

amber garza

the summer we fell



the summer we fell

amber garza

Cover: White Rabbit Designs and Creations

Copyright © 2014 Amber Garza

All rights reserved.

This is a work of fiction. Any resemblance of characters to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental. The author holds exclusive rights to this work. Unauthorized duplication is prohibited.

For information: ambergarza.wordpress.com



Other titles by Amber Garza

Tripping Me Up

Winning Me Over

Finding Me Again

Head Above Water

Falling to Pieces

Star Struck

Love Struck

Break Free

Break Through

Delaney's Gift Series:

Dazzle

Shatter

Betray

To connect with Amber Garza online:

<http://www.ambergarza.com>

<https://www.facebook.com/pages/Amber-Garza-author>

Or to sign up for the newsletter: <http://eepurl.com/sp8Q9>

Table of Contents

1

[sloane](#)

2

[cruz](#)

3

[sloane](#)

4

[cruz](#)

5

[sloane](#)

6

[cruz](#)

7

[sloane](#)

8

[cruz](#)

9

[sloane](#)

10

[cruz](#)

11

[sloane](#)

12

[cruz](#)

13

[sloane](#)

14

[cruz](#)

15

[sloane](#)

16

[cruz](#)

[17](#)

[sloane](#)

[18](#)

[cruz](#)

[19](#)

[sloane](#)

[20](#)

[cruz](#)

[21](#)

[sloane](#)

[22](#)

[cruz](#)

[23](#)

[sloane](#)

[24](#)

[cruz](#)

[25](#)

[sloane](#)

[26](#)

[cruz](#)

[27](#)

[sloane](#)

[28](#)

[cruz](#)

[29](#)

[sloane](#)

[epilogue](#)

[sloane](#)

[Read on for an excerpt from WINNING ME OVER, available now...](#)

[ONE](#)

[PAIGE](#)

[TWO](#)

[COLT](#)

[Authors Note and Acknowledgments](#)

To Auntie Boo for your unconditional support, and for making me sound smarter than I am.

1

sloane

“Mom, I’m heading over to Cruz’s,” I call as I push the front door open with my palm.

“Okay. Don’t stay out too late,” Mom’s voice floats from the kitchen. I hear water running, the clink of dishes.

“I won’t.” After stepping outside into the warm summer air, the door slams shut behind me. It may be evening, but here in Folsom it stays warm even at night. I hurry across the grass, my flip flops slapping on the ground with each step. By the time I reach the sidewalk I can hear music coming from the garage across the street. Our suburban neighborhood is fairly quiet. We don’t get much traffic since our street ends at a cul-de-sac. In the distance I hear a dog barking, the hum of a lawn mower. But the manic drumbeat drowns it out. Shaking my head, I step onto the asphalt and make my way toward the sound.

Cruz moved in across the street from my family the summer before kindergarten. I remember watching his family as they carried boxes and furniture from the U-Haul. My older sister Regan and I had been hoping for a family with girls, but the Vargas family consisted of four boys. Cruz is the youngest. I couldn’t have known then that Cruz and I would become best friends. Now I’m glad it had been him and not a girl moving in.

The drums are joined by the screech of a guitar by the time I reach Cruz’s front door. *I guess he’s trying out the band thing again.* Cruz’s mom wanted a girl badly. That’s the reason for Cruz’s existence, actually. After giving birth to three boys, she decided to give it one last valiant effort to get her girl. Even though Cruz is not a girl, his mom made it her life’s mission to live out all her girl fantasies with him.

That’s one of the reasons he’s been taking piano lessons since he was five. The thing is, that he’s incredibly talented, but playing classical piano isn’t exactly cool in high school. So Cruz has spent the last few months trying to make it cooler by starting a rock band. Problem is, he can’t find anyone with real talent to join it.

“Hey, Sloane.” Cruz throws me a smile when he opens the door. He wears a grey t-shirt that clings to his muscles and a pair of jean shorts. His feet are bare. Not exactly rockstar material, but with his dark hair, tanned skin

and dark eyes, I figure he could perfect the look if he wants to.

“Are Tweedle Dee and Tweedle Dum here?” I ask him with a slight laugh under my words. That’s what I call Cruz’s new bandmates, Carlos Sanchez and Trey Marshall. Not only do they lack talent, but they lack serious tact. Everything out of their mouth is some kind of sexual innuendo. It’s like they have no idea how to talk to a girl.

“Play nice,” he warns.

“Tell that to them.” I brush past him, stepping inside. The scent of freshly baked cookies smacks me in the face. “Hmmm.” I follow the smell.

“Yeah. Mom made cookies. You can grab some. They’re on the counter.” Cruz closes the front door as I scurry into the kitchen. “I’ll be in the garage.”

“Yeah. Wouldn’t want you to miss out on valuable practice time,” I tease.

“Hey, I’ll have you know we’re getting better. We even have a gig lined up.”

“Oh, really?” I spin around, cocking an eyebrow. “Where?”

“At Ruby’s.”

“Ruby’s? Like the café that has open mic night on Thursdays?” I lean my elbow against the kitchen doorway.

His eyes shift back and forth, but he shrugs it off. “Yeah, but whatever. It’s still a gig. Anyway, I better get back.”

“Hold on.” I have already spotted the plate of cookies sitting on the kitchen counter. After taking a step forward, I snatch one. “I’m coming.” With the chocolate chip cookie in my hand, I follow Cruz toward the door leading to his garage. As he pushes the door open, I bite down on the cookie, chocolate exploding in my mouth. I wipe my mouth with my free hand as I step into the garage behind Cruz. Male voices float over me. The lighting is dim, and white spots fill my vision as my eyes adjust. My gaze sweeps the room landing on Carlos and Trey who stand in the corner laughing about something on Trey’s phone. Something sexual, no doubt. Nudging Cruz in the side, I am about to make a quip about it when my breath catches in my throat.

“You didn’t tell me Adam Stewart was here,” I whisper harshly, my gaze locked on Adam sitting in front of the drum set, his tousled brown hair falling over his forehead. As he lifts a drumstick, the muscles beneath his t-shirt flex, and my stomach flip flops.

Cruz flashes me an amused look. “Does it matter?”

“Yes, it matters,” I say. When I glance down, I cringe at the cookie melting in my hand. *Great.* Before Adam can see me, I shove the remainder of the cookie in my mouth and then wipe my palm on my jeans.

“Why are you getting so worked up?” Cruz laughs, eyeing the chocolate spot on my pants.

“It’s Adam Stewart,” I hiss.

“Seriously. I thought you were better than that, Sloane.” Cruz’s eyes darken.

“Better than what?”

“Better than Lauren and her friends.” He holds up his arm, his hand dangling daintily from his wrist. In a girly voice he says, “Adam is so hot, Adam is so smart, Adam is such a good kisser.”

My eyebrows lift. “Good kisser?”

He lowers his arm and shrugs. “I sat behind Lauren in math last year.”

“Ah.” Lauren was Adam’s girlfriend until just a few weeks ago. She is also the head cheerleader, which makes sense since Adam is the star quarterback. They were the perfect couple, but rumor has it she cheated on him so they broke up. I don’t understand why anyone would cheat on Adam Stewart. He’s every girl’s fantasy. Mine included, even though I’ve never really admitted it to anyone, which is obvious judging by the look on Cruz’s face.

“I had no idea you liked him,” Cruz says.

“I *don’t* like him,” I respond defensively. Then I draw in a breath, noticing Adam glancing over in our direction.

Cruz lifts a brow, one side of his lip curling a bit. “Sure you don’t.” His tone is sarcastic.

“Shut up.” I punch him in the shoulder. “How come he’s here, anyway? I didn’t even know you were friends.”

“Are you surprised that the great Adam Stewart would want to hang out with me?” His eyes hold a teasing gleam, but there’s an edge to his voice that bothers me.

“No, not at all.”

Reaching out, he circles my arm with his hand. “Come on, I’ll introduce you.”

As he guides me over to where Adam sits, I take deep, steadying breaths. I've never really spoken with Adam before. I mean, unless you count the time I sat behind him in history last year and accidentally hit him in the head with my book. I muttered an apology under my breath, but other than that I'm pretty sure the guy doesn't even know I exist.

When we approach, Adam's head bobs up and his dark eyes meet mine. Setting down the drumsticks, he runs a hand through his hair and smiles. I literally can't breathe.

"Hey, Sloane," he says, shocking the hell out of me.

I throw Cruz a surprised look. His eyes are narrowed in a pensive look. Ignoring him, I shake his arm off and turn back to Adam. "Hey," I say, my tongue feeling swollen in my mouth.

"So are you in the band too?" Adam asks, placing his hands on his thighs.

Cruz chuckles. "Hell, no."

I stiffen, glaring at him.

"What?" He throws up his arms. "You're totally tone deaf."

I stare at Cruz, fantasizing about strangling him with my bare hands. When his gaze lands on me, understanding fills his eyes.

"But she can play a mean tambourine," he offers with a smile.

"And she sure can shake that tight ass," Trey interjects, much to my dismay. Apparently he pried his eyes from whatever debauchery he had been looking at on the phone.

I turn sharply, catching him and Carlos staring at my rear end.

"Yeah, why don't you give us a little preview?" Carlos guffaws, slapping Trey on the back.

"Hey, leave her alone," Adam says. "I don't think she came here to entertain you two pervs."

I glance over at Adam, stunned.

"In fact, I'm guessing she came to hear some music. Am I right?" He gives me a questioning look.

Unable to find my voice, I nod. Truth is, I didn't come here to listen to music. I came to get out of my house and hang with Cruz. But now that Adam is playing in the band, things just got a little more interesting. Trey and Carlos sober up and head for their guitars. Cruz looks at me once over his shoulder

before heading over to the keyboard.

As the guys get set up, I plop down in a nearby folding chair. Rotating fans stand all around the room, emitting cool air. I relish it, savoring the feel of it as it brushes over my warm skin. Heat rises in my cheeks when I notice Adam eyeing me. Reaching up, I fiddle with the ends of my long, dark hair, nervously twirling it around my finger. Biting my lip, I glance down at my chipped toenail polish and dirty flip flops. *Oh, hell. I'm a mess.* Since Cruz was pretty much my only friend growing up, I've always been a bit of a tomboy. I only started wearing makeup and dresses this last year after befriending Becca. Still, guys hardly ever notice me.

Music swells around me, and I look up, Adam's gaze finding mine again. Unnerved, I look away. Why is he acting like this? I mean, I didn't even think he knew my name. And I never would've expected him to defend me like he did. The whole exchange makes my head spin. Yanking my cell out of my pocket, I think of texting Becca about it. Tonight she's at the yogurt shop where she works, but she can still get texts. I start to type on the screen and then delete it. There's no way she'll believe me. I wouldn't believe it myself if I didn't see it with my own eyes.

Adjusting my position in the chair, I listen to the boys play. Oddly enough, they don't suck as much as last time I heard them. Maybe all they needed was a good drummer to pull them together. I had no idea Adam even played drums, but he's pretty damn good. The last guy Cruz had was all over the place. I don't know much about music, and even I could tell his beats were off. When Cruz presses his lips to the mic and starts to sing, I find myself mesmerized. His low, rich voice fills the garage. I've known Cruz almost my whole life, but his raw talent never ceases to amaze me. He offers me a broad smile when he sees me watching.

"Sloane," Adam says, yanking my attention from Cruz. "I have a tambourine right there." While he continues to drum, his head nods to the ground next to the drumset. "Come sit over here and give it a go."

My stomach flutters. "Okay." I stand up on shaky legs, pulling the chair behind me. It scrapes on the cement floor as I walk. After reaching down to pick up the tambourine, I set the chair next to Adam and sit in it. On his cue, I hit the tambourine against my open palm. Every time I do, he offers an encouraging nod and grin. A permanent smile etched on my face, I peer over at Cruz. He's watching me, but his expression is unreadable. A shiver runs through me. Usually I can read Cruz like a book. Confused, I furrow my brow and avert my gaze.

The boys go through a few more songs, and I continue to play

tambourine with Adam's help. It feels like a dream. Never in a million years did I ever think I'd be hanging out with Adam Stewart. The only downside is how loud it is sitting directly next to the drumset. I'm fairly certain my ears will be ringing for days. But it'll be worth it. When the practice is over, disappointment sinks into my stomach. Normally I can't wait for practice to be over so Trey and Carlos can leave. But tonight I had been hoping they would play all night long.

As Trey and Carlos pack up their guitars, Adam stands up and nods toward Cruz. "Hey, you okay with me keeping my drums here until next practice?"

"Sure, man," Cruz responds.

My heart skips a beat. That ensures I'll get to see him again. I suppress the grin that threatens to jump on my face and keep my expression neutral.

"Cool, because I gotta jet. I'm late to meet someone."

My stomach plummets at his words. I'm sure the "someone" he's referring to is of the female variety. Sighing, I set down the tambourine.

"Hey, you were great tonight," Adam says.

"Thanks," I mumble.

"Will you be here next time?"

I nod.

"Cool." With that, he spins on his heels and heads toward the door. I watch as he waves at Trey and Carlos. Then he slips out of the garage and I finally allow myself to breathe. Air rushes out of my mouth in a giant exhale.

"So, I guess you'll be coming to more practices, huh?" Cruz sidles up to me.

"Yeah, I think I will."

Cruz nods, a dark flicker in his eyes.

My stomach knots. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing." He shakes his head. "Nothing at all."

2

cruz

Damn it, I never should've let Adam join the band. Sure, it seemed like a good solution at the time. Our last drummer couldn't even keep the beat. He was all over the damn place. When I went to Ruby's the other day to talk to the manager about playing, Adam was there and he overheard my conversation. He approached me and said he was a drummer. I thought, what the hell? I'll give him a chance. I figured the worst that could happen was that he'd be a shitty drummer, so we'd have to kick him out and find someone else.

But no. Apparently the worst that can happen is he'll end up dating Sloane.

I'm not surprised that he was flirting with her. Sloane is hot. She has no idea she is, and that only makes her hotter. But I am surprised that she likes him. I mean, she's never even mentioned him to me. Although to be fair, she never really talks about guys to me at all. Other than her celebrity crushes, she's not really one of those girls who gushes about guys. It's just another thing I love about her.

Sloane isn't like other girls. It's safe to say that for much of our friendship I forgot she was a girl. Lately that's been more difficult since she's developed and she's wearing sexier clothes. It's damn near impossible when we go swimming. But even though she's maturing, she's still tough as nails and can keep up with me any day.

When we were younger she could belch the whole ABC's, and she never cared about getting muddy or hurt when we played outside. That's why I'm surprised about her reaction to Adam. Yeah, yeah, I know that every girl at our school falls all over the dude like he's a freaking rock star or something. But like I said, Sloane is different. I've never seen her fall all over any guy.

Until tonight, that is.

Frankly, I was embarrassed for her. I mean, have some self-respect.

The longer I watched her play that goddamn tambourine and giggle with Mr. Quarterback, the angrier I got. I mean, Sloane isn't even musical. And she hates playing the tambourine. It's the reason I brought it up. The one

time I asked her to play it at practice I thought she was going to throw the thing at my head she was so irritated. Honestly, it would've been funny to see her throw it at Mr. Football Superstar's head. Then again, his head is so inflated it would probably bounce right off.

Slamming my fist into the wall in my bedroom, I groan.

"Whoa. What's got you so upset?" Gabe pushes open my bedroom door that was slightly ajar and then leans against the doorframe, his eyebrows knit together. "Rough practice?"

"Something like that." I rake my hands down my face, my fist stinging. Shit, I'll have to fix the dent in the wall before Mom sees it and starts cussing me out in Spanish. When I was a kid I thought it was funny when she did that, like she was a cartoon character or something, since I couldn't understand a word she said. But now I don't find it so funny. Frankly it's terrifying, especially since Dad does understand her. And when she gets really riled up, I know he'll punish my sorry ass. That will be a lot worse than Mom's yelling.

