sweat pants, I slinked into the polyester and appreciated the weight of it against my skin. Dress zipped and form fitting in all the right places, I admired it in a whole new way. The sleeveless bodice; the flared skirt . . . Mac was right, it was really pretty and flattering with my blonde, clumsily curled hair.

"I told you," she said with a smirk. "You look hot."

"Thanks." Running my hands down the bodice, I imagined what Harlon might say when he saw me at the dance. If Mac's reaction was any indication, he wouldn't be embarrassed to call me his date. The fact that I might actually have a little fun tonight—with a *boy*—made my stomach flutter.

After appraising her work in the vanity mirror, Mac nodded with appreciation then shimmied into her red dress. "You brought your shoes, right? You definitely won't fit those pixie feet into my heels."

Crouching down precariously, so not to tear, crease, or wrinkle my dress, I pulled out the first pair of fancy flats I'd ever purchased. "Yep." I held them up proudly for Mac to see. Flat. Gray with a little sparkle. "I got neutral, like you said, so I can wear them again—one day."

"Good job, Sam. They're perfect." Mac winked and smoothed out her fitted, sequined party dress. "Okay, hair—check. Makeup—check. Deodorant—" She sniffed her

armpit, causing me to do the same, suddenly self-conscious. “Check,” we both said in unison.

Mac reached for her purple bottle of perfume. She hadn’t gone a day without it since our first day of high school, freshman year. That was when her dad finally let her wear her mom’s perfume, and Mac had worn it religiously ever since. It was lilac, a little bold and subtly sweet —the essence of Mac.

So, when she offered me some, I couldn’t help a gracious smile. “Thanks, I’d love some.”

After putting a little spritz on my neck and in my hair, Mac did the same and set it back in its designated spot on her dresser. “Okay, time to take a final look,” she mused, staring at her attire. With a satisfactory nod, she examined me in the mirror next. “Damn, we look good.” Her lips parted into a broad smile. “I’m starting to think that dress looks better on you than it does on me.”

“You’re going to be late!” Mr. Carmichael called from downstairs in the living room.

“Oh!” Mac hurried to her closet and pulled out a soft gray shawl and handed it to me. Then, she pulled out a silky black one for herself. “Now we’re ready.”

Grabbing our clutches from her bed, complete with lip gloss, hair pins in case we got too hot on the dance floor, Band-Aids for our feet, our school IDs, and Mac’s keys and driver’s license, we headed for her bedroom door.

She flashed me a toothy grin, punctuated by her signature let’s-get-into-trouble wink. “Time to make some more memories, Sam.”



When we arrived at the clock tower downtown, parking was

a nightmare, or maybe that was just because Mac was driving her Jeep like it was a race car and traffic laws didn't apply to her. Once we finally found a spot in the parking garage and hoofed it for a block, we made it inside with our makeup and hair still intact, though I couldn't say as much for my feet.

Sucking it up, the way Mac taught me to, I told myself that sore feet would be worth a night of fun and memories at my first dance, even if I *was* super nervous. Harlon was cute, if a little nerdy, but I liked nerdy. *I* was nerdy in my own way, and I was embarking on a night out, feeling like all the other girls in school for once in my life, thanks to Mac.

"Hey!" Kevin, Mac's date and Harlon's best friend, called from the photo-op in the hallway where he posed playfully with a group of his friends.

Mac waved to him and turned to me. "Okay, so you're good, right? Harlon's here somewhere. You're going to have fun. Tonight can be epic, if you let it be."

I nodded, though unsure I really processed her pep talk. Anxious was putting it mildly. Overstimulated too, by the mass of students, the loud music, and the flashing lights inside the room. And, I was looking for a specific, familiar face that I didn't see. Harlon's reaction would be everything. If his eyes lit up the way Kevin's did, I was certain I'd be able to breathe, just a little bit better.

"Hey," Kevin said again and sauntered over to us in his slacks and button up shirt. He looked at Mac appraisingly, then glanced at me and his face fell. "Hey, Sam."

"Hi, Kevin." My stomach dropped a little as I took in the expression on his face. Uncertain? Disgusted? Scared?

Confused, I peered down at my dress, making sure everything was still in place and I didn't tear a hole in it during our chaotic rush to get here.

“Why do you look constipated?” Mac asked him. “Why are you looking at Sam like that?”

His eyes skirted to Mac’s then back to me.

“What?” I bit out.

“So, Harlon . . .”

“Harlon what?” Mac said, impatient. “Is he here yet?”

Kevin nodded. “Oh, he’s here, but—”

“What is it?” she snapped and separated herself from him, stepping closer to me.

“He’s dancing with Kaitlin.”

“What!” Mac shouted, and Kevin’s eyes widened. “He’s here with his ex and you didn’t warn us?” She hit him in his shoulder with her clutch. “What the hell’s wrong with you?”

I swallowed the bile that rose in my throat. My first dance. My first real date. The first time in my life that I was stood up.

The first time I thought I might be sick in public.

“It’s not my fault he decided to get back with her. I’m his friend, not his keeper.”

“Yeah, but a warning would’ve been nice, asshole,” Mac growled.

I tuned the rest out and headed for the door. I needed air. I wanted to go home. No—I needed to go home. The last thing I wanted to do was be at a stupid dance I didn’t even want to attend in the first place, especially not when I had to watch the guy who stood me up dancing with his ex-now-new-girlfriend. Probably laughing at me.

“Sam!” Mac reached for my hand. When I looked back at her, Kevin was stalking away. “I know it sucks, but I really think we should stay.”

“What? No way. This is embarrassing enough. I’m not like you, Mac. I can’t give him the evil eye all night and

pretend to enjoy myself. I didn't want to come to this stupid thing to begin with."

"Please," she begged. "And I'm not asking for myself—well, not entirely," she added.

"I can call Papa, you don't have to leave. You can stay and have fun with Kevin."

"Screw Kevin," Mac said easily. "I already told him to get lost. He's an idiot if he thinks I'm going to hang out with him tonight after pulling that crap."

Surprised, I wrapped my shawl tighter around my shoulder. "Then why do you want to stay?"

"Because, tonight is our first dance together. We spent all this time getting ready . . ." She peered around at the streamers and balloons. "It can still be fun."

"No, Mac."

"Why not? Because of Harlon? Dude, he's a stupid sophomore guy whose name you won't even remember in a few months. You didn't even like him that much anyway. Don't let him ruin our night. We can still go in there and have fun and dance with everyone else, just us."

I peered inside, at my schoolmates—some of them freshmen, some of them upperclassmen—all jumping and bobbing their heads to the dance music emanating from the speakers.

"I promise, whenever there's a slow song," Mac said, anticipating me, "we'll take a break, get something to drink and come out here and take inappropriately awesome photos in the booth, okay?"

Mac's excitement was like a gravitational pull. She wanted to stay, and I didn't have the heart to leave her alone, even if I was certain she could find other friends to hang out with. This was important to her, and to me, if I was honest. I didn't want my first dance experience to be

tainted by one loser who was an honor roll student with bad hair and a lazy eye.

“All right,” I drawled, knowing Mac was right. “Let me use the restroom and then we can brave the masses.”

With an excited squeak, Mac jumped up and down, then realized she was messing up her hair and smoothed it back down. “Yay!”



After a lot of flailing, twirling, and laughing to upbeat music, a slow song came through the speakers. As promised, Mac and I maneuvered out of the crowd to take a breather. With heaving breaths, we headed for the drink table.

“This punch is disgustingly sweet,” Mac said, sticking out her tongue. “It tastes like someone snuck in sugar, not booze.” She shook her head and set her cup on the table. “Gross.” She grabbed a water instead, and I stared into the sea of people.

The dance hall was starting to smell a little like the locker room with all the bodies inside, but I tried to ignore it. The music was slow and the blue lights were dim and soft, making the silver decorations partially twinkle.

“Come on, let’s take some of our famously awkward photos,” Mac said, taking my hand.

“Sounds good.” I discarded my punch on the table as well. “I get to keep these ones though. You kept the ones from the fair *and* the ones from the arcade last time.”

“Fine—” Mac stopped short.

“What?” I followed her gaze to find Nick sauntering into the dance hall in a suit I’d never seen him in before. Then I saw Reilly come inside after him.

“What the hell are they doing here?” I breathed.

Mac started laughing. "You're here!" she shouted. She grinned at me, eyes alight with surprise and happiness. "I can't believe they came."

"Wait, what? I don't understand." I glanced between them. Nick peered around the room as he approached, but surprisingly, Reilly was looking directly at me. I had no idea when Mac called them, but she obviously had, and clearly Reilly knew I was the reason they had to schlep down here. I clasped my hands over my face. "Great." I muttered. The last thing I wanted was my guy friends holding this over my head for the rest of my life.

Nick stopped in front of us, then Reilly, both had their hands in their pockets. "Someone called about an escort?" Nick said with a wink.

"You wish." Mac smacked him on the shoulder.

With a chuckle, Nick looked around the room. "God, these dances are horrible. I can't believe you bought tickets this year."

"I can't believe you bought one to save the day," Mac simpered and wrapped her arm through his. "Come on, Mr. Sweet Tooth, I'll get you a drink."

"It better have booze in it."

"Well . . . it definitely has sumthin'."

Just like that, Mac and Nick were off on their own, laughing and arguing at the drink table, while Reilly and I stood on the outskirts of the slowly-dancing crowd. The music was low enough to hear each other, even if the room was a bit small for the group size.

"So," Reilly said, stepping closer as he peered into the masses. "Who do we need to pummel?" he asked, but I knew Mac had likely told him already.

"No one," I said with a grateful smile, even if it was a little embarrassing that he knew I'd been ditched by my

date. “Just some guy from school who apparently is back with his girlfriend. You know, the usual guy stuff.”

“Yeah, guys can be assholes,” he said.

Shaking my head, I peered up at him, almost a whole foot taller than me. “You guys didn’t have to come down here. It’s completely unnecessary. I don’t know what Mac was thinking.”

Reilly nudged me with his elbow, and it was somehow reassuring. “We weren’t doing anything anyway.”

“Ha! Yeah right. You guys were having a blast playing your major-league video game and eating Mrs. Turner’s famous chocolate chip cookies.”

Reilly chuckled and with a single nod, he looked at me again. “That’s true. How did you know?”

“I know everything you guys do.”

Reilly’s eyebrow lifted in curiosity. “Do you now?”

It suddenly felt strange having his gaze on me. I shrugged. “Of course. I’m sure you and Nick can surmise just about everything Mac and I do, too.”

With a smirk, Reilly’s stance widened. I heard what I assumed was a sigh. “I didn’t know you guys were at the dance tonight,” he admitted.

“No?”

“I knew you were thinking about it, but—I didn’t think it was really your scene.”

“It’s definitely not,” I agreed. “But you know Mac.”

With another chuckle, he said, “Yes, I do.”

After a few moments of us staring out at the crowd, my mind began reeling. Nick and Reilly, who *hate* dances—who have never been to one, even as seniors—were here with us now.

“You look nice tonight,” he said. “And Harlon’s an idiot for ditching you.”

The heat in my chest spread to my cheeks, and I ventured a glance at him. “Thanks.” I said it more quietly than I’d meant to.

Reilly didn’t bother looking at me, which felt even more strange, like he was avoiding my gaze.

Desperate to fill the silence, I cleared my throat and looked back out at the couples on the dance floor, searching for something else to say. Some of them were leaving the group, others were joining as another slow song began.

Reilly finally looked at me, scratching the back of his head. “So, since this is a dance and all . . .” He gestured toward the dance floor. “Shall we?”

The fact that one of my best friends was asking me to dance shouldn’t have been so nerve-racking, but something in his blue eyes confused me and the air between us was off-kilter. It made me feel unlike myself. Forcing a cool façade, I nodded and took his offered hand, warm and big compared to mine.

Suddenly, I was grateful Mac had guilted me into staying. I’m not sure if it was the turn of events, my adrenaline and surprise, or the fact that my stomach was summer-saulting all the way to the dance floor, but the night felt a little epic indeed.



SPRING

# FOUR

## SOMETHING MORE

REILLY

Six Years Ago

"I gotta take a leak," Nick said, rising from his spot beside me on a fallen log. "I'll be back."

"Make sure you shake it real good!" Mac called to him from the dock.

Sam's melodic laugh trilled above the sound of the harmonica floating through the stereo speakers, but I tried not to notice.

By summer, I would be gone. Away from my friends . . . away from Sam. The couple months I'd spent talking to her by the lake had felt like a puzzle. I couldn't quite see the bigger picture but I felt it, fuzzy in the periphery. I think I was scared to see it, actually. It had become more and more difficult to keep my focus, even if I knew what I had to do.

Since I started senior year, I'd had one single goal: finish the year with passing grades, give it my all in baseball, then leave the dark cloud that was my life behind me, and

explore life far, far away from Saratoga Falls. Away from my dad.

From my seat on the old, oak log on the bank of the lake, I stared out at the water's rippling surface. Leaving used to be a day that wouldn't come fast enough. I knew there had to be a better life for me out there, I'd been practically salivating for it, and determined to experience it after high school.

I popped the top off a longneck bottle of beer, from one of two six-packs Nick scored for us through Slinsky, the slime of the slime on the team. I took a long pull of the light beer, hoping the carbonation was the refreshing zap I needed to forget about my blonde-haired conundrum, laughing obliviously up on the dock. But the effect was lackluster; the beer tasted like warm piss, as Mac always said.

Staring down at the bottle, I wondered why I was even drinking it. I mentally shrugged. There was nothing else to do, at least not when I wasn't practicing my swing or dodging my dad.

I glanced over at Sam and Mac, sitting on the edge of the dock, their short-clad legs hanging over the edge. Something had changed between us—all of us, but particularly me and Sam. I didn't used to think one way or the other about the crew, they were simply a staple in my life—one of a few things that were consistent and reliable.

I wasn't sure if it was time or age or everything in between, but Nick wasn't just my best friend anymore, he was more like a brother; Mac and Sam were more like sisters I felt protective of—but Sam . . . Something definitely changed. I looked forward to seeing her, differently than before. Was it the way she'd looked at the dance that had been inching its way deeper into my sub-consciousness, or just that I knew

her differently than before, spending so much time with her alone at the lake? I didn't know if it was a good or a bad thing, especially since I was leaving after graduation.

Soft giggling behind me stole my attention once more. Sam leaned back on her palms and her amber eyes skirted over to mine so quickly, I wasn't sure if I'd imagined it. Her smile wavered, and she adjusted her glasses. A nervous habit I'd begun to notice. Just like she shoved her hands in her back pockets when she didn't know what to say.

I took another slug of my beer and tried to ignore the affect her blonde, disheveled hair and golden skin had on me. I couldn't stop noticing her quirks; things that fascinated me and made me want to smile randomly at the risk of looking like a complete ass.

She had to know how cute she was. *Right?*

"Take a picture, Reilly, it'll last longer." Mac flashed a toothy grin, winked, and with a whip of her coffee-colored hair turned back to her tittering with Sam.

"You're hilarious," I deadpanned. Then flushed and looked away.

Pressing the bottle to my mouth, I took another gulp, then another before I ran my hand gruffly over my face. It was hard to tell if I saw Sam looking at me differently or if it was all in my head. Somehow, I thought she could see the real me, the uncertain and completely confused graduating senior that should have his shit together, but didn't—at all.

Nick emerged from behind a sprawling oak. "Much better," he said with a contented sigh, and he plopped back down beside me, his beer still in hand. "There's nothing like answering to an incessant call from Mother Nature."

I made a noncommittal noise, but didn't dare risk glancing back in Sam and Mac's direction.

Nick looked at me. No, he stared, waiting.

My gaze shifted to him. “What?”

“What’s up with you? You’re being weird today.”

“No, I’m not. I’m fine.”

“Are you sure about that?” he asked with a chuckle and glanced over at the girls.

I frowned and bent over to pick through some of the clay rocks that were strung along the lakeshore. Nick followed suit, waiting patiently for me to say something else. His fingers were stained a rust color from working in the dirt so much around the ranch this summer.

“Just a lot on my mind, I guess.” I leaned back and skipped a flat-ish rock across the water’s surface. “It just sucks that the school year’s almost over.”

Nick tilted his head, a knowing expression lifting his eyebrow. “I thought you couldn’t wait to get out of here?”

I shrugged because I wasn’t sure how to answer. I could have told him that I was completely second-guessing the plan I’d set in motion by enlisting. I could have told him it was all Sam’s fault and that no matter how much I’d tried to brush my attraction to her away and minimize it to nothing but a summer crush, I thought it might be another discomforting lie.

Nick picked at the palm of his hand. “Are you nervous about being deployed?”

“No.” Not nervous.

He selected a couple more rocks from the water’s edge. “This is about Sam, isn’t it?” he said more quietly.

I looked at him, partially gratefully and surprised.

“Dude, it’s so obvious there’s something going on between the two of you.”

“There’s nothing going on,” I reassured him.

Nick grunted in disbelief. “Whatever you say.” He leaned forward, draping his elbows on his knees, holding

his beer in one hand as he rolled rocks around in the other.

“Nothing’s happened, it’s just—”

“You guys are just different around each other now. Yeah, I know. Like I said, it’s really obvious.”

When Sam’s eyes shifted to me again, her cheeks flushed instead of mine, like she’d been caught. Whatever was between us, she felt it too.

“It was the dance,” I admitted aloud.

“What was?”

“When things . . . changed.”

Nick fluttered his eyelashes. “Was it the pretty dress?” he asked in a high-pitch soprano and I punched him in the arm.

“Shut up. And no, it wasn’t the dress. Not entirely. I’ve been confused for a while, but the dance sort of made it impossible to ignore any longer. If that makes sense.”

“Don’t tell me you were jealous when you heard she was going to the dance with nerd-boy Harlon.”

But I couldn’t tell him he was wrong, because that would have been a lie too. “When Mac told us he blew Sam off, I remember thinking he wasn’t good enough for her anyway, and it bothered me that she might’ve gone on a date with him. Of course, he’s an idiot so I don’t have to worry about that anymore.” I shrugged and glanced at the girls laying back in the sunshine, their whispers barely reaching my ears. “I’m not sure what to do.”