"Well, maybe kick Trey and Carlos out. They're idiots anyway."

I chuckle under my breath. "Now you sound like Sloane." My insides sour. "If only she felt the same way about Adam Stewart." As hard as I try I can't keep the venom out of my voice when I say his name. I swear I don't dislike the guy. If I did, I certainly wouldn't have invited him into the band. *What the hell is wrong with me?*

"Ah, so this is about Sloane." Gabe steps inside the room. With a knowing smile, he sinks down onto the edge of my bed. "I knew this would happen one day."

I cross my arms over my chest, eyeing him from where I stand near the wall. "Knew what would happen?" Mom and Dad's voices float from in the kitchen, tea whistles on the stove. I'm glad they weren't up here when I threw my little temper tantrum.

"I knew one day Sloane would get involved with some guy and you'd get jealous."

My chin tightens. "They're not involved, and I'm not jealous."

"So what's with the hole in your wall then?" Gabe's gaze slides over my shoulder.

The dent in the wall taunts me, a glaring reminder of my loss of self-control. My quick temper is always getting me in trouble. "You should've seen him, Gabe. He was flirting with Sloane all night."

Gabe flashes me an I-told-you-so look.

“It’s not what you think.” My gaze flickers to the window and slips across the street to Sloane’s house. “Adam is a player. Everyone knows that. I just don’t want to see Sloane get hurt.”

“So this is about protecting Sloane, huh?”

“Of course.” I bristle. “What else could it be about?”

Gabe raises his eyebrows, then shakes his head. “Nothing. If you say this is about protecting Sloane, then I’ll buy it.”

“It is. She’s my best friend. It’s my job to keep her safe.”

Gabe nods. “And you’re sure this guy is bad news? You’re positive he’s going to hurt her?”

It’s clear that Gabe is the intellectual brother. He spends all his time analyzing ever damn thing. Sometimes I like it, but right now it’s downright maddening. “Well, I don’t know if I’m positive.” I scratch the back of my neck.

“Take my advice. If you’re not sure, then back off.” Gabe stands. “You’ll only push her away.”

I nod, knowing he’s right. That’s another thing about Sloane. She’s stubborn as hell. Since she’s practically a part of this family, Gabe knows that as well as I do. After Gabe leaves the room I stare outside, finding Sloane’s window. Light shines from inside, but the blinds are closed so I can’t see her. I know she’s in there, though, probably daydreaming about Adam Stewart. *God, I wish this didn’t bother me so much.*

I keep telling myself it’s because I’m worried about her. That this is strictly me being her best friend and trying to protect her. But deep down I know that isn’t the reason at all.

3

sloane

“Shut up.” Becca pushes me in the shoulder. “Adam freaking Stewart really said that? You’ve gotta be kidding!”

I giggle, rolling over onto my back and staring up at the ceiling. Becca gapes at me from where she sits on the edge of my bed. “I know. It’s crazy.”

“Seriously.” She tucks a strand of chin-length blond hair behind her ear. “You’ve gotta make your move.”

“Make my move?” I throw my arm up, propping my elbow under my head. “I don’t think so. This is Adam Stewart we’re talking about.”

“Exactly. He could have a new girlfriend by tomorrow.” She claps her hands. “You’ve got a small window.”

“I’m not even sure I have a window. It’s not like he asked me out. He just asked if I was coming to the next practice.”

“From Adam, that’s huge.”

My stomach flutters like a million butterflies are filling it.

“So what are you gonna wear to the next practice?” Becca asks.

I sit up, scrunching my nose. “I hadn’t thought about it.”

“Well, you better.” She scoots off my bed and opens the closet door. Her short blond hair swishes around her head with each movement. She’s wearing a short jean skirt and a pink tank top. Her silver sandals sparkle from the sunlight that filters in the window. “What about this?” She yanks down a floral sundress. It’s one she helped me pick out last time we went shopping.

“Yeah.” I shrug. “Maybe.”

“Not maybe.” She drops it on my bed. “This is what you should wear. And curl your hair.”

“Yes, ma’am,” I joke.

“Hey, Sloane,” Cruz appears in the doorway. When he steps inside he looks at Becca and frowns. “Oh. Hey. Becca.”

“Don’t look so excited to see me.” She rolls her eyes.

I hate the tension between the two of them. The reason Becca and I became friends was because she was dating Cruz. After they broke up, Becca and I stayed connected, a fact that Cruz is not too pleased about. If only they could find a way to get along, it would make my life a lot easier.

“I didn’t know you two were hanging out.” Cruz shifts uncomfortably from one foot to another.

“No, it’s fine. I have to go anyway.” Becca gives me a pointed look. “Do what I said. Wear the dress, and keep me posted.”

I nod as she brushes past Cruz and down the hallway. The front door opens and closes with a click.

“What was that about?” Cruz pushes off the wall and walks inside. He glances down at the dress strewn across my bed.

“She was just trying to help me pick out an outfit to wear at your next practice.”

“You know you don’t have to look good for me.” He plops down on the bed, leaning into me.

I smile.

“Ah, but it’s not me you’re trying to impress, is it?” He reaches out, fingering the dress. “This looks like an Adam Stewart kind of dress.”

My cheeks warm.

Cruz turns to me. “Look, Sloane, do you really think it’s smart to get involved with Adam?”

“Who said anything about getting involved?” I shake my head. “It’s not like he’d ever be interested in me anyway.”

“Why wouldn’t he be?”

I hop off the bed, moving toward the window. A yellow rope hangs from the tree outside. Cruz and I used to have a tire swing, until my dad took it down when Cruz pushed me too hard and I fell off, breaking my arm.

“Because he’s Adam Stewart, and I’m Sloane Martin.”

“So?” I hear the creak of the bed over my shoulder.

“So, he can have any girl he wants.”

“And why can’t that be you?” Cruz stands behind me. “You never give yourself enough credit.”

I chuckle under my breath. “You have to say nice things about me.

You're my best friend." Spinning around, I smile. "Anyway, it doesn't matter. I'm just having fun with this while I can."

Cruz smiles back, but it looks forced.

"What are you worried about?" I ask him.

"I just don't want you to get hurt."

"That's sweet, but I'll be fine." I puff out my chest. "I'm tough."

"Oh, yeah?" He tickles my waist, and a stream of laughter escapes through my lips. "Not that tough."

I writhe out of his grasp, slipping under his arm and racing for the door. "That doesn't prove I'm not tough, it only proves that I'm ticklish." Hugging myself I lean against the doorway.

"Remember when we were like seven and I tickled you so hard you peed your pants?"

I frown. "I thought we swore never to speak of that again."

"No. I swore I'd never talk to anyone *else* about it." Cruz moves toward me. "And I haven't."

That's what I love about Cruz. He always keeps his promises. It doesn't matter how many friends or girlfriends he's had over the years, he never divulges my secrets to anyone. Even when he was dating Becca he always put our friendship first.

"Just be careful, okay?" Cruz narrows his chocolate brown eyes.

"Okay." I nod, grateful to finally know what's bothering him. I've been worried about it ever since the last practice. He's never acted that way before, but now it makes perfect sense. He's just being his usual overprotective self. In second grade a boy named Raul had been picking on me at recess, kicking sand in my face and bumping into me on purpose, that sort of thing. Cruz got so angry he got into a fistfight with him one recess. He ended up getting in a lot of trouble, and I felt so bad. But I remember him saying that he'd do it all over again if he had to. Needless to say, Raul never bothered me again. And I'd always seen Cruz as my protector. Therefore, I guess I shouldn't be surprised that he'd be the same way with guys I date or are interested in.

"Wanna go to the lake today? It's supposed to be over a hundred degrees later."

"Sure." I shrug.

“Cool. I’ll grab my stuff and be back in fifteen.” Cruz saunters around me and heads down the hallway.

“Hey, you driving or am I?” I love offering to drive. Cruz is six months older than me so he’s had his license for a little while. I just got mine a month ago.

Cruz grins from over his shoulder as he reaches for the front door knob. “I’ll drive. I’d like to live long enough to see the lake.” He throws me a wink.

“Shut up.” I roll my eyes as he steps outside. The first time I took Cruz for a ride in my car I almost got into an accident. In my defense, the car came out of nowhere and was driving well over the speed limit. None of that seemed to matter to Cruz, though, when I swerved away from the car and into the opposite lane, causing us to almost get hit head on. However, I’ve pointed out to him many times that it takes a lot of skill to avoid two accidents in the matter of two seconds. I mean, I saved our lives! But he’s been scared to drive with me ever since.

After the door closes behind him I duck back into my room and head to my dresser. I locate my purple bikini and quickly change into it. Being best friends with a guy means that I have to know how to get ready a lot faster than other girls. When Cruz says fifteen minutes he’s usually back in five. He doesn’t need very long to change into a pair of swim trunks. I throw a cover up over my swimsuit and grab a towel out of the hall closet. As I’m tossing it into my beach bag, Cruz returns. *What did I tell you?* It hasn’t even been ten minutes.

I text Mom to let her know where I’ll be, and then Cruz and I head outside. Cruz was right. The sun is scorching hot, and it’s not even noon yet. Unrelenting, it beats down on us as we head across the street to Cruz’s car. I slip into the passenger side, the vinyl seat burning my thighs. I pick my legs up off the seat as Cruz hops into the driver’s seat and turns on the engine. Thankfully he cranks the air conditioning as he pulls away from the curb. I relish the cold air as it spills from the vents and feathers over my skin.

By the time we turn the corner, the seat is cool enough for me to lower my legs. Holding the beach bag in my lap, I stare out the window at the quiet suburban neighborhoods. Cruz puts on some music and a familiar rock band plays in the background. Under his breath, Cruz sings along as he drives. When we were kids, Cruz was always singing. He hummed while we played outside. He knew all the theme songs to the television shows we watched, and he used to make up songs for games we played. It used to drive me nuts. Now I find it endearing.

“Hey.” I turn to him. “Did I tell you that we got Mateo’s wedding invitation in the mail yesterday?”

“No, but I knew he sent them out.” He smiles. “So, does that mean you’re coming?”

“I wouldn’t miss your brother’s wedding. You know that.”

Cruz turns a corner. “I still can’t believe he’s getting married.”

“I can. It’s Mateo. He’s had a girlfriend since he was in diapers.” I laugh.

Cruz chuckles. “That’s true. I guess it does make sense. Now if Julian gets married, then we’ll know something’s wrong.”

My stomach knots. “How is Julian?”

He shrugs, keeping his gaze trained out the front window, but I can see the slight twinge of his jaw that happens when he’s upset. “Who knows?”

I bite my lip. Julian is the wild child of the Vargas boys. Mateo is the oldest and most responsible. Gabriel is only two years older than Cruz, and he’s the intellect of the group. He’s been offered academic scholarships from several prestigious universities. Julian barely graduated from high school, and shortly after he moved out with a girlfriend. Everyone knows that he’s on drugs and mixed up with some pretty bad guys. It’s been a source of a lot of heartbreak for the family, especially Cruz’s mom.

I can’t even imagine. Regan gave my parents a little grief in high school, but just typical teenage rebellion stuff. Still, it killed my parents, and it was enough to keep me from doing it.

Cruz parks in the lot near the bridge and shuts off the engine. The minute cold air isn’t pouring out of the vents, it’s freaking hot again. I wipe my brow as I step out of the car. The water is sure going to feel good. After flinging the beach bag over my shoulder, I slam the door closed and join Cruz. Together we head to the sidewalk, cross the street and head toward the lake. Our feet crunch on rocks and dirt as we make our way down the path.

Even though bushes obscure our vision, I can tell it’s busy down here today. Splashing, chatting and squealing sounds all around us. Cruz sweeps his arm out, pulling back a couple of twigs so I can step through. He follows behind and we make our way down to the water. Colorful beach towels line the sand, a makeshift kaleidoscope.

When we find an empty spot, I drop my bag and spread out a towel. In the distance a guy hurls a girl into the water. Her scream pierces the air. Shaking my head, I drop on the towel. Peering up at Cruz, I give him a stern

look.

“Don’t you even think about it.” The last time we were here he did the same thing to me.

“What?” As he sinks down onto his towel, he flashes me an innocent look.

“Oh, please. When have you ever been innocent?”

He cocks his head to the side. Then he smiles, shrugging. “Yeah, you’re right. I’m not making any promises.”

“No,” I say firmly. “The water is freezing. I want to go in on my own terms today.”

“Stop being such a wimp.” He swats my arm.

“I knew it was a mistake to become best friends with a boy,” I joke with him just as I have for years.

“Whatever. You know you love me.” He winks as he peels off his shirt, discarding it in the sand. My gaze lingers on his taut tanned chest. Over the years, many girls have asked how I could be platonic friends with Cruz. In fact, rumors have constantly spread that we are more than just friends. It’s like no one can believe that a guy and girl can be best friends only. And I sort of get it. I mean, it’s no secret that Cruz is hot. I’d have to be blind not to notice. But I guess I’ve become desensitized to it. To me he’s just Cruz. Nothing more, nothing less.

“Take a picture. It’ll last longer.”

My head snaps up to Cruz’s face, and he wears an amused expression.

“Shut up.”

“It’s okay. You can stare if you want.” He flexes. “I know it’s nice.”

“You wish.” I giggle, but my face warms a bit. Turning away from him, I search in my bag for the sunblock. Cruz may not have to worry about his dark skin burning, but I have to worry about mine. When we were younger Cruz used to tease me for my pale skin, calling me Casper the Friendly Ghost, as if I wasn’t already aware of the difference in our coloring. After locating the bottle, I pull it out. I squirt some on my arms and shoulders and rub it in.

“Here.” Cruz reaches for the sunblock. “I’ll get your back.”

I sit still as he rubs his palms over my flesh. My gaze scours the lake, and my stomach leaps. “Oh, my god.”

“I’ve put sunblock on you a million times, but I’ve never elicited this kind of response from you, Sloane. I must be getting better.”

I roll my eyes at Cruz’s joke. “No. Look.” With my index finger I point out at the lake. “Adam’s here.”

“Adam Stewart?” His hand stills on my back.

“Yeah. Right there. See?” I stare at Adam as he bobs in the water, his dark hair slick, liquid beading on his skin. He’s wearing sunglasses so I can’t see his eyes, but I can picture them, and it makes my stomach twist.

“Oh. Yeah, that’s him.” Cruz sounds bored. “Guess you better get in the water and try to accidentally bump into him or some shit like that. Then you can act all surprised as if you had no idea he was here.”

I throw him a confused look. “What are you talking about?”

“Isn’t that what girls do?”

Leaning back, I bite my lip. “I don’t know. I’m new to this whole flirting thing.”

Cruz tosses the sunblock to me, and I catch it in my palm. “That’s good. It’s better if you just be yourself. Don’t play games. Trust me.” He winks.

“Is that why you broke up with Becca? Because she played too many games?”

“Ugh. Becca.” Cruz groans. “That girl was so high maintenance and needy. And yeah, she did play games.” He shakes his head. “I can’t believe you’re friends with her.”

“It’s your fault.” I nudge him in the shoulder. “You’re the one who brought her into our lives.”

“That doesn’t mean she has to stay.”

I shrug. “I like her. Besides, she’s my first girlfriend.”

“Girlfriend?” Cruz lifts his brows. “Is there something you need to tell me?”

“You know what I mean. My first friend that’s a girl,” I clarify.

“Why do you need another friend? You’ve already got the best one right here.”

“And so humble too,” I mutter under my breath. Sweat forms on my brow and above my lip. “Let’s get in the water, it’s too hot out here.” Standing

up, I shimmy out of my cover up and toss it on top of my towel.