“Why don’t you just go with the flow instead of trying to figure it all out,” Nick offered, and I liked how easy that sounded. But it didn’t feel that easy. “What if it doesn’t work out?” I would lose one of my best friends.

“What if it does?”

“Well, I’m leaving soon,” I reminded him.

Nick shrugged. "You could change your mind."

"I dunno." I ran my hand over my face, grabbed my empty beer bottle, and rose to my feet. "As nasty as this crap is, I'm grabbing another one. You want?"

Nick nodded and guzzled down what was left of his before handing it over to me.

"Coming right up." I walked over to the ice chest, tossed in the two empty bottles and replaced them with cold ones.

"Mind grabbing me one?" Sam chirped, and I peered up at her.

"Yeah, sure. You want one for Mac, too?"

She shook her head. "Since we're not big fans, they'll get warm too quickly. We'll share."

"Got it." I handed her a cold bottle.

Sam smiled a thank you, but didn't say anything for a moment. The afternoon sun made her amber eyes glitter and my mouth run dry. "I haven't seen you down here much lately," she finally said, and glanced down the deer path that bent around the lake, toward my house. "Have you been pretty busy?"

"Yeah, I've had a lot going on with graduation around the corner," I fibbed. Mostly, I'd been avoiding meeting her at the dock in fear of what I would say.

"You must be excited." Even though she was smiling, it didn't reach her eyes. "It will be weird not seeing you and Nick at school every day."

"I know. I've been thinking about that too. So much is changing."

Her mouth quirked up in the corner and I wanted to know what she was thinking. "How are things on your side of the lake?" I decided the idle conversation was safer than the silence. Not to mention, I knew life since her dad married Nick's aunt Alison had been really rough on her,

which is why the lake had become such a watering hole for us both.

“They’re okay. The same, I guess. It could be worse, though. That’s what I keep telling myself.” Her shy smile widened, but she couldn’t fool me, not anymore. I knew Sam better than she realized.

“That bad, huh?”

Her smile faltered, but only a little, and she shrugged. “It sucks when you don’t want to be in your own house, is all.”

I knew exactly how she felt. “I’m sorry, Sam. I’d invite you to crash at my house when you need a place, but that’s a worse punishment, I promise you.”

She nudged me with the bottle of beer in her hand. “Hey, at least it’s summer so we have every excuse to get out of the house, right?”

Appreciating how her face lit up when she was at ease, I allowed myself to smile in response. Yeah, it was definitely good to get out of the house. “Especially lately . . .”

*Did I actually just say that?* I wanted to smash my head into the nearest tree trunk, feeling like a complete ass for being such a goober. That sounded like a line Nick would give some girl, waggling his eyebrows with a suggestive smile.

Sam blinked, slow and thoughtful. Did she understand what I’d meant or had I lost her? “I should be able to ride after dinner, now that it’s light so late, which will be nice—another excuse to get out of the house.” Her lips crept into a shy grin.

*And come down to meet me at the lake,* I realized.

She tilted her head, her smile encouraging a hopefulness I didn’t quite understand, and I couldn’t resist what would likely be my last school-boy grin. “Cool.”

FIVE  
KISS AND TELL  
SAM

Six Years Ago

Sometimes, riding was the only thing I felt connected to at home. Everything had been different since Papa married Alison. Inside, the house felt like a different world, like I had to walk on eggshells around the two of them and had to watch every little thing that I said in order to avoid one of Alison's mood swings or manic meltdowns. After a few months, I'd learned that keeping my mouth shut and myself locked upstairs in my room was the best way to co-exist inside the farmhouse. But outside . . . outside on the ranch, I didn't have to worry about any of that. It was my own domain; Alison never went out there. Outside, with the horses and chores, Papa was just Papa, and we did our thing, for a little while, at least.

Eventually, everything was tainted by my new step-mom, and if I was going to keep some of my sanity, I knew I needed a girl's day with Mac, especially after what happened with Reilly the other night down at the lake.

When Mac strode out of the stable, pulling her hair up

into a ponytail, my cheeks flushed at the memory of him. I'd have to tell her what happened, even if I had no idea how. Reilly wasn't some guy she knew I was crushing on. He was our best friend, and even talking to him most nights on the dock seemed so big I didn't know how to tell her. A kiss though . . . that was huge.

"Thanks for coming over, Mac. I know horses aren't really your thing. But it's that or feeding chickens and I know they creep you out."

Mac shivered. "It's the way they walk—and their creepy feet." She shook her head and sighed. "There are few people in the world I would do anything for, Sam, and you're one of them. Getting dirty for you would be my pleasure."

"Ha!" I handed her a curry comb to brush Benedict. "That just means you're going to hold it over me later. Aren't you?"

She smiled brightly. "Why yes, yes I will." She began to comb his sorrel hair. "I brush in the direction the hair grows, right?"

"Yes." My smile widened as the crease in her brow deepened with concentration. "You remembered, good job."

Mac ran her hand down the sleek curve of Benedict's back. "I hate teasing my own hair, and imagine it would feel the same."

"Probably." I'd never teased my own hair, so I couldn't relate.

We brushed our horses in silence, Mac likely deep in concentration, and me, I was just happy to have some company on the ranch for the first time in a while, even with the impending conversation looming. Nick had been visiting off and on all summer, helping Papa with projects in exchange for summer cash. Even Reilly had been helping

them sometimes, too, but having Mac around was completely different. She was there for me, and I didn't feel so alone.

"So," Mac started and picked up the hoof pick. She stared at it quizzically. "You're doing this part, right?"

I nodded and took the pick, handing her the saddle blanket instead. "You remember how to put this one on, right?"

She scoffed. "I think I can manage."

Lifting an eyebrow, I watched in anticipation. "Set it a bit further up on his withers and—"

"Scoot it down into place—I remember Sam."

I smiled, imagining I sounded a lot like an overbearing stepmother. I glanced at the farmhouse before bending down to pick the muck from Benedict's hoof.

"So . . . my payment," Mac began with a bit of uncertainty. I braced myself. "I want you to come shopping with me next weekend, so I can find an outfit for the beach party."

"The bonfire? That's easy. Wear jeans and a sweatshirt." Dropping Benedict's last hoof, I moved over to Shasta.

Mac glared at me. "Come on, Sam. We're going to be juniors next year, and you haven't had a date at all—and Harlon doesn't count. Neither does Reilly for saving our butts at the dance."

"Way to rub salt in the wound, Mac." It was true, I hadn't been going out for pizza or to movies with guys like she did. I hadn't been thinking about any other guys, other than Reilly. But she didn't know that. "I really hate shopping, Mac."

With a victorious laugh, Mac walked around Benedict and stopped beside me. "I know. And I hate getting dirty."

See? These are the sacrifices best friends make for each other.”

I knew I had no choice and rolled my eyes. “Fine. It will be the highlight of my week.” The saddest part of that statement was that it might actually be true. I’d gone to the lake the night after my kiss with Reilly and he hadn’t been there. I’d been sick to my stomach since, obsessing about whether or not it was just a coincidence or that Reilly regretted it and had been avoiding me.

“Besides,” Mac continued, oblivious to my inner turmoil. She glanced toward the farmhouse. “God knows you could use another reason to get away from this place.” Mac knew all too well the hell I’d been living in since the marriage. The strange thing was, I used to like Alison. She was Nick’s cool, young aunt and she liked to play with my hair, something no one had done since Mama died. Then, something just . . . changed. She was always bitter and moody, always unhappy. She needed space or for Papa to take care of her. She’d become a black cloud in my life I couldn’t seem to escape.

“Smurf,” Papa said as he stepped around the stable. He smiled the instant he saw Mac. “Machaela—I was wondering whose car was in the driveway. I’m not sure I’ve seen you since you got your new car.”

“Hi, Mr. Miller.” Mac gave him a single wave and leaned against the hitching post. “I’m helping Sam out with chores today.”

“Well,” he said. “I won’t pretend that’s not surprising.” Papa chuckled. It was a nice sound, one I rarely heard anymore, and my heart hurt a little. “Smurf, Josh should be here in a bit to help me fix the chicken coop. Send him to the house when he gets here, would you? I have to take care of some things.”

I tried to keep my expression indifferent and my surprise locked up tight, but I'm sure everyone could hear my racing heart as much as I could. If they looked close enough, they could likely see it trying to beat out of my chest. *Reilly would be here today?* I wasn't sure if that would turn into a good or a bad thing.

"Smurf?"

"Uh—yeah. Sure." I cleared my throat and turned back to Shasta. I couldn't even remember what I was doing, so I plucked the stickers and bits of hay from her mane.

"Thanks, sweetie. You two girls have fun." My dad's footsteps retreated toward the house and I prayed that Reilly wouldn't be here until after Mac and I had taken off on our ride.

With more haste than before, I slung the saddle over Shasta's back, wondering what exactly it would be like when I finally did see Reilly for the first time since—

"What, may I ask, was that?" Mac uttered under her breath. She stepped up beside me, and my hands stilled on Shasta's saddle.

"What are you talking about?"