Cruz and I walk down toward the water. The sand is warm on my heels. A couple of kids run past us, kicking up sand from their wet feet. I hold out my arm, blocking it from spraying me in the face. When my toes hit the frigid water, I let out a little gasp and yank my foot back.

“Oh, no.” Cruz chuckles, grabbing my hand and pulling me forward. “You’re not chickening out again.”

Water covers both feet, and I shiver. “Cruz, no.” I snatch my hand from his and whirl away from him, but I’m not fast enough. His arms fasten around my middle lifting me from the ground. Squealing, I kick my legs as he flings me toward the water. As my legs hit the water, I grapple for him, circling my arms around his neck. Together we fall into the water, and it swallows us whole. It’s so cold, it steals my breath.

When I come up for air, I splash him. “You’re gonna pay for that.”

He sputters as water hits him in the face. Before I can splash him again, he grabs my arm and holds it steady. Our faces are so close they are almost touching. Out of the corner of my eye, I see Adam a few feet away staring at us. My heart kicks up speed, and I shake my arm out of Cruz’s grasp. Then I push away from him. When he comes after me, I give him a stern look.

“Cruz, stop,” I hiss.

The teasing look drops from his face, his expression turning serious. “What’s going on?”

“Adam is watching us.”

“Oh, no.” He widens his eyes in mock horror. “Who cares?”

“Well, it’s just that...” My feet find the sand at the bottom of the lake, and I ground myself. With my hand I push wet hair out of my eyes. “I don’t want him to get the wrong impression about us, you know?”

Cruz’s eyes harden. “Yeah, we wouldn’t want that. Would we?”

“Cruz, you know what I mean.”

“Yeah, I get it. Don’t worry. I’ll make sure he doesn’t get the wrong impression.” He turns from me, diving under water. When he surfaces a little ways down, he doesn’t even look back. He just keeps swimming as if he can’t get far enough away from me.

4

CRUZ

I kick my legs, pumping with my arms in an attempt to swim as fast as humanly possible. My hands slice through the frigid water with each stroke. With my eyes closed, I have no idea where I'm going. But truthfully, I don't give a damn. I could swim all the way to Japan and it wouldn't be far enough.

Seriously, what are the chances of running into Adam today at the lake? Until the last couple of weeks I had never run into him anywhere other than school. And now suddenly it's like I'm a freaking Adam Stewart magnet or something. Or maybe Sloane is. God, the look on her face when she saw him was sickening.

I was already struggling enough when she took off her cover up revealing that tiny bikini. Sloane may not realize just how smoking hot she looks in a bathing suit, but trust me, she does. In fact, for a minute the overprotective side of me started to rear its ugly head. I came seriously close to demanding she cover up. Every guy in the place was ogling her, including Adam. But Sloane's oblivious to stuff like that. In fact, the only reason she bought that skimpy bikini was because of Becca.

Ugh. Becca. That's a girl I wish I'd never dated. Even worse that she latched on to Sloane, making it her life's mission to turn Sloane into a Becca clone or some shit like that. Sloane doesn't need to be anyone's project. She's perfect just the way she is.

As my arms move swiftly through the water, gentle waves slapping me in the face, I start to worry about my sanity. Sloane and I have hung out practically every day since we were five, and I've never acted like this. In fact, it's safe to say I've helped her put on sunblock hundreds of times, and yet when I did it today it felt oddly sensual. I found my mind wandering to places it shouldn't. It took all my willpower for my hands not to follow where my thoughts went. I wanted to chase them all over her smooth, porcelain-like skin. For one irrational moment I thought she felt the same way. When she moaned, "Oh, my god," I thought it was in response to my touch.

What an idiot.

I should've known it had to do with *him*.

Stopping, I break the surface of the water, lifting my head. Circling

my hands in the water, I hold my body up, then crane my neck to look back at the shore. *Shit, I did go far.* Squinting, I spot Sloane. She's talking with Adam in the water. *Surprise, surprise.*

Taking a deep breath, I turn around. It's time to go back and face the music. I'm going to have to explain my behavior to Sloane, and I have no idea what I'll say. What explanation can I give for why I'm acting like some jealous boyfriend? I don't even understand it myself.

As I stare at Sloane and Adam, a memory surfaces.

Becca and I had just started dating. Sloane had a track meet that Saturday morning and I promised to go. I never missed any of her home track meets. After I woke up I got a text from Sloane with the times of her heats, so I hurriedly got ready, not wanting to miss any of her races. The problem was that apparently I had promised Becca we'd hang out, and I'd completely forgotten. She didn't though. And she showed up at my house just as I was walking out the door.

Becca was dressed in a skirt and flowery shirt. When she saw me in my gym shorts and t-shirt she wrinkled her nose in disgust. "I thought we were going out?"

That was the thing about Becca. She was kind of a snob. I let it slide because she was gorgeous. Before you go on thinking that I'm a complete ass, I did at one time like her personality. I never would've asked her out if I didn't. In fact, when we first met she was really sweet and she had a spunky side that reminded me of Sloane. But once we got together, her true colors shone brightly and her high-maintenance side was a bit of a turn off.

"We are," I said with a smile. "We're going to Sloane's track meet."

"A track meet?" Becca glanced down. "In this?"

I shrugged. "Hey, I don't know what to say. I didn't tell you to wear that."

She glared at me, and then I felt guilty. It really wasn't her fault. I was the one who screwed up. And I did like her. At that point in our relationship she hadn't completely turned me off yet. So I sidled up next to her, circling her waist and drawing her close. "But don't worry about it. You'll be the most beautiful girl at the meet."

"I will?" She batted her lashes.

No, not really. Sloane would be there. But I kept that thought to myself and instead said, "Of course." And kissed her gently on the mouth. At least I meant for it be gently, but Becca was always an eager kisser. We got a little

carried away and kissed a little too long.

By the time we got to the meet we had missed Sloane's first heat. And it was her best one. The one she'd been most nervous about. In fact, she'd spent all last night talking to me about it. When I spotted Sloane all sweaty and breathing hard, my heart sunk into my stomach, and I felt like shit.

"Sloane." I broke away from Becca and ran toward her.

She turned to me, her eyes hard.

"I'm so sorry. I tried to get here in time, but then Becca showed up and so I was just running a little late."

"It's fine." But her tone told me it was anything but.

I sighed. "I'm really sorry."

She shrugged, her gaze sliding over to Becca. "You had more important things to do."

Her words pierced my heart. I grabbed her arm. "No. Nothing's more important to me than you."

"If that were true, you would've been here." She shook my arm off. "I won, by the way," she said before stomping off.

After that day I never missed another one of her races. And I made a vow to myself that I would never put anyone before her. I've kept that promise. I think that's why it's hard for me to see her with Adam. I'm worried that maybe now it's my turn to come second, and I don't think I can handle that. But I know that makes me sound like an asshole, so I'll work on it.

Sloane has been by my side through several girlfriends. I can do the same for her. I owe her that much at least. But I swear, if Adam hurts her, I'll kick his ass.

Diving back under the water, I make the swim back to the shore. As I swim, I steel myself for seeing Adam and Sloane. I even coach myself on how to act and what to say, promising that I won't act all macho or weird. When I get close, I bob my head up and my breath hitches in my throat. Damn, they moved fast. Sloane is seriously in Adam's arms, her face pressed to his chest. The whole scene is a little shocking. My feet find the bottom of the lake, and I stand up as Sloane and Adam separate. He glances up, spotting me. Then he smiles and waves in my direction.

Remembering my earlier pep talk, I force myself to respond cordially and make my way over to them.

5

sloane

“Hey, Sloane.”

I whip my head around at the sound of Adam’s voice. My reflection stares back at me from the lenses of his sunglasses. “Hey,” I respond shyly.

“What’s going on?” he asks, and my mind immediately flies back to Cruz’s weird behavior a minute ago.

“Nothing much.” I steal a glance over my shoulder, but don’t see Cruz. When I return my attention to Adam, he flashes me a dimpled smile, and my insides warm. I smile back, deciding to deal with Cruz later. Adam and I are both standing waist deep in the water, and I can’t help but notice how defined Adam’s chest muscles are.

“You came here with Cruz?”

“Yeah.” I remember how Cruz was holding me in the water. How it might appear to someone observing us. “You know...as friends.” Embarrassment creeps up at his knowing grin. *Why did I say that?*

“That’s cool. I came here with some friends too.”

That’s when I notice the gaggle of girls watching us from where Adam had been swimming earlier. My insides knot. “Oh.” I drop my gaze. “Well, I’ll let you get back to them.”

“It’s okay. I like talking to you.” He moves a little closer, the scent of his sunblock wafting under my nose. I have trouble breathing.

“Oh.” It’s the best response I can formulate. With this riveting conversation I’m sure he’ll be racing off to those other girls any minute.

“Is everything all right?”

Can he read me that well? My cheeks flush. “Um...yeah. Why?”

“I saw you and Cruz talking before he took off. It looked like maybe you had a fight or something.”

Irritation with Cruz bubbles inside of me. “No. Everything’s fine. He just wanted to go for a swim and I didn’t.”

“Well, he’s going pretty far.” He holds up his hand to shield his face.

“I can hardly see him anymore.”

I sigh, but force a smile. “He’s always liked swimming.” It’s true. We were on swim team together when we were kids, and Cruz outswam me all the time. “He’ll be fine.”

“What about you? You like swimming?”

I shrug. “Not as much as Cruz does, but it’s okay.”

“What do you like to do?”

The sun pierces my eyes, so I hold my hand up to shield them. “I like to run.”

“Ah, that’s right. You run track, right?”

I nod, stunned that he knows that. Track isn’t exactly the most exciting sport at our school. I know I’ve never seen Adam at a track meet.

“You any good?”

“Um...I’m not the best, but I’m not the worst either.” I shrug. “I can outrun Cruz on long distance runs.”

“You and Cruz hang out a lot, huh?”

I bite my lip. A few kids swim past, their legs accidentally splashing us as they kick their legs. Averting my gaze, I squint as liquid sprays my cheek. Reaching out, Adam wipes the dampness from my skin. Surprised, I shudder at his touch. A few of the girls Adam was with are now glaring in our direction. I can’t help but feel a strange sense of satisfaction. This is all new to me.

“Yeah. All the time,” I say when he draws his hand back. Realizing that doesn’t sound good, I add, “I mean, he lives across the street, and we’ve kind of always hung out. He’s like my brother or something.”

A broad smile sweeps over Adam’s face, causing me to feel momentarily guilty for downplaying my friendship with Cruz. He’s more than a brother to me, and I don’t hang out with him just because we live close. But this is Adam Stewart! Adam Stewart is talking to me, and even flirting a little. I can’t let my friendship with Cruz ruin this for me. Plus, I’m sure Cruz would understand. He’s had numerous girlfriends over the years, and I’m certain he’s had to explain our relationship to them. Funny, I’ve never thought about that before. I wonder what he’s told them about me. I’ll have to ask him sometime.

“Does that mean you’ll be my tambourine girl again next practice?”

His tambourine girl? I like the sound of that. “Definitely.”

A couple of the girls swim near, eyeing us. I recognize one of them as Brooke, a cheerleader at our school. She looks stunning even in the water, with her jet black hair, bright eyes, and toned body. I'm pretty sure I resemble a drowned rat at this moment, and I fully expect Adam to hightail it to Brooke. Especially when she swims directly in Adam's line of vision, throwing him a seductive wink. Adam doesn't seem to notice though. He keeps his gaze trained on me, and it makes me feel like the most special girl in the entire world.

I'm slammed from behind and pitched forward. The side of my face hits Adam in the chest, and his arms come around me.

"Sorry," a male voice says apologetically, as he races past holding a Frisbee in his hand.

I don't bother responding since he's out of earshot by the time I find my voice. Adam's hands on me, our bodies skin to skin, has rendered me speechless.

"You okay?" Adam peers down at me with a look of concern.

As I start to nod, I catch a glimpse of Cruz approaching. He looks at me, and scowls. Taking a deep breath, I step back from Adam. "Yeah, I'm fine. Thanks."

"Sure. No problem." His head bobs toward Cruz. "Looks like he's back." He steps around me. "Hey, man."

"Hey."

"You sure can swim. You were way the hell out there," Adam says to him.

"Yeah." Cruz runs a hand over his hair. "It wore me out." His eyes meet mine. "Ready to go, Sloane?"

"Sure." Disappointment lodges in my throat as I turn to Adam. "I'll see you later."

He leans close, his lips almost touching my cheek and whispers, "You sure will, my tambourine girl."

I shiver as his warm breath fans my skin. Then he disappears under water, leaving me to wonder if I imagined the whole thing.

"What was that about?" Cruz sidles up next to me.

"Nothing." I walk ahead of him.

"It didn't look like nothing." He hurries to catch up. I step onto the

sand, grateful to be out of the cold water. My feet are all pruny, and my legs are almost blue from the cold. I hardly noticed how freezing it was while I stood in it, but that must have been because my lower body had gone numb. Or maybe it was because Adam's proximity made me all hot and bothered. "A week ago you'd never even talked to the guy, and now you're letting him grope you."

"He was not groping me." When I reach my towel I snatch it up and wrap it around my body. "Some guy knocked into me and I fell over."

"Ah. Yes, I think I remember that happening with Becca too."

"I wasn't playing a game. It's what really happened."

Cruz ties his towel around his waist, water dripping down his legs and into the sand. My own feet are caked in mud as water drips from my hair. "Sure."

"What is your problem?" I place a hand on my hip. Cruz and I rarely fight. His behavior is so out of character today.

"Nothing." He smiles, his face softening, and it's like my Cruz has returned. "I'm just giving you a bad time."

"That's all this is?" I fix him with a stare.

He nods.

"What about when you went swimming away?"

"I wanted to go for a swim, and you wanted to make sure Adam didn't think we were a couple." He shrugs. "So I took off. It worked, didn't it?"

He had a point. "You're not mad then?"

"Mad? Why would I be mad?"

"No reason." I snatch up my beach bag, wanting to feel relieved by our conversation, but I don't. Something is off. I just can't put my finger on it.

When I get home Mom and Dad are fighting. I know it even before I step inside the house. Their hollering can be heard all the way in the front yard. I cringe, glancing around to make sure the neighbors can't hear. Dad's voice is harsh and low, while Mom's is shrill and loud. I can't make out what they're saying, but it still makes me feel sick.

The house on the corner of our street is a rental. A few years ago a young couple rented it out, and they used to fight all the time. Cruz and I would hear them when we rode our bikes down the street or took a walk. I

always felt embarrassed for them, and I was happy when they moved out. I never thought my family would one day be like them. My parents have always had a good marriage, or at least I thought they did. Sure my dad works long hours and used to travel a lot, but when he was home they seemed to get along.

However, lately they fight constantly. I've tried to ask Mom about it, but she won't divulge anything to me, so I have no idea what's going on with them. Not wishing to get in the middle of it, I turn around and head back over to Cruz's.

He doesn't bother masking his surprise when he opens the door. "Missed me already, huh?" His eyes travel down my bikini-clad body which is slightly obscured by my sheer cover-up. "Couldn't even change out of your suit." I sigh. His eyes lock with mine and his expression sobers up. "What's wrong?"

"Well, I guess I should be happy that you can't hear the fighting all the way over here. At least they are keeping it to a dull roar this time."

Cruz's gaze slides over my shoulder. "Your parents?"

I nod.

"C'mon." He motions me inside.

I follow him, the scent of freshly baked bread lingering in the air. Cruz's mom is always making something mouth-watering. "What's she baking today?"

"Corn bread, I think." He closes the door softly behind me.