"Don't play coy with me, Samantha Miller. You just froze up and practically turned white. You might've even stopped breathing." I could feel Mac's gaze burning against my skin, but she waited patiently for me to answer.

I forced myself to look at her, knowing I had little choice. I knew Mac far too well to think she'd ever let anything like what she suspected she'd just seen go without an awkward confrontation.

"Has something happened with Reilly that you haven't told me?"

As I opened my mouth, prepared to brush it off and make up some excuse, she shook her head and raised her

palm to stop me from answering the question. “Let me rephrase that, what happened with Reilly that you’re not telling me?”

Although Reilly and I had lived next to each other all our lives—his father’s property connected to mine—he’d always just been Josh Reilly, Nick’s best friend, a member of our group, and MVP of the varsity baseball team. That is, until two nights ago.

“Come on,” Mac said, stepping out of my way as I hauled Benedict’s saddle over his back. He was taller than Shasta, and my arms burned as I lifted the heavy saddle higher than I was used to.

“I can’t believe you’ve been keeping something from me,” she muttered, her lilac scent wafting off of her in the breeze. Even amidst fly spray and a hint of manure, she still managed to smell amazing.

“I haven’t been keeping anything from you, Mac,” I bit back. “It just sort of happened.” I grunted as I tightened Benedict’s cinch.

Mac swatted at a fly, her face twisting and her ponytail swaying as she took a step back.

“God, you’re such a girl,” I muttered.

“Yeah, so are you. You should act like it more often.”

I glared at her.

“Sorry, low blow. Clearly your tomboyishness seems to be working for *Reilly*. Now, come on. No more stalling. Spill.”

It only took me a heartbeat to realize if I told her anything other than the full truth she’d not only resent me for holding back, but she would never let the conversation go. So, I grabbed Benedict’s bridle and decided a brief retelling would suffice.

“Well, a while back, I went down to the lake—you

know, trying to get away from Dad and Alison—and Reilly was there.” Mac draped her arm over Benedict’s saddle, gaze fixed and intent on me. “I’d heard Reilly and his dad yelling at each other, so I can’t say I was all that surprised to run into him. The lake is about as far as he can run from his place, without being in another zip code.” The lake had always provided me with a comfort I couldn’t really explain, so I wasn’t surprised that it did the same for Reilly. “The lake has a funny way of making you feel like you’re in a different world,” I explained.

“Okay, and . . .” Mac took Benedict’s reins from me.

“And I’ve seen him a couple times since. It’s not like we purposely meet down there—” I paused, considering how we went from never running into each other on the property, to it happening at least a few times a week. “Anyway, the other night was . . . different.”

Mac’s glittering green eyes widened, her expression hardened, and then she flicked me.

“Ouch!”

“I can’t believe you,” she chided. “You really have been holding out on me. Josh Reilly—cutest, nicest-guy-in-the-world—is having clandestine meetings with you at the lake? For weeks? Tell me. Everything.”

I couldn’t help but feel giddy as Mac tried and failed to contain her excitement. Reilly and I had always been friends, but it was never the sisterhood Mac and I shared, obviously, and it was never like the relationship I’d always had with Nick—he was like a big brother, though a cocky, annoying one at times.

Reilly was always the nice, quiet guy who wasn’t necessarily shy, but only spoke when he had something to say. He was the strong silent type, which is what made it so difficult to ignore how his father had been treating him, I think. He

shrugged everything off and never complained, but the more I got to know him, the more miserable he seemed, just like me. It was nice to have that in common with him.

“Sup, girls!” Nick called, startling me. He made his way over from the hillside, the direction of Reilly’s. His cocky grin was in place and his thumbs hooked in his jean pockets like he owned the place. Typical. My attention quickly shifted to Reilly, though, walking beside him. All I could focus on was the way his dirty-blond hair hung just over part of the darkening bruise on his temple, a result of an argument with his father. It angered me all over again, but the warm thrill that curled inside me from the kiss we shared was just as fresh in my mind, too—living, pulsing. It was a little confusing. I wanted to know what thoughts played behind those baby-blue eyes of his and that easy smile that comforted me somehow. And his lips . . .

With bated breath, the same nerves I had standing beside him on the dock that night hummed to life inside me again, unexpected and deep down somewhere in my soul I couldn’t fully distinguish. I wasn’t sure I needed to.

“Sam,” Reilly said quietly and nodded in greeting.

“You ladies look as stunning as ever,” Nick said over him. His voice boomed compared to Reilly’s, which was something I’d never noticed before.

“Why, thank you,” Mac chirped, but I was too busy trying to seem busy as I turned back to Benedict, checking his hooves again, then his cinch.

“We’re here to help your Pop with the chickens,” Nick explained. “He needed some extra muscle.”

Mac threw her head back. “Ha! Then why did he call you, exactly?”

“Whatever.” Nick grumbled and took a step closer.

"Hey, are you two coming over tonight? My dad's grilling. You don't want to miss my dad's barbecue."

I wanted to see what Reilly was going to say, and when I glanced back at him, he was already staring at me.

"So, Sam," Nick prompted. "My house, tonight?"

"Do we have a choice?" I teased, pushing my glasses up the bridge of my nose.

Nick made a false effort to think about it. "Not really."

"Mr. Miller's in the house," Mac interrupted and nodded inside. "He said you could find him in there." That was my cue. Mac was growing impatient.

Taking Shasta's reins in my hands, I climbed up into the saddle.

Nick moved to leave, then paused. "Aunt Alison wouldn't by chance be cooking anything divine for lunch today, would she?"

I snorted. "Yeah, right."

He furrowed his brow.

"Don't your parents feed you, Nick?" Mac teased. "Let me rephrase that, I know your parents feed you. Don't they feed you enough?"

"Come on, Reilly," Nick said, ignoring her. "Let's go find some food and get to work."

I glanced at Reilly again, surprised to find his eyes on me and filled with something that looked a lot like the curiosity and uncertainty I had been feeling since our kiss. At least, I thought that's what it was.

"Reilly!" Nick shouted as he ran up the porch steps. "Let's go."

Finally, Reilly tore his gaze away from mine, smiled at Mac, then ambled his way toward the house, much to Nick's dismay.

"Dude, hurry up. Would you? I'm starving."

“I’m coming.”

Once Mac mounted Benedict, we rode toward the hill. I’d never seen Mac so excited to ride a horse, but she waited to inundate me with questions until we were out of earshot.

“Okay, Sam,” she said when we reached the edge of the farm. “Now finish your story. I’m on pins and needles. What exactly happened the other night, because that interaction was almost painful to watch. You said it was different . . . different how?”

Remembering the mark on Reilly’s face, all levity vanished. “Did you see the bruise on his face?”

Mac’s face fell, and the brightness in her eyes dimmed. “I figured it was from practice or something. Nick gets banged up all the time . . . His dad did that?”

I didn’t have to respond, she’d already guessed the truth.

“I knew he was a mean bastard, but I didn’t realize it was that bad. I mean, I had an inkling, but only because of the way Nick is always trying to get him to stay the night and jokes about Reilly moving in with him. He really wants him out of that house.”

“Yep.”

“Poor Josh,” Mac rasped, and let the reins hang loosely in her hands. Benedict liked to follow Shasta, so they ambled beside one another companionably. “I really hate Mr. Reilly.”

I nodded. “Me too. When me and Reilly ran into each other, I begged him to leave his dad’s house, even though I know he won’t, and somehow we just, sort of . . . kissed.” My mind and heart lightened at the memory, and I almost closed my eyes as I replayed it for the seven-hundredth time. “It was pretty magical, actually.”

Mac grabbed onto her saddle horn with one hand then leaned over to flick me again. “You fucking kissed Josh

Reilly, Sam. How are you not bursting at the seams? Wait," she shook her head and straightened. "How did I not know any of this until now? It's like you have this whole life I know nothing about it."

I tilted my head with a haughty glare. "First of all, you know everything about my life, maybe except for this, so it's not a big deal."

She snorted. "Yeah right. You're in love. I can't believe—"

"I'm not in love with him. I'm just . . . confused, I think. Surprised."

"No you're in love, it's obvious now that I know what happened."

Rolling my eyes, I shook my head.

"I'm serious, Sam. Mark my words—"

But before she could finish, I nudged Shasta into a canter and took off, up the hill. I wasn't sure if I was ready for Mac's meddling quite yet. Plus, if Mac was going to make me go shopping with her, she was going to have to work for it.



SUMMER

SIX  
TRUTH OR DARE  
NICK

Five Years Ago

The evening summer breeze was warm, and the sound of the crackling fire and song of the crickets was soothing. Even if I didn't feel much like partying, it was nice to be out of Saratoga Falls for the weekend, sitting under the stars, away from my parents and life.

"So, how does it feel to be a high school graduate?" Sam asked with a smile. It was a forced one though. She'd been miserable since Reilly's deployment a few weeks before, we all had been. Knowing he needed to get out of Saratoga Falls and away from his dad was one thing, him actually being gone was another. I hadn't been prepared for how different things would be, I guess. None of us were.

"It feels the same, right now at least," I admitted. But in reality, everything had changed. "Maybe after this summer and when my classes at the U start up in the fall, being a high school graduate will feel more like a reality." I poked at the embers in the campfire.