"Yum." My stomach growls. I catch my reflection in the large, silver edged mirror hanging on the wall. *Yep, drowned rat. Just like I thought.*

"It's cooling right now, but I'm sure I can cut you a piece soon." A warm hand lands on my arm, fingers brushing my flesh. "You okay?"

Nodding, I shove down the emotion that rises in my throat. We enter the family room. Pictures of the Vargas boys cover the walls. Cruz plops down on the leather sofa, and I sit next to him. I spot the picture of Mateo and his fiancée that sits on the fireplace mantel. The look they give each other is one of complete love and devotion. It makes my stomach hurt. "Do you remember the Johnsons?"

"That was the family on the left side of your house, right? The ones that moved out a couple of years ago?"

"Yeah." I press my lips together, breathing out my nose. "They moved

because they got divorced.”

“Sloane.” Cruz’s hand covers mine. “Your parents are just going through a rough patch. They’re not getting divorced.”

“How do you know?” Heat pricks my eyes.

“I don’t.” His lips curl a little at the edges. “But I know you, and you tend to jump to conclusions. So maybe this time don’t worry about the what-ifs. Just live in today.”

I know he’s right, but it’s hard for me to do that. My mind tends to always go to the worst-case scenario. Almost like it can’t help itself. Cool air spills out of the air conditioning vents, causing me to shiver.

“So tell me all about what I missed between you and Adam.”

“Oh, now you want to know about it?” I grin.

Cruz touches my chin. “If it gets you to smile like that, then yes, I do.”

“Nothing happened. We talked, and then I fell.”

“For once your klutziness is working in your favor.” He jabs me in the stomach.

I giggle.

“Hey, Sloane.” Annette, Cruz’s mom, enters the room. “I thought I heard your voice. You’re just in time to have some cornbread.”

I smile. Annette is always trying to feed me. Cruz explained to me early on that food was his mom’s way of loving on people. If that’s true, then Annette loves me very much. And my body grows every year because of it.

“Come on,” she says. “I’ll cut you both a piece.”

I drop my beach bag on the ground and stand up. Following Cruz into the kitchen, I think about how lucky I am to have him in my life. I don’t know how I’d survive without him.

6

cruz

“You got a crumb right here.” Reaching out, I brush away a flake of cornbread stuck to the outer edge of Sloane’s lips.

She giggles. Sloane’s laugh is quite possibly my favorite sound in the world. “I know. I’m the messiest eater ever,” she says, staring at the ground, her cheeks flushing pink.

I wipe some cornbread on my face. “Yeah, you totally are. I never get food on my face.”

Sloane glances up, and when her gaze connects with my messy face she bursts into laughter. “Yeah. Never. Your face is super clean.”

I chuckle, and a few crumbs fall from my face onto my feet. Sloane reaches for a napkin, clutching it in her slender fingers. Then she brings it up to my face, swiping it over my skin.

“We better clean this up before your mom sees,” she says with a smile.

My mom is sort of a neat freak. Weird, I know, since she’s the mother of four boys. You would think she would become immune to messes. Then again, she had us all trained at a very young age to pick up after ourselves. Apparently she even has Sloane trained.

Sloane presses the napkin down over my lips, and I feel the pads of her fingers through the paper thin napkin. She stands so close I catch a whiff of her apple shampoo and the berry lotion she wears. Her eyes are pinned to my face, and my pulse quickens. A funny feeling descends in my stomach. When she steps back, a large gust of air pushes past my throat.

“Okay. All clean.” She throws me a wink. “But you might want to stay away from the cornbread from now on. Obviously you’re not old enough to eat it.”

“Hey, I’m six months older than you,” I joke back.

“Oh, really? Well, no one can tell. You act way younger.”

I hop up off the barstool, reaching for her. “You’re gonna pay for that.”

Squealing, she whirls away from me. She hides behind the kitchen

table as if that will protect her. I circle it, eyeing her like a vulture does his prey. She bites her lip anxiously, the overhead light shining on her smooth skin. When I get closer, she pushes one of the chairs out to block me and then sprints toward the family room, leaving a stream of shrieks in her wake. Sloane's a screamer. I remember the first time we rode a roller coaster together. She screamed so loud during the ride I thought she burst my eardrum. I couldn't hear for a week afterward. Okay, I may be over-exaggerating, but trust me, it was bad.

"Nice move," I say as I tear into the family room.

Sloane is standing behind the couch wearing a triumphant grin.

"But it wasn't good enough." I leap over the couch tackling her around the waist, and together we fall to the ground. She flails in my arms as I pin her down. My hands reach for her middle, fully intending to tickle her. But she's wearing nothing but that damn bathing suit cover up and a tiny bikini underneath. I'm not really sure where to put my hands. I know where I want to put my hands, but I can't do that.

Panting, she stares up at me, still trying to fight me off. She knows what's coming. I can see it in her eyes. She's anticipating the tickling. Her eyes sparkle and her cheeks are red. Damn, it turns me on like nothing else ever has. *What the hell is happening to me?*

This is Sloane. My best friend. I can't go there with her.

Groaning inwardly, I slide off of her body, making it seem like she won. Leaping up, she holds up her arms and does a victory dance.

"Who's the strongest girl in all the land?" She teases.

"You." I grin, remembering how the sight of her in a bathing suit rendered me completely useless. "Definitely you. No question."

After Sloane leaves, I head into the living room to the piano. I slide onto the bench, lifting the lid. This piano belonged to my grandma. It just sat in our house for years untouched. Mom can play a little, but not that well. And my parents never thought of teaching Mateo, Julian or Gabriel how to play. I think my dad has always thought of piano playing as something reserved for girls.

I used to hate my mom for pushing it on me, especially knowing that Dad and my brothers all thought it was girly. But then I realized I was really good at it. I had always struggled with the other things my parents tried to teach me, like how to speak Spanish or play soccer. But music was something

I excelled at. Sure, over time I discovered other things too, like baseball and swimming. But piano was the first, and for that reason I've always loved it.

It's my escape.

Lying my hands on the keys, I start to play. Closing my eyes, I let the song carry me. It's one I've played often. Some love song my mom wanted me to learn years ago. I don't need to read the music, I've got it all up in my head. For a while I play from memory, my fingers gliding over the keys effortlessly.

"Sounds great, son." Dad appears next to me, still dressed in slacks and a collared shirt from work.

"Thanks." I smile, my hands falling from the keys and into my lap. Over the years my dad and brothers have learned to like my piano playing. They only tease me about it occasionally now. Truth is, I'm pretty lucky. My dad has always been supportive of all of his boys. When I was taking lessons I met plenty of boys whose dads harassed them endlessly about it.

"Hey, honey." Mom sweeps into the room.

While Dad moves toward Mom, I return to my playing. I vaguely hear their feet shuffling on the carpet as they exit the room. The smell of spices float from the kitchen where Mom cooks dinner. I run my fingers over the ivory keys in a new pattern that takes me by surprise. Pausing, I try it again. It's been awhile since I tried writing a song, but maybe it's time. Reaching on top of the piano, I find a pen and paper. I write down the chords that I just played and then tap the pen on my chin, trying to come up with some lyrics. Opening my mouth, I sing a line and then scribble it down.

Once I've filled half the page, I read back over it, stunned by what I wrote. Frozen, I sit at the piano staring down at the words. I've always been surprised by the emotions that pour from me when I write songs, but this is crazy. Standing up from the piano, I snatch up the paper in my hands and hurry to my room. Once inside, I tuck the song in my top nightstand drawer. Hidden where no one can see it. Where no one will know how I really feel.

7

sloane

Mom stares out the kitchen window, her back to me. Her golden hair glistens in the sunlight that streams in through the slats in the blinds. She's still in her work clothes – a fitted black business suit. Her red lacquered nails tap on the kitchen counter. Past her I see Adam's truck pull up and park along the curb in front of Cruz's house. My palms clam up, my heart beginning to race. But something about the stillness of Mom's pose stops me from racing outside.

I lean against the doorway, my shoulder supporting my weight.
“Mom?”

Slowly she cranes her neck. Her dark eyes are sad. “Yes?”

I inhale. “I'm going over to Cruz's.”

“Okay.” She looks lost.

My heart squeezes. “Are you all right?” I step into the room, my sandals tapping on the hardwood floor. I'd taken Becca's advice and worn the dress. The skirt swims around my pale legs.

“Fine.” She forces a smile. “Just tired. Long day.”

“I can stay home if you want.” As much as I'm dying to spend time with Adam, the idea of leaving Mom like this pierces my heart.

“No.” She waves away my suggestion with a flick of her wrist. Pushing off the counter, she walks in my direction. “You go have fun. I'll be fine. Your dad's working late tonight, so I have a date with chocolate ice cream and reality TV.”

“I could stay and watch TV with you,” I offer.

Mom reaches out and fingers a lock of my hair. “That's sweet, but I actually want to be alone tonight.”

“You sure?”

“I'm sure.” Her red lips curve into a smile. My mom is the only woman I know who looks good in red lipstick. It gives her a classic, old fashioned look I find so beautiful.

“Okay. I'll be home in a little bit.” As I head out of the house, I glance

over my shoulder. Mom is no longer in the window, but I can't quell the uneasiness settling in my stomach. No matter how hard she tried to convince me she was fine, I could tell she wasn't. Pausing, I start to turn around when Adam's voice stops me.

"Sloane."

I swivel to face Cruz's house where Adam stands in front of his truck. Hadn't he driven up several minutes ago?

"Forgot something in my truck," he says as if reading my mind. As he opens the door he smiles. "I'm glad you're here. I was starting to think you were gonna bail on me."

I reel back from his statement, stunned that he cares at all. "Nope. No bailing." Abandoning thoughts of my mom, I cross the street.

Adam grabs a couple of drumsticks out of his truck and then closes the door. Leaning against the side, he crosses his arms and grins at me. "Glad to hear it. I didn't know what I'd do without my tambourine girl."

There it was again. The use of the words "my" and "girl" in reference to me. I mean, I know he isn't exactly calling me "his girl," but to me it's close enough. "So, how long you been playing?"

"Drums?"

I nod. The screech of a guitar sounds from inside the garage. I guess that means that Trey and Carlos are already inside.

"About a year. I was trying to figure out something to do during football's offseason, and I've always been interested in music so I thought I'd try it out."

He's only been playing a year? *Is there anything this guy can't do?* I swear it seems so unfair how some people are blessed with incredible genes, while the rest of us get the leftovers. "That's cool. You play really well," I keep my voice neutral, not wanting to gush all over him and scare him off. I'm sure girls are like that with him all the time.

"Hey, are you busy after practice?" he asks suddenly.

I shake my head.

"Want to grab a bite to eat or something?"

Is he serious? I stop my mouth from gaping open and force myself to speak. "Um...yeah, that might be good. To eat, I mean. Because, you know, I'm hungry. Haven't had dinner yet. Well, obviously not. You must not have had dinner either, you know, since you're asking me to go get food." *Stop*

talking, you idiot. I take a deep breath. “Yes, that would be nice.”

When I finally shut up, Adam stares at me with an amused expression on his face. He probably regrets asking me already. “All right. Then it’s a date.”

A date? With Adam freaking Stewart. I think I’m going to die.

His hand brushes my elbow as we head inside Cruz’s house, causing goose bumps to rise on my flesh. When we get to the garage the guys are all set up. Trey and Carlos are standing up holding their guitars, and Cruz is hunched over the keyboard. I swallow hard at the collective raise of eyebrows around the room. Lowering my head, I move away from Adam and head toward the folding chair. But he doesn’t let me get away that easy.

“Come on over here, tambourine girl.” He picks up the tambourine, motioning me toward him.

My face flaming, I move slowly in his direction. As I fold my hand around the tambourine and sink into a chair next to Adam, I keep my gaze trained on my feet. But even without looking I can feel everyone’s eyes on me, and it’s unnerving. I’ve never been one who likes attention. I’m happy to blend in.

Music starts up, and Adam nudges me with his arm. When I glance over, he’s holding out his palm. Nestled inside are two orange ear plugs. Grateful, I snatch them up and put them in my ears. The sound is now muffled, and I relax a bit. Just like last time, I hit the tambourine against my open palm on Adam’s cues.

The longer the boys play the more nervous I get about my date with Adam. I wish I could text Becca and tell her about it. Better yet, I’d like to talk to her and get some tips. I’ve never been on a date before. I have absolutely no idea how to act or what to expect. My mind spins, my stomach rolls, and my palms sweat profusely.

When practice is over I feel dangerously close to puking, which would be really unfortunate, and I’m sure would ruin any chance I have with Adam. So I do my best to make sure that doesn’t happen. I inhale through my nose and exhale through my mouth, attempting to settle my nerves.

“It looks like you took Becca’s advice.” Cruz approaches me after practice, eyeing my outfit. He reaches up and touches one of my curls. “I like the hair.”

“Thanks.” I bite my lip, unable to tell if he’s mocking me or not.

“So, you wanna stay for dinner? Mom made your favorite enchiladas.”

“Ready to go, Sloane?” Adam comes up behind me.

Cruz raises a brow. “I’ll take that as a no.”

I turn to Adam. “Yeah. I’ll be there in just a sec.”

He nods. “Cool. I’ll just round up my stuff.”

“Looks like your klutziness worked even better than we thought,” Cruz jokes when Adam is out of earshot.

“Yeah.” I chuckle lightly under my breath. “Can I get a rain check on the enchiladas?”

“You don’t need a rain check. You know you’re welcome here any time.” He smiles a little sadly. “You always have been.”

“So, we’re cool then?” It feels weird to have to even ask that. Then again, I’ve never turned Cruz down before, unless I had some type of familial obligation.

“Of course.” He winks. “Have fun with Adam.”

I smile, my insides dancing. “I will. Thanks.”

Adam takes me to a local burger place. I know for a fact that the football players eat here all the time, so I’m a little surprised when we end up here. My insides do a little flip as we walk inside together. Obviously he’s not embarrassed about being seen in public with me. As he ushers me toward an open booth, I smooth down my curls with my palms. I hardly spoke at all on the drive here. I’m a total ball of nerves. Glancing around the room, I recognize a few students from our school in a corner booth as I sit down across from Adam.

A server hands us each a glossy menu filled with pictures of burgers and fries.

“Is this okay?” He spreads out his palms. “I mean, I guess I should’ve made sure you weren’t a vegetarian or something.”

I smile. “No. I like burgers.”

“Good.” His shoulders visibly relax. “I like when girls eat real food.”

I never thought my bad eating habits would actually help me get a guy. It’s pretty obvious that I’m not the thinnest girl in the world. But what can I say? I like food. I can’t eat like a bird the way some girls do. Grateful

that Adam gave me the go ahead to eat what I want tonight, I end up ordering a bacon cheeseburger with fries. Then I settle back into the booth, feeling a little less nervous than when we first arrived. Fifties music plays in the background as bright fluorescent lighting shines down on us.

“Do you like being in the band?” I ask him.

He shrugs. “Yeah, it’s cool.” There is something noncommittal about his response that peaks my curiosity.

“I was actually surprised that you joined it. I mean, Cruz, Trey and Carlos aren’t really your usual crowd.”

There’s an angry flicker in his eyes, and I instantly regret my statement.

“I’m sorry. That came out wrong.” I scramble to fix it.

“No, it’s fine. You’re right.” His gaze shifts around uncomfortably. “I guess I just wanted to change things up this summer.”

I know there is more to his story, but I don’t want to press. For god’s sakes, I’m on a date with the most popular guy at my school, and I’m acting like it’s a goddamn therapy session. *What the hell is wrong with me?*

“That’s cool. I like that idea.” I smile.

“Oh, yeah?” He leans forward, his eyes sparkling.

“Yeah. Changing things up sounds good.” I set my palms on top of the shiny table.