"Maybe." Sam nestled further down in her seat, staring

into the growing flames. “It won’t be the same without you, you know?”

“I know.” I flashed her a cocky grin. “Your junior year will be so lame without me.”

Sam smiled again, but like the last time, it didn’t reach her eyes. “How come you’re not crashing the baseball team’s campsite with Mac?” she asked, eyes finally leaving the flames.

“Why aren’t *you*?” I replied.

Sam ignored my question and continued. “Is it because Bethany is over there?”

“No.” It was a partial lie. Normally I didn’t mind being around Bethany, even if she did blow me off one too many times for us to ever be considered friends, but I didn’t like that she was dating Tompkins, one of the baseball team’s outfielders, either. He was a good guy and all, but I just—I didn’t like it. Even if I couldn’t explain why, exactly.

Everything about Bethany was a puzzle. She’d easily been the hottest chick in Sam and Mac’s class, but she was also a flirt, and from what I’d heard, she got around. She and Anna Marie were always going to parties and getting into trouble. Not to mention, I knew firsthand the games she played. I’d been a part of her schemes before, and I couldn’t help but feel like I was still a part of one. It felt like she gave me the cold shoulder half the time and it should’ve been the other way around. She was the one who ditched me at a party my junior year to make out with some other guy.

But, call me stupid, I felt like there was more to the whole situation than that. Maybe a part of me felt sorry for her because of what happened in middle school with social services and her brother almost getting taken away from her. Her parents were assholes then, and I doubted they’d changed all that much over the years. Or, maybe I was just

an idiot and wanted to imagine the sad, lonely girl I'd seen all those years ago, even if she was no longer there.

"Hey fellas!" Mac called merrily as she skipped over to us, the rumbling of people in tow.

"Here they come," Sam grumbled under her breath. I was actually happy to have a distraction from my thoughts.

"Since you're both sticks in the mud, I brought the party to you." Mac sighed and snuggled into her empty camping chair beside Sam.

A couple guys from the baseball team, Slinsky and Tompkins, came into view, as well as Anna Marie and Bethany.

"Dude," Tompkins said, pulling up a bench seat and plopping down beside me. "What are you doing alone over here? This is probably the last time we'll all be here together and you're depressing the shit out of me."

I laughed and glanced at Sam. She was only partially amused. "It's all about strategy, my friend. I got you all to come over to me, did I not?" I glanced around at the group, but my eyes landed and rested on Bethany as she stared into the fire.

Tompkins' arm was wrapped around her shoulder territorially.

"Touché," he said, and pulled Bethany closer against him.

"Well, we were bored, and Mac promised us a party if we followed her over here," Slinsky added and put his palms up to the fire. "This doesn't look like a party." He peered around at all of us.

"That's because it hasn't started yet," Mac said with a smirk. "Now, does everyone have a drink, because we're going to play a drinking game." Her gaze shifted around the

fire, nodding as she checked off everyone's bottle or cup. Finally, she nodded satisfactorily. "Good. Now . . ." She pulled her chair up closer to Sam. "Since the team is disbanding, now that graduation has come and gone, I think we should play Truth or Dare—you know, go back to our roots."

There were grumbles and heads shaking, save for Slinsky. "All right!" he shouted. "This is going to be good." He clapped his hands together and settled in.

I could only roll my eyes. "What are we, Mac, seven?"

"I know you're an old man now, Nick," she retorted. "But you all need to loosen up a bit, and this is how it's going to happen. Plus, we're making it a drinking game, remember? It will be fun."

"Even better." Slinsky readjusted his seat on an old stump.

"Great, then . . ." Mac surveyed the group. "Tompkins, you go first. Do you pick Truth or Dare?"

"I've always hated this game," he muttered and leaned forward in his chair.

"We all have," I agreed.

Mac narrowed her eyes on me in a silent warning to shut up. "Come on. Choose. Which one will it be?"

"Dare," Tompkins finally said, shocking me.

Mac's eyes went wide with excitement. "Really?" Tompkins had no idea what he'd gotten himself into.

He shrugged. "What? It's Mac, how bad can it be?"

I burst with laughter.

Clapping her hands together, Mac leaned forward. "Okay, Dare it is." She pulled her bottom lip between her teeth, and eyed Tompkins closely.

"You're freaking me out, Mac. Pick something already," he finally said.

BY LINDSEY POGUE

I smiled at his naiveté. “This is Mac’s favorite game—or, at least it used to be,” I amended.

“Okay, Tompkins. I dare you to streak through the next campsite—not yours, the one to the left.”

“What?” he nearly shrieked. “There’s like five old people in that one.”

“If you don’t do it,” Mac said, “not only do you have to take three shots of a liquor of my choosing, you will forever be deemed a coward in my eyes.” She shrugged. “You make the call.”

I burst out laughing again. “Dude, this is great. You were right, Mac. Truth or Dare was a fantastic idea.”

Tompkins looked from Bethany, who was staring at him, expectant, to me, and then around the group. “As much as it will crush me to be less than a man in your eyes, Mac, I’m going to have to take the three shots and call it a day. I don’t want someone that looks like my grandma seeing my Johnson. Sorry.” The group laughed, and Bethany muttered her disappointment.

“Somebody’s getting faded tonight,” Slinsky whispered, excited.

“All right then. Follow me. I’ll pour you your vodka shots one by one to ensure you take them.”

“What? Vodka? Can’t I drink something that doesn’t taste like rubbing alcohol?”

“My choice,” Mac reminded him over her shoulder.

With a groan, Tompkins followed Mac to the drink table, while we all hooted and shouted for moral support.

Laughing, I settled back into my seat, and my eyes met Bethany’s of their own accord. Immediately, she looked away. *Can’t even stand to look at me. Awesome.*

Tompkins took one shot after another, until his three were accounted for and his eyes were watering. “I should’ve

streaked,” he gasped. Wiping the water from his eyes, he took his place back beside Bethany. She smiled at him, more like she laughed, but I could only wonder if they were just sleeping together or if they were an actual *thing*. Bethany was always seen around with guys, but I’d never actually heard of her dating anyone. I wasn’t sure what made Tompkins so special.

“Okay, Tompkins, your turn.” Mac sat back down with a full cup, ready and waiting. “Pick your victim.”

He nodded at Bethany. “Pick your poison. Truth or Dare?”

“Oh yeah!” Anna Marie yipped with excitement, and took a drink from her cup.

Bethany glanced around, her eyes resting on mine briefly, but I didn’t think she was really looking at me so much as thinking. “Truth.”

“Truth?” Tompkins laughed. “That’s an easy one. One question I’ve always wondered—how many guys *have* you slept with?” He laughed and peered around at the group.

The look on Bethany’s face was anything but amused. “Way too many to count,” she answered snidely. I couldn’t tell if she was joking or just pissed off. Quickly, she rose to her feet. “And you’re officially off the list for asking.”

His smile vanished. “What? Wait—”

“You might as well get my shots ready.” The mood turned from fun to awkward, and even as curious as I was to hear the answer, I was pissed for her sake, too. It might’ve been a playful question, but calling her out in front of everyone was a dick move.

Mac and Sam exchanged a wide-eyed look, then their gazes landed on me, but I refused to look at them. Reluctantly, Tompkins poured her three shots of Patron and she took them quickly, one by one. When she was finished, she

didn't even look at him as she went to sit down on the other side of me, next to Anna Marie. They exchanged a confident look then peered back out at us, waiting.

"That was a dick thing for him to ask," I told her without thought.

"Yeah, well, I'm not sure why I expected him to be any different than the rest of you." It was a cut I hadn't been expecting. She didn't even bother to look at me, which was fine.

I leaned the other direction in my chair and took a hearty swig of my beer. My sympathy for her had completely vanished.

"Your turn, Bethany," Mac said. "Who's your victim?"

"Anna," she said with a nod to her friend. "Truth or Dare?"

Tompkins glared into the fire, clearly not into the game anymore, but Slinsky was smiling like an expectant idiot.

Anna Marie, who was already feeling the effects of whatever drink was in her cup, laughed. "Truth—one-hundred percent truth."

"What's the craziest thing you've ever done?" The question rolled easily off her tongue.

Everyone laughed because Anna Marie was fun and flirty, and she and Bethany got themselves into predicaments every now and again. "There are so many to choose from," she mused with a smirk. "But, I'm going to have to say skinny dipping in the fountain downtown last New Year's."

Mac and Sam gaped.

The guys and I laughed. "Hot damn, I missed it," I teased and winked at her. I could imagine it though, and it was definitely something Anna Marie would do if she were

feeling young and wild, with the help of her closest friend—Champagne.

“You never told me that,” Bethany said in utter surprise.

“You were too busy making out with—what’s his face? Todd! Yeah. Anyway,” she waved Bethany’s wide-eyed expression away. “I was with Claire and we wanted to do something crazy to ring in the New Year.”

“I’d say,” Tompkins muttered, but he was clearly amused.

Tompkins and Reilly were always the straight edges on the baseball team, which was another reason I was surprised that Bethany decided to date him of all people—and why I was also surprised that he asked her the question that he had. In all fairness, though, he had taken a few shots to loosen up first.

“Now you all know something about me. Who wants to be *my* victim?” It wasn’t really a question. Anna Marie was staring right at Slinsky.

“Hit me with it,” he said, and leaned forward, elbows on his knees and drink dangling in his hand. “I choose Dare.”

“Sweet,” Anna chirped, all too happy to oblige. She took a swig of her drink and nestled it into the dirt. “I double dare you to let one of us girls put makeup on you.”

“What?” He glanced around the fire. “Why can’t I run around naked or something cooler than *that*?”

I shook my head. “No one wants to see you naked, Slinsky,” I reminded him.

“Sam does,” he said with a wink.

I narrowed my eyes in warning. Mac and Sam were off limits, the entire team knew that much.

“I don’t think Reilly would appreciate you saying that,” Mac added.

“Geez, it was just a joke,” he said with a groan. “Okay, fine. Who would like to do the honors?”

“Anna Marie,” Mac said, “you get first dibs.”

“I’d prefer to watch,” she says with a wink at Slinsky.

“Then, I’d love the honor.” Mac jumped from her seat. “I’ll grab my stuff.”

Slinsky sighed, his shoulders rising up around his ears, as if life was so wicked. He took a few swigs from his cup in preparation. “You all better watch this, because it ain’t ever happening again.”

“Oh, don’t worry,” Tompkins said. “We’re getting pictures.”

“Well, then.” Anna turned back to the group and rubbed her bare legs. “While we wait, Slinsky, it’s your turn. Who is *your* victim?”

He smiled directly at me. “Turner.”

“Great,” I muttered. Fantastic.

“What will it be?”

“Dare,” I said, reluctant. I’d never chosen Truth before, and I wasn’t going to start now. Even if I was actually a little nervous this time.

“Oooh, keeping it exciting, as always, Nick.” Anna winked at me.

A grin spread across Slinsky’s mouth, a sly and conniving one. “It’s time to bring this party up to a whole new level,” he said manically.

“Spit it out, Slinsky. What do you want me to do?” For me, dares were like a Band-Aid, you had to tear them off before you thought too much about them.

“You have to pick someone in this group to kiss—and I’m not talking about a peck on the lips, Turner.”

“This isn’t Spin the Bottle,” Sam retorted, but Slinsky didn’t budge.

"Hey, it's a Dare, Turner. You going to kiss one of the girls or drink?" He shrugged. "Completely up to you." Slinsky said that knowing I wouldn't back down. A kiss was actually an easy dare, just awkward given my choices, which is what he was going for.

I glanced around at the girls, knowing Sam and Mac were out of the question, and Bethany was a bad choice for a number of reasons, the first being that she would probably refuse. But Anna Marie was my choice anyway. She was cute and fun, and wouldn't take this too seriously, which would make the experience all the more enjoyable. I could tell by the giant-ass grin on her face.

"I choose Anna," I finally said, offering her a cocky smile. "You wanna make out with me?" I winked at her, unable to resist. If it was a show that Slinsky wanted, I had no problem giving it to him.

"Why, Nick Turner, I'd love to make out with you." We both laughed, but when I got to my feet, so did Bethany.

"Bathroom break," she muttered and hurriedly stepped through the campsite toward the outbuilding. She seemed a little too eager to get away as I watched her disappear through the trees.

Anna stepped over to me. "Well then, Turner, shall we?"

I barely had time to process before Anna pressed her mouth to mine. All I could think about through Anna's vanilla scent that filled my nostrils was Bethany and what, exactly, had just happened.

SEVEN  
THE KISSING BOOTH

NICK

Four Years Ago

Trying to find parking in the school lot was ridiculous, but not as ridiculous as the fundraiser was going to be by the time I got inside.

“Nick, where are you?” Mac chided through the phone. The crowd was loud behind her, and the impatience in her voice meant they were in a tight spot, especially if they needed a good ol’ alum, like me, to save the day. “Seriously, I needed coverage, like, twenty minutes ago—”

“Okay, okay. I’m parking right now. I’ll be there in two minutes. Hold your horses.”

Mac groaned. “Fine. I’m behind the stage.” She hung up the phone.

*Behind the stage?* I didn’t like the sound of that. I had no idea what I was signing myself up for when I answered her frazzled plea, and I was starting to have my doubts.

Climbing out of the Explorer, I hurried through the lot and headed for the baseball field. The Booster Club threw some sort of fundraiser at least once a year, something the

baseball team often got wrangled into doing as part of their community project. I thought I was finished with all of that, since I'd graduated almost two years ago, but alas, I was back. Even though it was a Saturday afternoon, and I had a dozen other things I would have preferred doing, what was a couple hours of ticket handling or working at one of the game booths for a friend in need?

When I finally made it to the stage, I stopped, dead in my tracks. "No," I said.

Mac came running out toward me, her face lit up. "You're here!"

I took a few hurried steps back, shaking my head. "No. No. No—I am *not* working the kissing booth, Mac."

The fear in her eyes darkened, and she reached for me. "Nick, please? You have to help."

"I don't mind helping, but I'm not kissing a bunch of high school girls."

"Oh, come on. Some of them are cute. Besides, they aren't all high schoolers. We'll sell so many more tickets if you are the one doing all the kissing."

I gaped at her. "*All the kissing?* No, Mac."

"Pleeeease, Nick? Only for an hour until we can find a replacement? Kensington, the main cheese in our senior class, was going to do it, but he bailed at the last minute. So far, it's only been the girl's booth. Which I'm rocking by the way." She simpered, but then her eyes widened again and she frowned. "Please, Nick. Pretty, pretty please? I would owe you forever if you did this." Mac clasped her hands against her heart, actually begging.

"Gah. Fine. But yes, you owe me so big, you don't even know."

"Yay! Fine—anything." She flung her arms around me, and kissed my cheek. "Follow me." Mac took my hand and

led me up the back of the stage, a definite pep in her step again.

“How the hell did you get mixed up in the baseball team’s fundraiser, anyway?”

Mac waved my question away. “When you have to pick a senior project and your best friends are busy with their own lives, that’s how. Reilly’s deployed, you’re busy with college, and Sam’s sneaking off every waking moment to be with her new boyfriend she doesn’t think I know about. So, you find things to do, hence, helping the Booster Club with all their fundraisers this year.” She ran her fingers through her hair as she opened the back of a small booth. “This one’s a doozy though. I promise there will be no more kissing booths in the future. I didn’t realize how difficult this would be. Lesson officially learned.”

“Thank God,” I grumbled, but Mac was right about my being MIA, which made me feel all the more guilty and bendable to her will. Working at Lick’s and taking classes at Benton U had kept me more than busy over the past year.

“Come on,” she said, turning me to face her. She eyed me up and down. “Well, you don’t look like a complete wreck,” she muttered, and ran her fingers through my hair and smoothed out my t-shirt. “I think you’ll do just fine.” She smiled and reached into her bag.

“Well, thanks. I guess.” I tilted my head, realizing I’d never seen her so frantic before.

“Here.” She handed me a case of mints. “You’ll need these, no doubt. Pop one in now, and maybe after the next few kisses.”

“What? I’m not making out with them, Mac.”

She laughed. “Of course you’re not, but girls can be greedy. And you’re a legend here. Trust me, you *will* need them.”

“Oh my God.” I cursed myself for ever answering my phone as she pushed me into the private booth from the back, closed to the ladies waiting in the line outside. I could hear their curious murmurs and impatient grumbles.

Mac kissed my cheek. “I’ll introduce you and send the first one back.”

“I can’t wait,” I groused and sat down on a patio chair with a cushion on it. Not only would it be the most awkward experience of my life, it would likely scar me forever.

“Okay, ladies,” Mac simpered into a microphone. “Sorry for the delay, but as promised, we have some yummy eye candy for you inside. He’s not only a looker, but a baseball legend.”

I had no idea how many girls were out there, what they looked like, or how old any of them were and it made me sweat just thinking about it.

“If you haven’t already, purchase your tickets at the booth to the right of the stage and you’ll get a kiss with one of the baseball legend-makers himself. And, remember, this is for a good cause, so if you’re happy with your kiss, buy another ticket for a round two!”

I wanted to throw up.

“Without further ado, I’ll start collecting tickets! Remember, only one minute each, ladies. Don’t be greedy.”

My cheeks burned, and I swallowed thickly as soft footsteps approached. A girl in flip-flops, by the sound of it. Tentatively, the curtain opened and afternoon light poured through, almost blinding me until I could see a petite girl with long brown curly hair, probably seventeen or eighteen years old, looking hesitantly in at me. Her expression seemed to soften and she pulled the curtain shut behind her.

“Yeah, so this is awkward,” I said with a smile. Breaking the ice was the only way I’d get through the next—well, however long Mac was going to make me do this.

The cute girl smiled. “It’s for a good cause, right?”

I nodded. “That’s what Mac keeps telling me.”

“Well then . . . I guess—”

I nodded again, and leaned forward. “Let’s do this.”

Shutting her eyes, the girl leaned in and pressed her lips softly against mine. Then, just like that, she stood up. “Thanks,” she whispered, and disappeared back through the curtain.

“You’re welcome?” I said, mostly to myself. It was quick and painless, which gave me hope it wouldn’t end up being so horrible after all.