“How are you planning to change things up this summer?” Reaching out, his hands find mine, his fingers curling around them.

“Like this. Being here...” I stare at our fingers woven together in the middle of the table. “...with you.”

In response to my words, his hold on my hand tightens. The intense look on his face gives me pause. I never thought Adam Stewart would need anything from anyone, especially not me. But in this moment it seems that he does. He’s more vulnerable than I ever imagined.

I’m stabbed with a pang of disappointment when our food arrives, causing Adam to release my hands. We both sit up straight and dig into our food. Picking up my large hamburger, I lift it to my lips and take a bite. Juice and ketchup paint my lips. Embarrassed, I quickly reach for my napkin, praying that Adam won’t see it. But when I peer up at him, I see that his face is smeared with sauce too. When he flashes me a sheepish grin, I smile back, realizing I’d misjudged him.

My perception of him had clearly been wrong all these years. Grabbing the napkin in between my fingers I snatch it up and wipe it across my mouth. Then I put down my burger and eat a french fry drenched in ketchup.

“So, what’s the deal with you and Cruz?”

The question comes out of left field. “What do you mean? I told you that we’re friends.”

“Seriously? You two have never dated?”

My stomach clenches. I fiddle with the napkin in my hand. “Nope. Never.”

“Really?” His eyes widen in surprise.

Annoyance surfaces. “Why is that so hard to believe?”

Adam studies me a moment. Then he bends forward, his hand making its way across the table again. “Because he’s around you all the time. I’ve hardly been around you at all, and there’s no way I could stay just friends with you.”

My heart stutters in my chest. I can’t find any words to respond with, so I just stare at him as his fingers brush mine.

8

CRUZ

It was weird to see Sloane and Adam walk into the garage together. I've never seen Sloane with another guy. And the way they were looking at each other was so intimate, as if they were the only two people in the room. It made me wonder if she's ever looked at me that way. It irks me further to think that maybe I want her to.

I can't focus at all during practice. All I can think about is how flirty Sloane is being with Adam, and how she keeps staring at him. I also can't help but notice how sexy she looks in her little dress. *Damn it, this is spiraling out of control.*

Normally I could play all night long, but tonight I want this practice to be over. I want Trey, Carlos and Adam to go home. And I want to be alone with Sloane. The way it should be. The way it usually is. No tambourine playing, or drumming, or flirty banter. Just me and her.

I don't even bother picking up my stuff after we finish playing. Instead, I take my opening while Adam, Trey and Carlos are packing up their stuff, and head over to Sloane. I'll show Adam who's really important to her. It's me. It always has been, and it always will be. He might be some big hot shot football player who can get all the girls, but Sloane and I have a connection he'll never understand.

"It looks like you took Becca's advice." I look down at her dress, hating how much I like it. Hating how much it makes my mind wander. Reaching up, I touch her curls. They feel silky against my skin, and I imagine what it would feel like to bury all my fingers in her hair. Shaking away the thoughts, I say, "I like the hair."

"Thanks." She bites her lip, and my gaze lingers on it a little too long.

"So, you wanna stay for dinner? Mom made your favorite enchiladas."

"Ready to go, Sloane?" Adam comes up beside her.

My brows jump up in surprise. Clearly I underestimated him. "I'll take that as a no."

Sloane shoots me an apologetic look before turning to Adam. I seriously want to punch the guy in the face all of the sudden. "Yeah. I'll be

there in just a sec.”

Adam nods. “Cool. I’ll just round up my stuff.”

I can’t let Sloane know how upset I am. Besides, she looks so happy. Her eyes are bright, her cheeks are flushed. I don’t want to take this away from her. And I shouldn’t. It wouldn’t be right. I’ve dated other girls, so it’s only fair to let her date other guys, even if I hate it. Plus, my feelings are so conflicted right now. I need to be sure of my feelings before I say anything to her. “Looks like your klutziness worked even better than we thought,” I finally joke. It’s the perfect Cruz thing to say, and I know she’ll buy it.

“Yeah.” She giggles. “Can I get a rain check on the enchiladas?”

“You don’t need a rain check. You know you’re welcome here any time.” Her words bother me. A sad smile passes over my lips. “You always have been.”

“So, we’re cool then?”

“Of course.” I wink. “Have fun with Adam.”

A broad smile sweeps her face that sickens me. “I will. Thanks.”

That’s what I’m afraid of.

It kills me when she walks out of the garage with him. I want to stop her; to make her come back. But I can’t. I pray that he treats her well. That he doesn’t hurt her. And more importantly, that he keeps his paws off her. I have no right to be so possessive, but I can’t help how I feel. I don’t want any other boy’s hands on her except mine. Feeling royally pissed, I storm out of the garage and into the house.

“Whoa. Off to punch more holes in your wall?” Gabe follows me as I tear into my room.

I whip my head around, hoping Mom and Dad didn’t hear. The sound of canned laughter travels from the family room. I heave a sigh of relief. Clearly they’re wrapped up in one of their sitcoms. “Back off, Gabe. I’m not in the mood.”

“Yeah, I can see that.” He eyes me while hovering in my doorway.

I fling myself down on my bed, throwing an arm over my face. “You can close the door on your way out.”

“You sure you don’t want to talk about it?” Gabe takes a step into my room.

Blowing out a breath, I stare up at one of the rock posters on my wall.

I bet those guys don't have the girl problems I'm having. I bet their drummer doesn't steal the lead singer's girl. Shaking away the thought, I realize how stupid I'm being. Sloane isn't my girl, she's my friend. I need to remember that. "What part of, I'm not in the mood, do you not get?"

"C'mon, tell me what's going on."

"Don't worry. I'll keep my cool. No more punching the walls." My gaze shifts to the wall where I sloppily covered the last hole I made.

"That's not what I'm worried about." Gabe sits on my bed near my legs. I feel the slope of the mattress from his weight. "I'm your brother. I'm just trying to help."

I remove my arm from my face, and furrow my brows. "Since when?"

Gabe reels back from my words. "Seriously? I know we haven't always been that close, but I've always had your back."

"Not really." I sit up. "You always look for an opportunity to get me in trouble so you can look like the good brother."

"To be fair, Mom has always placated you. You're her little pet, her favorite." His eyes darken. "The momma's boy of the family."

I hop off the bed, anger simmering. My muscles buzz, my pulse races. "How dare you."

"Oh, and now you're gonna threaten me? Maybe throw a punch or two, because then you can just run and tell Mommy that I bullied you. Poor little misunderstood, sensitive, music-loving Cruz."

I narrow my eyes, ball my hands into fists at my sides. He's right. I do want to punch him, and I know I'll be justified if I do. And Mom probably will side with me. It's the reason I don't punch him. His words hit a little too close to home.

"You've got Mom wrapped around your little finger," he continues. "So you don't need any of the rest of us. That's the real reason none of us have your back."

"That's not true. You and Mateo never have my back, but Julian always did."

He exhales, shaking his head. "I can't even believe that you still defend Julian after everything he's put us through."

Irritation bubbles inside of me, like boiling water just before it foams over the sides and sizzles on the burner. "He wasn't always like this, and you know it. He's just going through a tough time."

Gabe presses his lips into a tight line, the vein on his forehead popping out. “You make it sound like he has cancer or he’s down on his luck. The guy’s a drug addict. He made a choice. This didn’t happen to him.”

I know what he’s saying is true, but it hurts nonetheless. I’m the only one who tries to defend Julian. And honestly, I don’t know why I even bother anymore. Deep down I’m angry with him too. Maybe even more than the rest of the family, because his leaving hurt me deeply. He was my closest sibling, the one brother I could always count on. And then he was gone. Not just physically, but emotionally too. When I see him now he’s merely a shell of his former self. I know the old Julian is in there somewhere, but I can’t find him. He’s buried too deep.

“Whatever. I don’t want to talk about Julian with you.” I fling myself back down on my bed and lay my arm over my face again, blocking Gabe out. “I don’t want to talk to you at all.”

“Fine.” I feel the bed spring up as he stands. Then I hear the shuffling of his feet on the carpet and the door clicking closed.

The truth is, I’m not really angry with Gabe. He’s just an easy target. I’m mad at myself. I wish Sloane had never gone out with Adam tonight. I should have stopped her, begged her to stay here. If only I hadn’t taken her for granted all these years, then maybe she would be here instead of out with Mr. Quarterback. Having Sloane around has been something I count on. The same way I used to count on Julian. He left me, and now I’m worried Sloane will too.

It’s not Gabe’s fault we’ve never been close. We’re both to blame. Or maybe our personalities are. We’ve always been complete opposites. In my family sometimes I feel like the black sheep; like one of those pictures where you pick out what doesn’t belong. But with Sloane I fit. I belong. I’m accepted.

She’s family to me.

Maybe even more than my own brothers.

9

sloane

The sun rises over the hills in the distance and the air is still cool and crisp as I start my morning run. In the summer I have to get up pretty damn early in order to run without dying of heat stroke. I used to try to jog in the evenings, but some nights it doesn't cool down enough. But this is nice. Besides, there are hardly any people out so it's the perfect time to clear my head. I'm sure that most people are still in the comfort of their bed. Certainly every teenager I know is. That's the only hard part – making myself get out of bed. Once I'm out here I'm good. It's getting out here that's rough.

My feet pound on the pavement as I turn the corner heading to the trail. The familiar burn in my thighs and warmth in my lungs feels good. I've never been great at sports, despite trying them all. It could be in part because I've always compared myself to Cruz, who is naturally a better athlete than I am. But when I discovered running, I found something that I was good at. Even better than Cruz, actually. And it felt good. It was nice to find something that was mine and mine alone. Something I could excel at. And the fact that it helps me keep in shape is an added bonus.

Plus, I've found over the years that it gives me an outlet. With my overactive imagination and brain that moves at warp speed, I need something that helps me unwind and let go. Running is that for me. It's my escape, my way of coping.

However, today I have a feeling that even a run won't quiet my mind. Not with thoughts of Adam racing through it constantly. Images of Adam flood my mind, crashing into me like a powerful wave. Even as sweat beads on my upper lip and snakes down my back, I can't think of anything other than the way it felt when Adam touched my fingers. It's more real to me than the sun on my face and the breeze at my back.

The trees and flowers that surround me on the trail don't catch my attention. All I can think about is the way Adam's eyes sparkled when he looked at me. As I follow the curve of the trail to the right, I remember that I left my phone sitting on my nightstand at home. For one irrational minute I wonder if Adam has tried to text or call. Then I realize how silly that thought is. It's not even six in the morning. I'm certain he's still tucked under the covers in his bed, still dreaming. Picturing Adam in his bed causes a rush of excitement to pulse through my body. Shaking my head, I force the thoughts

away. It's a little too soon in our dating relationship to be imagining him in bed. We haven't even kissed yet.

It's just that the whole thing is so crazy. I never would've dreamed Adam would ask me out. It seems impossible that I actually went out on a date with him. Like it's not even real. But it is. It's very real, and I don't ever want it to end.

"You realize I'm totally living vicariously through you now." Becca licks yogurt off a pink spoon.

We are sitting at a round table outside the yogurt shop where Becca works. I giggle, taking a bite of my own yogurt. It's chocolate with brownie bites and chocolate sauce on top. I think Becca got something fruity with gummy candies mixed in. The two of us seem to be opposite even in what we choose to eat.

"I still can't believe this is happening! It's amazing." Becca's eyes are alight with excitement, but there is also something else. Something like jealousy.

My chest tightens. I never thought I'd see the day when Becca would be jealous of me. Becca with her petite body, cute clothes, and perfect blond bob. Becca who never has trouble finding a boyfriend. It's so weird how quickly the tables can turn.

"I know. I can't believe it either. I feel like pinching myself. Like maybe it's all just a dream."

"It's not a dream." Becca gives me a pointed look as she digs into her yogurt again. Pulling out her cell phone, she glances down at it. "Shit. My break is over in like three minutes."

A car drives past, music spilling out the windows. The bass is so loud it rumbles beneath my feet, reverberating through my body. I look over to see a group of Adam's friends piled inside a compact car, staring out the window. A chill brushes my body. Adam isn't with them, and it reminds me of the statement he made last night about changing things up. It makes me wonder what happened. What caused his sudden change of heart? And more importantly, how long will it last? I'm not naïve enough to think this will last very long. Soon he'll return to his football player friends and cheerleader girlfriends. I know I'm just a passing phase, but I'm okay with it. I mean, you only live once, right? And I plan to make the most of it.

“So, what does Cruz think about you dating Adam?” Becca props her elbow up on the table and rests her head in her hand.

I shrug. “He’s fine with it.”

“Really?” She gives me a dubious look.

“Yeah. Why wouldn’t he be?” I finish the last bite of my yogurt and then toss the plastic spoon inside the bowl. It’s so hot out here that sweat beads on my shoulder blades and slides down my back.

Becca shakes her head. “No reason, I guess. Just curious.” It’s obvious she wants to say more, but before I can prod her my cell buzzes.

When my eyes connect with the screen, my stomach flutters.

Adam: Hey. What r u doing?

“Is it Adam?” Becca asks.

I nod, a broad smile sweeping my face.

“Oh, my god. What did he say?”

“Just asked what I was doing.” I type back quickly.

Me: At the yogurt shop with Becca.

“I bet he’s going to ask you out again.” She glances down at her phone. “Damn it, I have to get back to work.” Standing up, she throws me a stern look. “Keep me posted. I want all the details.” Then she hurries inside, leaving her empty bowl on our table.

Adam: Want to hang out later?

Me: Sure.

Adam: Great. I’ll pick u up at 4.

Me: Sounds good.

With shaking hands, I round up our empty bowls and toss them in the trash. Then I hop in my car and head home to get ready for my date with Adam. As I drive, I feel like I’m flying, soaring high above the clouds. I wonder if I’ll ever come down.

10

CRUZ

“You’re going out with him again?” I lie on top of Sloane’s bed, my hands intertwined under my head.

“Yeah.” She rummages through her drawers trying to locate something to wear.

I had suggested she wear her gym shorts and t-shirt, but she didn’t go for it. I was only half joking. “But I thought we were hanging out tonight.”

“We hang out every night.” She yanks something black and lacy out of her drawer. My stomach knots. “This will give you a chance to hang with your guy friends. Maybe call Trey or Carlos or something.”

“I don’t want to hang out with them. All they want to do is play video games or watch YouTube videos.”

“Yeah, I don’t blame you there.” She smiles while yanking out a pair of jean shorts.

They’re a little shorter than what she normally wears, and my eyebrows shoot up. I sit up, eyeing the clothes in her hand. “You’re not wearing that.”

“Yes, I am. You can’t tell me what to do. You’re not my dad.” Her defiant tone irritates me. Why is she being so rude when I’m trying to help?

“Well, maybe you need me to be.”

“Trust me, I don’t.”

“If your dad was home he’d never let you wear that.” I know it’s the wrong thing to say the minute the words leave my mouth. Her eyes flash, her jaw slacks.

“Lucky for me my dad is never home anymore, and when he is, he’s too busy fighting with Mom or brooding in his office to notice what the hell I’m wearing.” Anger radiates from her like a heater on full blast.

I instantly regret my behavior. “Hey.” I slide off the bed, and it creaks beneath me. Then I move toward her. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said that.”

She shakes her head, blinking back tears. “It’s fine. I just can’t deal with this right now, okay? I don’t know why you’re acting so weird, but I

need you to stop. I need you to be my friend.”

Now I feel like an even bigger asshole. No matter what’s going on inside my head, no matter what demons I’m wrestling, I can’t take it out on her. “I’m sorry.” My arms wrap around her waist, pulling her close. She drops her head on my shoulder with a sigh. It causes my stomach to flip flop. “I’ll try to be more supportive.”