When the next girl came in, I recognized her from my graduating class, which meant she was probably someone’s older sister who got sucked into coming to the event too. “Caralyn, right?”

“Yeah. I wondered if it would be you or Slinsky or Tompkins.”

“I hope you’re not too disappointed,” I said with a smirk, almost flirting with her.

“Pleasantly surprised, actually.”

I smiled. “Shall we then?” This time, I leaned in with more confidence, only she didn’t just press her lips to mine. Caralyn’s mouth parted ever-so-slightly, and she seemed to relish the kiss for a few breaths before she slowly pulled away. I sat there, stunned.

“Thanks, Turner.” She smiled and licked her lips. “See you around.”

“Uh—yeah, sure.”

I stared at her empty seat. If nothing else, this was a

good way to get my fix during a dry spell. I laughed at my own joke, pleased with myself.

When the curtain opened again, it was Bethany who was stepping inside. I'm not sure what my expression was, but the moment she saw that it was me, she froze, her purse half falling off her shoulder.

"It's you," she breathed.

"Yep." I wasn't sure if that was a good thing or a bad thing.

She stared at me, her blonde hair hanging long and straight around her shoulders, and her makeup was dark around her eyes. Finally, she turned around and walked out. Just like that.

Even though it was a typical encounter for us—awkward and off-putting—I felt surprisingly rejected.

"Yeah. Good to see you too."

## EIGHT

# THE DECISION

REILLY

Three Years Ago

Sitting in my bedroom, staring at the walls that had felt like my cage most of my life and listening to my old man snoring in the next room, drunk in his chair, made it hard to remember why I'd wanted to come home for my break. Maybe it was because everyone else in my unit was excited to visit family and I felt like I should be too. Maybe it was because I thought it would help bring me closure after Sam ripped out my heart through a letter that told me she didn't want to be with me anymore—she couldn't wait for me anymore, despite what she'd promised. Maybe it was because I knew she was in Saratoga Falls and that she was seeing someone else. Sam and I went from best friends, to more than that, to nothing at all. It sucked, and apparently, I was a glutton for punishment.

My dad cleared his throat in the other room. Coming home to this house—this town—was a mistake.

Grabbing my keys and a jacket, I opened my bedroom door and headed out into the living room. My dad was

passed out and slouched over in his peeling-pleather recliner, a couple empty beer cans on the floor around him, and one teetering in his hand. He'd aged a lifetime in the couple years I'd been gone. His beard was full and nearly grayed, his permanent frown deepened, even in his sleep. The familiar stench of stale beer clung to the house, though to my surprise, it looked like he might've cleaned the place up a bit, knowing I'd be coming home.

I shook my head. No amount of spot cleaning or cheap air freshener could cover up the decay of this place. It was still hell.

Without looking back, I walked out the front door. At least now I was divested of him and the home that housed every bad memory of my childhood. It was liberating knowing I never had to go back again if I didn't want to—that he couldn't hold anything over me anymore. I was double his size, which meant he couldn't touch me either. I never had to see my own hell or him again, if I chose not to. It was a powerful feeling.

The Rumbler glistened in the setting sun, and I realized how much I'd missed my truck while I was gone. It might have been one of the only things I'd really missed.

A breeze whipped by me, sending chills over my skin, and I shrugged on my jacket. It was difficult getting used to the changing climate. It was almost time to leave again and I still hadn't acclimated. Part of me missed the arid, shrub-riddled hillsides of the Middle East. I was used to heat and desolation. Not the storm clouds that had started to roll in. Not the cold. Not anymore.

Pulling out my phone, I texted Nick.

**Me: Frida's?**

I knew it was his night off from Lick's, and he was likely at home doing homework, so I wasn't surprised when he

texted me back almost immediately. Plus, he was always hungry.

**Nick: YES!! You read my mind. You fly, I buy? Four al pastor tacos with extra chips and salsa.**

**Me: On it. See you soon. You better have clothes on when I get there.**

It was my last night in Saratoga Falls, and I figured I might as well spend it with my best friend. Sliding my phone into my back pocket, I turned on the Rumbler and headed down the gravel driveway. I tried not to wonder if Sam was at home, or if she was with Mike. I knew the guy briefly when I was in high school. I'd seen him in passing at a couple parties in Benton, though he was at least a year older than me. He wasn't a local, which I hated even more. He was some rich sleazeball from the city who slummed it in Saratoga Falls and college towns once in a while, or at least that was the story I'd made up in my head. I just knew I didn't like the guy. Refusing to look at the driveway past mine, I started down the mountain.

I'd seen Sam with him at the gas station when I'd first got to town at the beginning of the week. That was enough for me. They'd come out of Jack's Save Mart holding hands and completely oblivious to my being there, which was fine with me. Watching them together was a hurt and anger I hadn't expected to be so raw, and the last thing I wanted to do was talk to her.

I pulled into Frida's Mexican Restaurant and ordered a super carne asada burrito and four al pastor tacos—with extra chips and salsa—to go. And while I waited for them to prepare my order, my gaze landed on a couple going at it, hot and heavy in a booth tucked in the far corner of the

bustling restaurant. Rolling my eyes, I was about to look away when I noticed a familiar face come up for air. I almost didn't recognize him in the dim light and he was out of place without his BMW and sport jacket.

Mike said something I couldn't hear and downed the rest of his beer. Then, with a grin, he looked at the girl he was with. She wasn't a petite, pixie-like blonde, but a brunette. The brunette, young, maybe Sam's age, but definitely nothing like Sam, climbed out of the booth, adjusted her cardigan, and smoothed out her hair as she waited for Mike to climb out behind her.

She took his hand and led him toward me—toward the door—and it was all I could do not to throw him against the wall with a mouthful of my fist.

He nodded at me as he passed. "Hey, Reilly," he said. "It's been awhile." Oblivious, he smiled. "Take care, dude."

My fists clenched tighter, and a growl might've escaped me.

"Sir?"

I looked at the girl at the cash register, staring at me and blinking. "Your order." She glanced down at the plastic bag and pushed it toward me. "Have a good night." I could hear the uncertainty in her voice as she watched me closely. I didn't get angry very often, but my body coiled so tight I wondered if she could see my trembling muscles.

Clearing my throat, I took the bag and walked back to my truck before I followed Mike out to his car and did something stupid.

I assumed Sam didn't know about the brunette, or at least didn't know they were practically screwing in the corner booth—in a dingy Mexican restaurant, even if it was my favorite takeout.

The entire drive to Nick's, all I could think about was

what I was supposed to do with my newfound knowledge. Would Sam even listen to me, if I told her? We hadn't talked since her breakup letter. She hadn't had the guts to answer my calls. Would she believe me, like she would Mac or one of her friends? I realized I didn't know Sam much anymore, so it was hard to guess.

When I pulled up outside Nick's apartment, I didn't linger in the truck. The warm scent of grilled onions and spices made me nauseous and I headed toward the house.

I was about to open the front door when it opened for me. Nick was standing there, his smile almost as wide as his eyes as he peered down at the bag in my hands. "You're like my own personal Santa Claus, you know that? I'm freaking starving." But his excitement faded when he registered my expression, and he moved aside for me to come in. "What the hell's wrong with you? I put clothes on, like you asked."

I handed Nick the bag and ran my fingers through my hair. "What do you know about Sam's boyfriend?"

"Oh boy, not this again—"

"I'm serious, Nick. What do you know about Mike?"

Nick walked over to the table and untied the plastic bag. "Nothing, really, other than Sam keeps to herself when he's here. She only comes around when he's away on business for his parents or some shit. That's all I know." He pulled a couple Dr. Peppers out of the fridge and set them on the table. "It's not like I hang out with the guy."

"But they are still together, right? I mean, I saw them the other day at the gas station. They acted like they were together." I tried and failed to make sense of Sam's stupidity —to make sense of how she could possibly be in a relationship with such a piece of shit.

Nick nodded, then crossed his arms over his chest and frowned. "Why? What's this about?"

“I just saw the mother fucker at Frida’s with his tongue down some other chick’s throat.”

His eyes narrowed, his jaw clenched, and I felt vindicated as his scowl deepened, similar to mine. “Really?”

“Out in the open, like it was nothing.”

Rubbing his temple, Nick sighed and shook his head. “I knew that guy was bad news. I think Sam does too, deep down, or she wouldn’t keep me and Mac at a distance so much.”

“Well, what the hell do I do?” I paced the living room of the apartment, my mind reeling with hatred and uncertainty. I wanted Sam to regret her decision to dump me for a tool that would treat her the way Mike was. But more than anything, I didn’t want her to be treated like that, even if she already knew and didn’t care, which was a hard and sudden realization. She deserved better.

“I fly back to Colorado tomorrow for deployment. I can’t leave, knowing what I know, Nick. I can’t do *nothing*.” I looked at him in earnest. “What do I do?”

His brow drew together, and I knew Nick was just as conflicted as I was.

“Sam is going to hate whoever pops the bubble she’s been living in this year. You know that, right? At least for a little while.”

I nodded. “Probably. But the alternative is allowing her to be a toy to some guy who clearly doesn’t care about her the way she thinks he does. I can’t let that stand. She has to know.”