“I don’t understand why you have to try.” Her voice is muffled against my chest. “Haven’t I always been cool about all of your girlfriends?”

She has a point there. And I have no idea how to explain to her why I’m having such a hard time with this. I can’t admit that my feelings for her are starting to change. That I’m starting to fantasize about being more than just her best friend. That every time she’s in my arms I want to touch her in places I never have, I want to kiss her lips and stroke her face. I glance down at her knuckles that are white as she clutches my shirt in her fingers. *Yeah, that’s not something I should share with her right now.* I clear my throat in an attempt to clear my impure thoughts as well. “True, but Adam is known as being a player, and I don’t want to see you get hurt.”

She shoves me back. “You don’t always have to protect me. I’m a big girl. I can make my own choices, my own mistakes. Girls have hurt you, haven’t they? It’s all part of growing up. You have to let me experience it.”

She’s right, but I hate admitting it. I hate this whole thing, actually.

“Cruz, I’ll be fine. Promise.”

“Okay, I’ll back off.” I point my finger at her. “But if he hurts you in any way, all bets are off.”

“Deal.” She grins. “Now go so I can change.”

I stand still, wishing I could stay and watch her. When I glance down at the skimpy outfit hanging from her fingertips, I cringe. Adam is going to see her practically naked. And I know what thoughts will be running through the guy’s mind. “You’re still going to wear that, huh?”

She narrows her eyes. “Go.”

Sloane doesn’t need me to control her. She needs me to be her friend. Isn’t that what she just told me? And the last thing I want to do is push her away. That will only make her like Adam more. There’s no way Adam will come between Sloane and me anyway. What we have is too deep, too meaningful. It doesn’t matter how popular the guy is. Besides, Adam dates a new girl every week. It’s not like this is going to turn into anything serious. I hold up my arms in mock surrender. “Okay, okay. I’m going. Have fun on

your date.”

It takes all my willpower to turn around and walk out her bedroom door knowing that she’s going to wear that little outfit for Adam Stewart. It should be me she’s going out with tonight.

There, I admitted it.

Not to her, but at least to myself.

I want to be with Sloane. Not just as her friend, but as her everything. *Damn, what am I going to do?* I can’t tell her. What if she doesn’t feel the same way and I jack up our friendship? I can’t lose Sloane. I’d rather have her date Mr. Football Superstar forever than have her vanish from my life. The thought of a life without Sloane makes it difficult to breathe.

I need her.

I only hope she still needs me.

11

sloane

Adam and I walk down Sutter Street in Old Folsom together, both licking our ice cream cones. It's warm today, but at least it's not in the hundreds. A nice breeze billows around us. I dart out my tongue, catching my mint chip ice cream before it slides all the way down the cone. When I glance over at Adam who is licking his scoop of pink ice cream atop his cone, I raise my eyebrows and stifle a laugh.

"What?" He asks.

"Nothing," I mumble.

"If you have something to say, just say it." He wears a challenging grin.

If it was Cruz or anyone else I would totally say what I'm thinking. But this is Adam Stewart we're talking about. However, I know he wants me to be real with him. And he won't keep dating me if I'm always so nervous around him. Cruz warned me about playing games. He told me I need to be myself.

Gathering up courage, I say, "It's just not every day I see a teenage boy order pink bubble gum ice cream."

"Why not? It's good." He chuckles. "Have you ever had it?"

"Yeah. I used to order it all the time when I was a little girl." I put extra emphasis on the words "little" and "girl."

Adam shrugs, licking his ice cream cone. "I know. I took my little sister to ice cream the other day and she ordered it. She let me have a lick, and I liked it so much that I told her I would order it next time I went for ice cream. And now I can tell her that I did."

My heart warms as I picture him taking his little sister out for ice cream. He's sure messing with my previous image of him.

"I didn't know you had a younger sister." I surmise that she must not be in high school yet or surely I would have heard of her.

"Two younger ones, actually. I live in a house full of girls." We reach the light and we stop as cars whiz past. Adam pushes the button, and we wait

for the light to change.

“You and your dad are outnumbered, huh?”

A dark look cloaks his face as the light changes. Grabbing my arm with his free hand he guides me across the street. When we reach the other side, he sighs. “No dad. It’s just Mom, my sisters and me.”

“Oh.” My stomach knots, and I curse myself for my flippant remark. Why had I assumed he had a dad living at his house? *Stupid. Stupid.* “I’m so sorry.”

“Not your fault. You’re not the woman he left my mom for.”

I can’t even imagine how awful that would be. I think about how much my parents have been fighting, but at least they’re still together. At least they are still both in my life.

“I didn’t mean to bring the mood down.” He nudges me in the shoulder.

I smile at him. “No, it’s my fault. I never should’ve said that.”

“How could you have known?” And there are those dimples again. I melt faster than my ice cream cone. His hand wraps around mine as we continue down the street. It feels good as his fingers sweep over my palm, as his strong hand holds mine steady. I savor it, thinking how I never would’ve dreamed I’d be in this situation. *Ever.*

Sure, I’d fantasized about it. A billion times. But reality is so much better.

“What about you? Got any siblings?”

“Yeah. An older sister. Regan. She’s in college.”

“Oh. Right. She was a senior when we were freshman, right?”

“Yeah,” I answer softly, a little miffed that he remembers her. It’s no secret that Regan is the pretty sister. The popular one too. Therefore, I’m not surprised that he would have noticed her. Just a little perturbed, I guess. I mean, he didn’t notice me at all until the first practice at Cruz’s house, and we’ve been going to school together for years.

“I remember her,” he says.

I take the last bite of my cone and then rub my palm on my thigh. “Yep. She’s pretty unforgettable.”

“No, I mean, I remember seeing you with her.”

I freeze. “Me? You noticed me before now?”

Adam chuckles, squeezing my hand. He’d finished his ice cream a minute ago, so his other arm swung by his side. A couple maneuvers around us pushing a kid in a stroller. We pass an antique shop and a family peruses a stand with children’s books lining it.

“Of course. Did you think I didn’t?”

I nod. Adam stops walking and turns to me, his eyes searching mine. My breath catches in my throat. His hand is still tethered to mine. “The truth is that I’ve noticed you for years. I just always assumed you were hung up on Cruz.”

The words are like a punch in the gut. Is that what it seems like to people? That I’m into Cruz? “Well, I’m not,” I say firmly. “We’re just friends.” My mind flies back to Cruz holding me in my room before Adam picked me up, but I shake away the memory. It doesn’t mean anything. We’re best friends. Best friends hug all the time.

“I know that now.” He releases my hand and then brings his arm up. His fingers trail over my chin. I inhale sharply. As his face tilts toward mine, my heart takes off like a roller coaster at full speed. Like that one Cruz and I rode at California Adventure. I’ll never forget how shocked I was at how fast it was from the get go. Cruz still makes fun of me for the ear-piercing scream I let loose when we took off. As Adam’s face nears mine, I force my thoughts back to the present. When his lips almost meet mine, his gaze slides over my shoulder and his eyes widen. As if he’s been slapped, he jumps away from me.

Confused, I whirl around. Across the street I spot some of Adam’s friends from the football team. Is that why he jumped away from me like I had a contagious disease? Because he didn’t want his friends to see him with me?

With a disgusted look on my face, I march forward. I may not be in the elite crowd at our school, but I have my pride. Walking faster, I think about Cruz’s words. He was right. Adam is a player, and clearly I played right into his hands.

“Sloane, wait!” Adam calls after me, causing me to pick up the pace. “Sloane.” His hand circles my wrist. *Damn, he’s quick.* “Where are you going?”

I shake his hand off. “Look, it’s obvious that you’re embarrassed to be seen with me, so just take me home.”

Clouds fill his eyes. “Is that what you think?”

“It’s what I know.” I cross my arms over my chest. “You acted like I was a goddamn pariah the minute you saw your friends over there.”

“I’m sorry about that. I just sorta freaked out when I saw them.” He reaches for me. “But not because of you. It had nothing to do with you.”

“Oh, yeah?” I want to believe him, but I don’t know what other explanation he can offer for his behavior.

“Please let me explain.”

“Why do you even care? I mean, we’ve only been on one date.” I have to know that what he said earlier was true. That he really does want to be with me. That I’m not just another girl to be played. It’s the only way I can keep putting my heart on the line like this. I may have spouted all that stuff to Cruz about being strong enough to handle getting hurt, but the truth is, I don’t want to be hurt by Adam.

“I like you, Sloane. I really do.” He touches my arm.

I soften. “I like you too.”

“C’mon.” He threads his fingers through mine. “I have something I want to show you. Then I think you’ll understand.”

I wasn’t expecting to end up at the high school.

When I turn up my nose in disgust, Adam chuckles. “Relax. I’m not going to make you do math or write an essay or anything.”

“I was hoping I wouldn’t have to set foot on this campus for another couple of months.”

“Someone’s counting down the days.”

“Only because I’m dreading it.” I groan. “Do we really have to be here?”

“Trust me.” He offers me his hand.

I’m not sure if I should trust him or not, but I allow him to guide me out of the car and across the parking lot. At least we aren’t heading in the direction of the classrooms. Relief fills me when we end up at the bleachers on the football field. Adam leads me up to the very top, and then we sit down.

“Is there a game I don’t know about?”

“Nah.” He shakes his head. Then his eyes meet mine. He takes a deep breath, and I can see the rise and fall of his chest and shoulders. I steel myself for what’s coming next. “And there won’t be another one for me.”

“What do you mean?”

“I was injured at the end of last season. My doctor says I can’t go back to playing next season.”

I do remember hearing that Adam had hurt his knee at one of the games; had to be carried off the field. It was the talk of the school for weeks, but then it died down. I guess I thought that meant he was better.

“But you seem to walk fine.”

“Yeah. My knee was pretty jacked up, but it’s better now. Still, my doctor thinks it’s too big of a risk for me to play this year. I may be able to in the future. We’ll see. The guys on the team don’t get it. They just want me to come back and play the game. Like you, they assume that if I can walk fine, then I must be able to play fine.” He shakes his head. “And I don’t like being around them. It reminds me of what I’m missing out on. That’s why I acted weird when I saw them. I’m not ready to face them quite yet.”

I think about the games Cruz has dragged me too. It was obvious who the star of the team was. Adam shone out on that field. And I could tell he loved it. I cover his hand with mine. “I don’t know what to say. Sorry doesn’t seem adequate.”

“You don’t have to say anything. I just wanted you to know.” His jaw clenches, his gaze sweeping the field. “I’m just sorta lost right now.”

I nod with understanding.

“I feel like I need to find my footing right now. Figure out what else is out there for me.”

It makes me wonder what part he expects me to play in this. Am I a detour? A way to pass time as he’s figuring out his future? Or does he see me as a part of his future? I don’t dare ask. Besides, I’m not even sure what I want from him at this point. So I simply hold his hand as he stares out at the field. The field where he was once a star. The field he’ll never play on again.

12

CRUZ

“Good morning, mijo,” Mom trills when I enter the kitchen. Then she glides over to me, stamping a kiss on my cheek. My conversation with Gabe from the other night flies through my mind. “You look exhausted.” Worried lines etch her face as she presses a cool hand to my forehead. “Do you feel okay?”

“Yeah, I feel fine.” I sigh. “Just didn’t sleep well.” Every time I closed my eyes I pictured Adam pawing all over Sloane. I tossed and turned all night, hardly getting a wink of sleep.

“Oh, no. Is everything all right?” Mom places a hand on my back. “Come sit down and we can talk.”

I shake my head. “Nah. I was actually going to go see if Sloane wants to grab a coffee or something.” At the dejected look on Mom’s face, I hurriedly add, “I’ll pick you up a mocha.”

She smiles, ruffling my hair. “You’re such a good boy.”

I don’t care what my brothers say about my relationship with Mom. They can give me shit about being a momma’s boy for the rest of my life. It doesn’t matter to me what they think. I have often wondered if something was wrong with me that my two strongest relationships are with women – my mom and Sloane. I don’t have many guy friends, and my brothers and I aren’t super close. But I wouldn’t change any of it for the world. I’m content with the way things are.

When I knock on Sloane’s door no one answers. I know her parents are at work, but Sloane’s car is still parked along the curb, so my guess is that she’s out on a run. A headache pricks behind my eyes, betraying how badly I need a dose of caffeine. I decide to head to the coffee shop and pick something up. I can surprise Sloane with it when she returns from her run.

Skipping across the street I hop in my car and take off. My favorite coffee shop is right around the corner from my house, so it’s only a matter of minutes before I’m pulling into the parking lot. After shoving my keys in my pocket and adjusting them so they don’t poke me in the thigh, I head inside. The sun is already making its appearance, so I welcome the cool air inside the coffee shop. The scent of espresso beans and pastries greet me as I step into

the lengthy line. After scanning the menu written on a large chalkboard, I settle on what to order and then wait my turn.

After ordering, I walk over to the pick-up line. There are numerous patrons waiting on their orders, so I stand against the window, resting my back on the cool glass. Crossing my arms over my chest, I glance around.

My stomach tightens when my gaze lands on Adam standing against the wall near the pick-up counter. Seriously? I'm starting to think the guy is stalking me. Why is he everywhere I go lately? A large smile sweeps over his face, and he lets out a little laugh. That's when I notice that he's talking to a girl with dark hair. I can't see her because she's blocked by his body. Could it be Sloane? Is that why she wasn't home? I find it difficult to draw breath as I crane my neck attempting to see around him. Momentary relief washes over me at the sight of the strange girl Adam is speaking too, but just as quickly my relief turns to anger.

Seeing red, I step toward him. Wasn't Adam out with Sloane last night? And now he's already out with another girl? I knew he was no good for Sloane. He doesn't deserve her.

As I tap on his shoulder, I clench my fists, forcing them to stay at my sides. What I want to do is shove my fist through the dude's face, but Sloane will kill me if I do, so I keep my arms pinned down.

"Hey, man," Adam says when he turns to me.

"Who's she?" I point to the brunette. Her smile fades, her face falling.

"What?" Adam's eyes narrow.

"I thought you were dating Sloane, so what are you doing here with her?"

The girl shifts uncomfortably, frowning. "Um..." She scratches her head. "I'm gonna take off. See you later, Adam." As she shoves past me, she wears a disgusted look.

I feel like an ass. My anger is directed at Adam, not her. I shouldn't have made her feel like that.

"What's your problem, man?" Adam asks. He holds a paper cup in his hand and a small brown paper bag in between his fingers.

"My problem is that I don't want you messing with Sloane."

"I'm not. Claire's just a friend."

"A friend that you're taking to coffee the morning after a date with Sloane?"

An incredulous look passes over his features. “Not that it’s any of your business, but I’m not on a date. I just happened to run into Claire here.”

“It is my business. Sloane’s my best friend, and I won’t let you hurt her.”

Adam’s face softens. “I’m not going to hurt her, Cruz. I promise. I really like her.”

It’s not what I’m expecting him to say. And I can see in his eyes that he’s telling the truth. Honestly, it should make me happy. It’s what I wanted, right? I wanted to make sure he was going to treat her right. But it doesn’t make me happy. It makes me feel sick.

“Well, you better not.” I puff out my chest. “Because if you do, you’re gonna have to answer to me.”

“What is this really about, Cruz?”

I’m startled by his words. “I told you what it was about. I’m just protecting Sloane.”

“You had to know you wouldn’t have her all to yourself forever.” Adam gives me a knowing look. “Shouldn’t have waited so long to make your move.”

I feel naked, exposed. How has he read me so well? “W-what are you talking about?” I sputter. “She’s my friend. That’s all.”

He slaps me on the back. “Perfect. Then we’re good.”

“Yeah, we’re good.” I swallow hard, bitterness coating my throat. My order is called, and I snatch it off the counter. The three coffees are nestled in a cardboard travel container, and the pastries fill a small bag.

“I’ll see you at the next practice.” He eyes my hands. “When you bring Sloane breakfast, tell her I said hi.” The tone of his voice and the funny look in his eyes turns my stomach. *Am I really that transparent?*

This time when I knock on Sloane’s door she answers right away. As I suspected, her face is flushed, her hair sweaty. She’s wearing gym shorts and a t-shirt. Her running shoes are discarded near the front door, and sock lines cover her bare feet.

“I bring sustenance.” I hold up her coffee and the bag of pastries. I already dropped off my mom’s before coming over here.

“Hmmm.” Sloane smiles, reaching for the coffee and bag of pastries. “You’re the best.”

I try not to read too much into that statement as I head inside her house. By the time we reach the kitchen, Sloane is already tearing into a blueberry muffin. A few crumbs dribble from her chin as she takes a big bite of the pastry. She yanks out the donut and hands it to me. “I believe this is yours.”

“You know it.” I grab it, and take a bite.

Sloane sets her coffee and pastry on the counter, bending over them. “I was starving.”

“I figured you would be after your run.” I nudge her in the side.

“Always so considerate.” She smiles before picking up her coffee and taking a sip.

“How did your run go?”

“Good.” She nods. “You should’ve joined me.”

“Nah. I was too busy picking you up breakfast.”

“Chicken shit.” She winks. “You’re just too scared because you know you can’t keep up.”

“Oh, I can keep up all right,” I say, even though I know that she’s right. She can outrun me any day. Not that I’ll admit it to her. It would ruin this whole competitive thing we have going.

“Sure.” She takes another large bite of her muffin. After swallowing, she spins around and then hops up on the counter. Her parents hate when she does this, but she’s always preferred sitting on top of the counter rather than at the table. Her legs dangle from the counter as she picks up her coffee, bringing it to her lips and taking a sip. She’s wearing tiny shorts, and they ride up her thighs exposing her pale legs. By sitting on the counter, her legs are level with my arms and it takes all my willpower not to reach out and touch them. Instead, I slide farther down the counter and focus on my breakfast.

“So, what do you want to do today?” Sloane asks, pleasantly surprising me.

“You’re not going out with Mr. Quarterback?”

“His name is Adam,” she corrects me. “And I don’t think so. I haven’t heard from him since we went out last night.”

I bite my lip, remembering how I just saw him at coffee. But I don’t

mention it. Frankly, I don't want to mention him at all.

"Wanna go to the lake?"

I'm tempted to say yes, but I'm not sure I can keep my thoughts or actions pure if she's in her bikini. "Um...not today. Let's do something else. Maybe a movie or something."

"Nah. There's no movie I want to see right now." She drinks her coffee, her forehead a mess of squiggly lines as she thinks. Her eyes widen like she's had an epiphany, and she lowers the cup. "Becca was telling me that there's a new record store downtown, and it sounds just like a place you'd like. We should hit it up. Maybe you'll find some music you like."

God, she's amazing. She always knows exactly the right thing to say, always thinking about me. Music isn't really even her thing.

"Are you sure you want to do that?" I ask.

She nods. "Sure. You know I love it downtown. Besides, we can hit up some other stores too."

"Sounds good." I grin. "I'll wait here while you shower and change."

She narrows her eyes. "Are you saying I need to freshen up?"

What I want to say is, 'No, you're perfect just the way you are.' But the words get lost in my mouth. Instead, I wink. "You said it, not me."

Sloane giggles, sliding off the counter. "Fair enough. Be back in a few."

And I know she will. Sloane can get ready faster than any girl I've ever met. It's just one of the many things I love about her.

13

sloane

I awake to the buzzing of my cell phone. Rolling over in bed, I reach my arm out and grapple around the top of my nightstand. My fingers brush over a pen, a book, a hair tie. Finally they land on my phone. I snatch it up and bring it close to my face. My eyes are watery and tired, but I blink a few times as they adjust to the bright morning sunlight spilling in the windows.

Adam: I had fun the other night.

Smiling, I sit up in bed. I hadn't heard from Adam in two days, and I was a little worried that maybe he didn't want to go out with me again. My dark purple comforter bunches at my waist. Tucking my legs up to my chest, I rest the phone on my knees and type back.

Me: No problem. It was fun.

Adam: Next time I promise not to get all serious on you.

Me: So there's going to be a next time?

Adam: Of course.

A text from Cruz comes in before I can respond.

Cruz: Can we hang out today or r u busy with Mr. Football Superstar?

I roll my eyes, and quickly respond.

Me: Yes, we can hang out.

Cruz: Cool.

Me: But only if you can be nice about Adam.

Cruz: Promise.

Me: OK.

Switching out of that conversation, I go back into the one I was having with Adam.

Me: I look forward to it.

Adam: What about today?

I groan, running a hand through my hair. If only I hadn't already said

I'd do something with Cruz. Biting my lip, I think fast. There's got to be a way to make this work. I jump back into my conversation with Cruz.

Me: Hey! Adam wants to hang out today. Maybe we can all do something together.

A minute passes and no response. That's so unlike Cruz. I fling off my covers and slide out of my bed. My bare feet hit the carpet, and I pad over to the window. With my thumb and forefinger, I spread the blinds open. Cruz's car is outside, so he's home. I lean against the wall and text again.

Me: Cruz?

Cruz: It's fine. Go out with him. I'll do something else.

My stomach drops.

Adam: Sloane? U there?

Shit.

Me: Yeah. I'm here.

Adam: What do you say?

Me: OK. Let's hang out today.

Adam: Great. I'll be by to pick you up in an hour.

Dropping the phone onto my bed, I sigh. As I glance back out the window, my gaze scours the front yard. Memories of Cruz linger everywhere. All the games of hide n' seek and soccer, the chalk drawings we made on the sidewalk, the endless hours of riding our bikes down the street. As I peer up at his window directly across from mine, my stomach churns. We've never been like this before. The distance grows like a chasm between us, like an invisible line dividing our properties. One wrong move and I fear it will swallow me whole.

Leaving the window, I maneuver around the bed. The carpet rubs softly against the pads of my feet as I walk to my dresser. Framed pictures of Cruz and I line the top of the dresser. I pick up my favorite one, running my fingertips over the glass.

"I can't believe I let you talk me into this," I said to Cruz as I put on my lifejacket. Pulling on the straps, I cinched it as tight as it would go. I was pretty sure I wouldn't be able to breathe, but I didn't care. The fear of drowning trumped anything right now. I was always pretty tough, but not when it came to stuff like this. Too many things could go wrong. I had a very healthy fear of nature, especially river currents and ocean waves. Two things I knew could kill me in an instant, and I'd be unable to do anything to save

myself. I was having serious doubts about this tiny lifejacket's ability to save me too, but I had no other choice but to trust it.

"You'll be fine." Cruz slapped me on the back. "And when we're finished, you'll be begging to go again."

"I highly doubt that."

"Hey." Cruz stepped in front of me, his eyes meeting mine. "You trust me, right?"

"Of course. It's the river currents I don't trust."

"That's not what I asked."

Behind us I could hear the rest of our river rafting group assembling. Over Cruz's shoulder I could make out the raft we were going to be boarding any minute. The rush of the river was loud in my ears. Water foamed at the shore. My stomach clenched.

Tapping my foot nervously, I smiled. "Yes, I trust you."

"I'd never let anything happen to you, Sloane." He touched my shoulder.

"I know." I nodded firmly, needing to believe him.

"Hey, you two. Turn around so I can snap your picture." A man with a camera came up to us.

With a wistful smile, I set down the picture of Cruz and me standing by the river in our bright orange lifejackets. Turns out, Cruz was right. I did have a blast river rafting, and we've gone several times since. I've always trusted Cruz. He's been the one constant I can count on in my life. My biggest supporter, the person who is there for me no matter what. My heart sinks remembering his last text. I hate that things are changing between us. For one second I contemplate canceling on Adam and heading over to Cruz's to make things right.

Then my mind wanders back to the other night. Adam was so vulnerable and open with me. So different than I ever thought he'd be. And I like him. A lot. Cruz is my best friend. He has been almost my whole life. We can work this out, I'm certain of it. I've been by his side through girlfriends and breakups and crushes. Surely he can do the same for me.

Decision made, I race across the hall to the bathroom. I need to jump in the shower and get ready fast. Adam will be here in less than an hour.

Adam takes me to the movies. It's some action flick I'm not that interested in. But Adam was dying to see it, so I didn't have the heart to tell him no. Besides, it's not like he'd want to watch some chick flick with me. I mean, Cruz does it, but only because he has to. It's sort of a best friend policy or something. But I know he hates them.

Truthfully, though, today's not that bad because Adam and I share a tub of popcorn, and every once in awhile our fingers touch. Frankly, I'm not focusing on the movie anyway. I'm fixated on Adam's proximity. On the way he smells like mint and cologne. On the way his fingers feel against mine, all rough and calloused.

Toward the end of the movie there is a horribly graphic fight scene. As blood spurts across the screen and a man's head is severed from his body, I let out a tiny squeal and bury my head in Adam's shoulder. His arm comes around me, holding me close. At this moment I'm glad he chose this movie. In fact, I think I will insist on these kind of movies on all my dates in the future. If only I'd taken advantage of my weak stomach earlier in the film, I could've spent the entire flick with my head nestled against Adam, his arm securely fastened around me.

Much to my chagrin, the film ends a few minutes later. When the credits start to roll, I force my head up. Adam drops his arm, disappointing me further.

"So, what did you think?" Adam asks as we wait for the other moviegoers to clear out so we can leave the aisle.

"It was..." I search for the right words.

"You hated it, huh?"

"I didn't hate it exactly." Feet pound down the stairs as people file out of the theatre. Adam and I stay seated, the empty popcorn tub at my feet.

"I guess I should've let you pick the movie." He smiles.

"No, it's fine." I wave away his words.

"I'm used to the girls I date being super pushy about what we watch. I think this is the first time I've watched a movie I wanted to see with a date. Usually I have to sit through a chick flick."

I could see Lauren being pretty demanding with him about what movie to watch.

"It was good," I lie. "I liked it."

“You’re pretty damn cool, Sloane Martin.” He grins, slinging an arm over the seat.

My heart skips a beat at his words. The theatre is almost all the way cleared out and a man with a broom and dustpan walks around sweeping up popcorn kernels. I stand, reaching for the popcorn tub.

“I got it.” Adam leans down, picking it up.

“Thanks.” I smile, thinking how Cruz has been worried for no reason. Adam is the perfect gentleman.

My feet stick to the ground as I head down the stairs and out of the theatre. The lobby is loud and crowded. People stand in lines at the concession stands and kids run around squealing in front of the theatre showing the latest cartoon movie. Adam’s hand closes around mine as we make our way to the glass doors. His fingers thread through mine. Out of the corner of my eye, I see a few girls standing in a cluster near the bathrooms. They are whispering and staring in my direction. When I turn my head, I recognize them as some of the cheerleaders. Holding my head high, I avert my gaze. I can’t help feeling a little smug. I mean, those girls have never been nice to me. And I can tell by the look on their faces that they never expected to see me on a date with Adam Stewart. As Adam pushes the door open and we walk out into the bright sunlight, I’m struck once again by how shocking this all is. I still can’t get over how crazy it is that I’m dating Adam. I wonder if I ever will.

Hand in hand we walk toward the parking lot. We pass a coffee shop, and the scent of coffee beans is overwhelming. I glance over at the patrons sitting outside sipping on their oversized mugs. A young attractive woman sits back in her chair lifting a cup to her lips. My gaze flickers to the man sitting across from her, and my breath hitches in my throat. I freeze, the air leaving me. Dizziness sweeps over me and my knees buckle.

Adam squeezes my hand. “You okay?”

I nod and start walking again. Faster this time. I have to get the hell out of here before he sees me. My strides are clipped, my feet clicking on the pavement as I hurry forward. Adam trails me, his hand still tucked in mine.

“Sloane, what’s going on?”

I contemplate telling him, but I just can’t. I don’t even know how to formulate the words. They get lodged in my throat, sour and awful tasting, lingering at the back of my throat, poisoning my mouth.

“Nothing.” I attempt to sound cheery, normal. Not like a girl who is on

the verge of losing it.

“You sure?”

“Yeah.” I fake a laugh. “I guess the movie just spooked me a little. I have an active imagination.”

His brows furrow, and I worry that I made up the wrong excuse. Will he think I’m crazy now? But then his face evens out and he smiles. “Okay, point taken. Next time we’ll see something a little less gory.” He moves closer, his hand brushing my shoulder. “Although I kind of liked it when you got squeamish.”

I bite my lip, my insides coiling. Not only did he admit that he liked holding me, but he pretty much asked me out again. If I wasn’t so worried about what I saw, I would be on cloud nine right now. I want to be in the present; to savor my time with Adam. But all I can think about right now is how much I need my best friend.

14

CRUZ

I'm surprised when she shows up at my house. A part of me is ecstatic that she's here instead of out with Adam, but the other part is still angry with her for choosing him over me earlier. The angry part wins out. "I thought you were out with Adam today." I open the door and step outside. By the look on her face, I can tell she's bothered by the fact that I don't let her in.

"I was." Her tone is soft, unsure.

"Then what are you doing here?" I rest my back against the side of the house, bending one leg and shoving a hand down into the pocket of my jeans.

"I needed to see you." Her voice cracks, breaking me apart a little.

I was so busy being upset that I hadn't noticed the turmoil in her eyes, the slight tremor of her fingers. Both telltale signs that she's been hurt in some way. "Are you okay?" I push off the wall, running a hand through my hair. Visions of Adam with his hands on her fly through my mind. I ball my hands into fists at my sides. Man, it'll feel good to pop that guy. "He didn't hurt you, did he? God, I swear I'll kick his ass."

"No." She gently circles her hand around my arm. Her touch instantly soothes me. "It's nothing like that."

"Then what happened? You look like you lost your best friend. But I know that's not correct, because I'm right here." I attempt to lighten the mood, praying I'm not the cause of the pain she's feeling. I couldn't bear it if I was.

"Are you? Because I feel like I'm losing you, and I just can't do that right now" A sob slices through her words. "I need you, Cruz."

Her words unravel me. "Hey." I step toward her, wrapping my arms around her and tugging her to me until her body is flush against mine. "I'm not going anywhere." My hands rub her back, painting swirling lines over her skin, my fingers tangling in her hair. Her shoulders shake and she whimpers, the warmth of her breath searing into my chest. "Tell me what happened. You know you can tell me anything."

"I saw my dad when I was out with Adam," the words tumble quickly from her mouth.

“Okay.” I speak slowly, trying to decipher the meaning behind this.

“He was with a woman.” She sniffs. “Not my mom.”

I tighten my hold, startled by her words. “Are you sure?”

“I’m sure she wasn’t my mom. I’m pretty familiar with how she looks.”

I draw back. Resting my hands on her shoulders, I search her eyes. *God, those eyes.* Those dark eyes with tiny flecks of gold that sparkle even when the sun isn’t shining. Eyes that I’ve never seen on anyone but her. *Okay, focus Cruz.* “No. I mean, are you sure he was with another woman? As in having an affair. Maybe he was just with a work colleague.”

“Maybe.” She squints, puffing out her bottom lip like she does when she’s in deep thought.

“Where did you see him?”

“At the coffee shop across from the theatres.”

Relief sweeps over me at her answer. I’ve always respected Mr. Martin. I don’t want to believe he would cheat on Mrs. Martin. But more importantly, I don’t want to believe he would ever hurt Sloane like that. Ever since I met her, she’s believed her dad hung the moon. When we were little he used to spend hours outside with us – riding bikes, taking us to the park, playing ball with us. And Sloane would look at him like he was a god or something. She would be devastated if he was having an affair.