“We could tell Mac and she could—”

I shook my head. “I’m doing it,” I said with more adamancy than I’d ever felt about anything in my life. “I’m confronting him, and I’m going to make him tell her. I’ll be more persuasive than Mac ever will. Even if I have to put

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the fear of God in him.” Even if I had to drive around all night to figure out how.

Nick didn’t seem convinced. “Reilly, his family is huge in this town, he might not care what you have to say to him.”

“He will.” I turned for the front door. “He still lives in that big ass house in the Valley?”

“Yeah, but—”

I flung the door open.

“Reilly . . .”

Despite my determination, I hesitated.

“She might hate you for this,” he said.

Knowing I would be leaving in twelve hours and might never see Sam again anyway, I didn’t care. “She can hate me all she wants.” I met Nick’s gaze one last time. “I’ll hate myself if I don’t.”

Nick nodded, and I shut the door behind me.

## NINE FRIENDS FOREVER

SAM

Three Years Ago

“What about that one?” Mac asked and pointed up to the black expanse above us. “That one could be a mermaid—or, a merperson, if we’re being P.C. You just really have to use your imagination.”

“Are we still talking about constellations, or are you referring to that scant patch of clouds over there, because I don’t see it in the stars?” I wrapped my arms tighter around me. It was a cold night, brisk and semi-clear, for an April evening. Being up on Mac’s rooftop, with only the sound of Mac and I breathing and the feel of the breeze against my skin, was reassuring in its own way. A nice change from the loneliness I felt at the ranch, even if it was easier to hide there.

“I was talking about the constellation,” Mac clarified, as if it was obvious.

“You can’t just point up into a sea of billions of blinking stars and say, ‘that one’ and expect me to know which one you’re talking about. It doesn’t work that way.”

"Fine." Mac sighed. "If you look at the last star in Orion's Belt, and bump over to that fast blinking one—" Her finger moved through the sky, and I nodded like I could actually see a mermaid, but I couldn't.

"I told you it was a stretch," she muttered, and pulled the fleece blanket over us, closer around her neck.

Staring up at the night sky, I felt so small. My life had fallen apart in a matter of hours. It would never be the same, and no matter how much my friends tried to console me—no matter how many times I told myself Papa would've wanted me to move on—none of it mattered. Until that moment.

The grief and regret felt a little lighter up there on the rooftop, closer to the unknown. My world might've been crashing in around me, and my head and heart aching and broken, but I was still breathing, staring up at the unexplainable and that felt big. I felt lucky in some ways.

"Thank you for coming over, Sam. I know you didn't want to."

I blinked in the cool air, refusing to look at Mac and her sympathetic expression. I wasn't sure why I'd always wanted to cry when I was around my friends. I had gotten better about holding myself together, most of the time. But knowing Mac wanted me there because I'd begun to push her away, made the night feel heavier than usual.

"I needed to get out of the house," I told her, which was true. "Thanks for making me."

Mac didn't say anything else about it. She didn't ask how I'd been holding up since Papa's funeral, or if things were better with Alison at the ranch, because she already knew the answers. I wasn't holding it together well, not when I knew Papa was gone because of me. Things with Alison weren't better, they never would be. We didn't talk

much, and I felt more alone than I ever had in my life. Mac seemed to finally understand that.

“Is Nick working tonight at Lick’s?” I asked, wondering if he was tired of working two jobs and going to school on top of it all. It was a lot to ask of him, helping me around the ranch in Papa’s absence, but then, I guess I never really asked him. He was just Nick—always there when I needed him, even if I didn’t always know it or appreciate it the way I should.

He showed up the week of the accident to feed the horses. The following week he began to exercise them. He fed the chickens and then helped me figure out Papa’s finances and the business side of things. Nick had been there for me ever since. We didn’t talk about Reilly, thankfully. Not after the mess he’d created. I didn’t think it was possible to hate someone you once loved so much, but I did. I hated him the way I hated Mike for not returning any of my calls. Probably because he was off with Bethany, too busy to care that he’d ruined my life. That I was shattered because of him.

Mac, Nick, and the ranch had been the only constants. My only distractions. They were my sanity, and I owed a girl’s night to Mac so that she could have some peace of mind.

“Have you heard from David?” I asked her, realizing she’d had her fair share of shit to deal with also. “I’m sorry I didn’t ask sooner.”

“Meh. It’s fine. I mostly worry about my dad, not David. David’s an ass, he does what he wants and on his terms.”

“Yeah, but he’s never been MIA this long, has he?”

When Mac didn’t answer, I glanced at her, only to find her face covered in shadows. “He’s not coming back this time,” she said with certainty and there was bitterness

and perhaps a tinge of guilt in her voice, too. “It is what it is.”

David had been a mean brother all Mac’s life—temperamental and neglectful in his brotherly duties, but something between him and Mac had changed over the past couple years. There was something she wasn’t telling me, but I didn’t push her. I of all people knew how important it was to keep things quiet, to not let them out of their cages or risk internal chaos. There was plenty I wasn’t saying too, so I had no room to judge.

“How are your classes at the college?” A subject change was clearly needed. “I keep telling myself I should enroll, but I don’t think it’s going to happen this year.”

“Give yourself more time, Sam. You’ve got a lot on your plate right now.” She rolled onto her side and looked at me, a smile parting her lips. “I’m loving my photography class, actually.” It was the first real smile I’d seen all night.

“Yeah? Is it the subject matter,” I asked, knowing she’d been taking shots of the college football team, the track meets, and some of the other athletic events her professor wanted her to cover for the school newspaper. “Or,” I added, “is it the art of photography itself that you’re enjoying?”

“Can it be both?” she asked with a wry grin. “Because the community college has their fair share of hotties.”

“Just not a Mr. Right, though,” I clarified.

Mac shook her head. “No one will ever be good enough for me,” she said playfully. Mac liked to pretend that she was flippant and carefree when it came to the opposite sex, but I’d never seen her with a guy, not really. She’d always flirted and hung out with them, but dating never turned into anything more than a night out, and I always wondered why. Her dad was likely the reason—overprotective and

downright intimidating—but then, I couldn’t help wondering if it was something else.

“Sup, girls,” Nick drawled from the window, making us both jump.

“What the heck are you doing here?” Mac demanded. “I thought you were working?”

He crawled up onto the rooftop and sat at the apex above us. “I left early.”

“Awww, you came to hang out with us,” Mac said, and I didn’t have to see Nick to know he rolled his eyes.

“No, you were on my way home,” he lied. We weren’t on his way home at all. Mac lived in the older, cramped neighborhoods where the blue-collar folks dwelled. His apartment was in a newer part of town, happily situated an equal distance from downtown and his parents’ place in the Valley with the nicer homes, the bigger homes.

With a sigh, he motioned for us to separate, and he carefully nestled in between us. “I had to make sure you guys weren’t getting into trouble, at least not without me,” he added.

“Well, we are about to pour our *second* cup of hot cocoa. It’s pretty crazy, I know. You want?” Mac offered him her to-go mug.

“Does it have extra marshmallows?”

“Always.”

“Then, I happily accept.”

“You know, Nick,” I said, realizing something. “For as long as we’ve been friends, I’ve never seen you refuse the offer of food, candy, or any other free, edible thing someone’s offered you.”

He chuckled and took a sip of the hot chocolate. “And, my dear friend, you never will.”

After sating his sweet tooth with a few more savored

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gulps, Nick settled in between us and peered up at the stars.  
“This is kinda cool.”

“It’s been awhile since we’ve come up here,” Mac mused. “It was time.”

“You’ve never come up here with us before, huh?” I realized aloud.

Nick took another swig of his cocoa. “I was never allowed. You have a girls only rule, remember? Reilly and I have always been banned.”

My heart hurt at the mention of his name, but I couldn’t fault Nick for thinking about or mentioning his best friend. As much as I wished everything could be different and go back to the way it used to be between us, I knew that Nick had not only been ditched by his best friend, but that I’d been pretty MIA, too.

“Things change,” I thought aloud. “Consider the ban temporarily lifted.”

“Yeah, we could use your warmth.” Mac snuggled closer against him.

“So, that’s all I’m good for, huh,” he said dryly. “My warmth and charm.” Even though he was being playful, his words struck a chord in me, tightening my throat and burning the backs of my eyes.

I rested my head on his shoulder, peering up at the night sky. I didn’t say anything to him because I couldn’t make my vocal chords work, but I squeezed his arm, and he squeezed my hand in reply.

“Too much has changed,” Mac whispered. “I don’t like it.”

“Yeah,” Nick said. “Tell me about it.” Like Mac and me, Nick had been grappling with something, though I wasn’t sure what it was. His parents, maybe, and the pressure of attending school so that he could work at his dad’s firm. All

Nick really wanted to do was play baseball, Mac and I both knew that, even if he would never admit it.

“Let’s never forget this,” Mac said, her voice strained for the first time. “Let’s always do this, no matter what else changes, okay?”

Nick wrapped his arm around Mac and drew her in closer. Whether it was her words or his body heat, my heart melted a little, and I knew I was lucky to have them.

“Okay,” I breathed. Best friends, forever.