“See?” I nod, giving her shoulders one last squeeze before dropping my arms. “Coffee. That’s pretty innocent.”

“Yeah, I guess.” I can physically see the tension disappearing from her shoulders. “Thanks.”

I shrug. “What are friends for?” Afraid she might take off, I snatch up her hand. I resist the urge to thread our fingers together and instead, wrap my palm around hers. I plop down onto the cool grass of my front lawn, directly in the shade of a large tree. Since our hands are linked, I pull Sloane down with me. “You gonna talk to your dad about what you saw?” I release our hands. As I do, I wonder if Adam has held her hand. Has he stroked her fingers? Has he touched her milky white skin? In an effort to steady myself, I splay my palms on the grass behind me and turn my face up to the sky.

“Maybe. I’m not sure.” Sloane picks at a blade of grass, rolling it between her fingers. “You’re probably right. She most likely works with him, and I was just being silly.”

“Not silly. It’s understandable that you would think that after everything that’s been going on at your house,” I say. “Remember how much my parents fought a few years ago?”

“Yeah. Only I couldn’t understand a word of it since they yelled at each other in Spanish.”

“Me either.” I chuckled, remembering how rapidly the words would fly out of my parents’ mouths. It reminded me of those Spanish soap operas my mom used to watch sometimes. Their words so fast and clipped, their motions so demonstrative. “It’s the only time my brothers didn’t tease me for being the one kid who can’t speak Spanish fluently. Mateo said I was lucky I didn’t know what they were saying.”

“We all knew what they were fighting about though,” Sloane says, leaning back.

“Yeah, we did.” I sigh, thinking about Julian. About how depressed my mom was when he left. And about how my dad blamed her for his choices. He said she had placated him too much. Mom countered, stating that it was Dad’s fault because he was too hard on Julian. I force my thoughts back to the present, not wanting to relive that dark time. “My point is that they got through it, and yours will too.”

“I just wish I knew what they were fighting about.”

“Well, they’re not speaking in a foreign language, so you must be able to understand what they’re saying.”

“I can only pick up bits and pieces. Nothing concrete. Nothing to go on.”

I reach out, my fingers brushing the tops of hers. “Hey, don’t sweat it. Just enjoy your summer, and I’m sure it will all work out.”

She glances over at me with a smile. “I’m sorry about today. I should’ve said no to Adam and hung out with you instead.”

I worry once again that maybe he’s hurt her in some way. Sitting up, I feel my muscles tighten, my veins pulsating under my flesh. “Damn, I knew that guy was trouble. What did he do?”

She shakes her head in exasperation. “Okay, you’re gonna have to stop this macho act. He didn’t hurt me. He’s a nice guy, and we had a good time. It’s just that you’re my best friend, and friends should come before boyfriends.” Leaning into me, she grins. “You taught me that. You never put your girlfriends before me, and I always appreciated that. So I should do the same for you.”

I know she thinks she's saying the right thing, but instead her words hurt me. "It's okay. Don't worry about it."

She cocks her head to the side. "I'm saying that you were right. This is your time to gloat."

"Well, of course I'm right. I always am." I flash a quick smile. "But the reason I never chose my girlfriends over you is because I liked hanging out with you more. I don't want you to hang out with me out of some weird best friend obligation if you'd rather be with Adam. I don't want you hanging out with me because you think you *have* to. I want you to hang out with me because you *want* to."

15

sloane

It's nighttime when I head home from Cruz's. The sky is dark, the incandescent glow of the streetlamps guiding my way. A gentle breeze rustles my hair, and I'm grateful for the cooler evening temperatures. When I reach the driveway, my stomach drops as I notice only Mom's vehicle parked outside.

Steeling myself, I enter the house. It's quiet, and the silence spins around me. Every light is on, and the brightness assaults me. Searching for Mom, I head into the kitchen. It's empty, but I notice a lone wine glass sitting on the counter, a deep purple stain setting into the bottom. Mom doesn't usually drink. I mean, occasionally at a party or when she has friends over, but never by herself on a regular week night.

"Mom?" I call out.

"In here," her voice carries from down the hall.

I follow it and find her sitting on her bed, a hardback book open over her outstretched legs. Her head bobs up when I enter. "Hey, honey. How was your night?"

"Good." I walk further into the room, then perch on the edge of the bed, near Mom's feet. Her toenails are painted the same blood red color of the lipstick she normally wears. But she's not wearing any makeup now. Her face is scrubbed clean, her hair brushed. "How about yours?"

"It was nice." She rests her open palms on the pages of her book. "Quiet."

"Um...Mom?" I swallow hard. "Is everything okay?"

She smiles, but it's not her usual smile. It's not one that comes easy; that sweeps across her face without trying. No, this looks like it takes some serious effort. "Everything's fine."

"Okay." I accept her answer. I'm not sure why. Maybe because I desperately want to believe it.

Mom leans forward, her eyes brightening a little. "So, tell me all about this boy you're dating."

“Who says I’m dating someone?” My face heats up.

“Well, for starters, you’ve been dressing up lately. And you have a certain glow about you.” She shrugs. “Let’s just call it mother’s intuition. I’m right, though, aren’t I?”

“Yeah.” I lower my gaze, running my fingertips over her bedspread. It feels silky against my skin. “His name is Adam Stewart.”

“Adam Stewart?” Mom taps her finger to her chin. “Where have I heard that name?”

“Probably from me. He’s kind of a big deal at school. Quarterback of the football team, super popular.”

“Ah.” Mom shoots me an impressed look. “And he treats you well?”

“Very.”

“What does Cruz think?”

I bristle. “Why does everyone keep asking me that?”

“I trust Cruz, and I know he looks out for you, so I want to know if he approves.”

“Oh.” My shoulders relax. “Yeah, he approves.” I remember how many times tonight Cruz threatened to kick Adam’s ass, but keep that information to myself. “In fact, that’s how I met him. He’s the drummer in Cruz’s band.”

“Yeah, I figured he was trying out the band thing again. I keep hearing noise from his garage.”

I chuckle. “Actually they’re not that bad this time.”

“Well, I know Cruz isn’t. I’ve heard that boy play and sing. He’s incredible.”

“Yeah, he is.” I smile. “They actually have a gig tomorrow night.”

“I’m assuming you’re going?”

“Of course. I wouldn’t miss it.”

Becca has a night off from work, so I drag her to Ruby’s to watch Cruz’s band play. They still haven’t agreed on a name, so we’re just calling it Cruz’s band for now. Not that it matters. It’s not like they have a real gig or

anything. Still, I can tell that Cruz is excited even if it is just open mic night. I guess I don't blame him. It's something he's dreamed of for a long time.

Adam tried to talk me into playing tambourine with them, but I vehemently declined. It's one thing to play at practice, but no way am I going to play in front of people. I'd completely freak out and probably play at all the wrong times, or fall off the little makeshift stage or something equally horrifying. No, thank you. I'd rather just sit at a table with Becca and drink coffee while the boys play. I'll stay safe and hidden in my seat.

I'm a little surprised at how busy the place is as Becca and I search for an open table. I've never come here for open mic night, so I had no idea what to expect. I hold my coffee cup precariously in my hand as I weave through people. A girl with too much makeup and perfume on, pushes past, almost causing me to spill my coffee. As I fight to hold it steady, I repress the urge to cough. The strong floral smell still lingers in the air when we finally locate an empty table.

Becca snatches it up quickly before anyone else can. I'm grateful to set my cup down. After lowering into my chair, I smooth down my jean skirt and adjust the black tank top. I borrowed an outfit from Becca for tonight, and it's a little tight. But she said it would be perfect for watching the band. She's wearing something similar, but I think it looks better on her. More natural, I guess. Lately I feel like I look like a girl trying to play dress-up. It makes me wonder if I've even been pulling it off, or if everyone can see through me, see the tomboy underneath. The girl who's more comfortable in her t-shirt and jeans.

Shifting in my seat I attempt to get more comfortable. But it's a losing battle. Short jean skirts are uncomfortable by design. Finally I realize I have to cross my legs so I don't flash the entire place. This only irritates me further. It's not how I normally sit. Plus, my knees scrape the bottom of the table, and I think a piece of gum just stuck to the top of my leg. *Gross.*

"Here comes Adam," Becca whispers, leaning toward me. Her eyebrows are raised, her eyes wide.

When I turn, my face practically slams into Adam's middle. I peer up at him. "Hey."

"You came." He smiles, resting his hand on my shoulder.

Becca's mouth gapes open, staring at Adam's hand.

"Wouldn't miss it."

His fingers graze my hair. "I'm glad you're here." Scouring the room,

a nervous look passes over his face. "I'm not sure we're ready for this."

"Are you kidding? You guys sound great."

"I wish you would be my tambourine girl. That would make me feel better." He raises a brow.

"That's a great idea," Becca interjects. "You should totally do it."

"No way." I shoot Becca a firm look.

But it's like she doesn't even notice. "Yeah. That would be awesome. I'd love to hear Sloane pay the tambourine. And I know she'd love to do it."

"I guess it's settled then," Adam squeezes my shoulder.

"What? No." I shake my head.

"I'll go tell Cruz and grab the tambourine for you." Before I can stop him, he's gone.

I turn sharply to Becca. "Why did you do that?"

"C'mon, it's obvious the guy was desperate for you to help him out. Besides, now you get to be up there with Adam. Everyone here will know you're together. It's like you're marking your territory or something. It's perfect."

"I'm not a dog, Becca." Agitated, I run my fingertips over my coffee cup. "I don't need to mark my territory."

"Well, you should. This is Adam Stewart we're talking about. He can have any girl he wants."

My stomach knots. "What are you saying? That I'm not good enough or something?"

"Not at all." She waves away my words as if they're ridiculous. "I'm just saying that girls are going to be after him all the time. You have to make sure they know he's taken."

Is he taken? We've only been on a couple of dates, and we haven't exactly defined our relationship. But the idea of other girls being all over him certainly turns my stomach.

A hand clamps down on my shoulders. "We're up."

I stiffen as Adam shoves the tambourine into my hand. Am I really going to do this? Standing up, I feel sick. My legs wobble as I trail behind Adam, holding the tambourine in my sweaty palms. When the manager announces Cruz's band, I don't even hear what she says. It's all muffled and

far-away sounding, like I'm in a tunnel. My heart hammers so loudly I hear it above all the chattering and the whir of the espresso machine. I start to think that maybe that means I'm having a heart attack. But when I reach the small stage and I'm still alive, I realize that it probably wasn't one.

Taking deep breaths, I attempt to lower my racing heart. Wiping my palm on my jean skirt, I step up the two small steps and stand next to the drum set. Adam plops down in front of it and throws me a wink. Trey and Carlos are strapping on their guitars, and Cruz is messing with the mic over the keyboard. I pull down the jean skirt that creeps up my thighs and force myself to breathe. Dozens of eyes are on me, and I worry that I might faint. The walls close in around me.

Cruz speaks into the microphone, introducing the first song. I vaguely remember them practicing this one, but I pray that Adam's cues are spot on because I'll never be able to keep the beat on my own. Before starting, Cruz's eyes meet mine and he offers me a subtle nod of encouragement. That simple act causes me to calm a little. My heart slows enough that I can breathe again. I give him a small smile before he turns back to the audience.

The band starts playing, and I keep my eyes trained on Adam the entire time, petrified of missing my cues. Surprisingly, I don't do half bad. Of course I only hit the tambourine when Adam nods to me, so it really has nothing to do with me. But still I'm happy that I don't botch things for the band.

By the end of the set, I am actually enjoying myself. I feel like I'm a part of something. Cruz and Adam keep giving me encouraging smiles and nods. Trey and Carlos are being their usual perverted selves. I keep catching them starting at my butt and smiling, but I just ignore them.

When we finish, Adam stands up from the drum set, a large smile sweeping his face. "You did great, my tambourine girl." His arms circle my waist, and he pulls me close, his lips fanning over my cheek. "Thank you." Hot breath meets my skin, and I shiver. When he draws back, I regain my composure and then turn around to exit the stage.

Cruz is standing at the keyboard and his gaze slams into me, his expression troubled. Without saying anything, he whirls around and hurries off the stage. I lose him in the crowd. Unsure of what just happened, I swallow hard and step off the stage. The scent of Adam's cologne signals that he's behind me. His hand finds mine, and he guides me back to the table.

"You guys sounded incredible," Becca gushes when we reach her.

"Thanks." I sit down and reach for my coffee cup. My mouth is so dry

that I need a sip now. All those nerves really messed with me. Adam grabs a chair from a neighboring table and joins us.

“Was it a rush being up there?” Becca asks.

“Not really. I kind of felt like I might throw up.”

Adam laughs, slinging his arm around my shoulders. “Well, you couldn’t tell. You looked like you owned the stage.”

I blush. “What about you? Was it all you dreamed?”

He shrugs. “It was cool.”

His response bothers me a little, and I find my gaze shifting around in an effort to find Cruz. I wonder how he’s feeling right now. I’m pretty sure he wouldn’t shrug if I asked him what it felt like to finally play in front of a crowd of people. If his excitement earlier today was any indication, I’m sure he’s beside himself right now. Also, I’m dying to tell him how great he sounded. When I finally find him he’s sitting at a table alone, staring sullenly in my direction. My heart pinches. *Why doesn’t he come over here?*

I stand up. “I’ll be right back.” The minute I step forward, Cruz gets up from his table. I smile, thinking he’s going to meet me halfway. Only he doesn’t. He pivots in the other direction and makes his way out of the coffee shop. All I see is the blur of his grey shirt as he races past the window and down the sidewalk.

I almost go after him, but Adam comes up behind me. “What’s up, my tambourine girl?”

“Nothing.” I force a smile and turn around, attempting to leave thoughts of Cruz behind.

16

CRUZ

I thought this whole thing with Adam and Sloane would blow over quickly like a storm - loud, disruptive, and chaotic. But then it would settle down, leaving a little mess in its wake, but nothing we couldn't clean up. And once it was cleaned up, we would forget it ever happened. In fact, we might even be stronger, more aware now.

However, things aren't slowing down. Rather, they're progressing. It's clear that Adam is into Sloane, and if the lovesick expression on her face is any indication, she's pretty into him too. After our set last night it about ripped out my heart to see him sweep her into his arms. It should be my arms she's in. It should have been my moment with her.

God, playing up on that stage was such a rush for me. It was something I've dreamt about for years. And I wanted nothing more than to share that with Sloane. But just Sloane. Not Sloane and her new boyfriend.

It was even worse when we came off the stage and she ran off with him. When I saw her sitting at the table with Adam and Becca it was like she didn't need me at all. Like she was part of a new group. Like she was leaving me behind.

And at first it pissed me off. That's why I left. I was too upset to face Sloane. So the minute she came toward me, I raced away. It was a temper tantrum, plain and simple. As embarrassing as it is to admit I'm getting pretty good at those lately.

However, right before I whirled away, I caught a glimpse of Sloane's face. And that glimpse was enough to make me feel guilty. The way her eyes sloped downward as she frowned filled my mind when I ran off. I couldn't shake it, so I ended up going back to the coffee shop to talk to her. To make sure she was okay. Only when I did, she was still with Adam. I watched her with him. Watched her eyes light up, her lips curving into a large grin. Watched her throw her head back in laughter, as her fingers gently lighted on his arm. It was painful, but also necessary because I realized something. I realized that Adam makes her happy. Like really happy.

And isn't that what I've always wanted for her?

I remembered the words Adam said to me the morning I ran into him

at the coffee shop. He seems to really like her, and he treats her well. I love Sloane too much to ruin this for her. No matter how badly I want to be with her, it's clear that she wants to be with him. Besides, I had my chance. Years of chances actually, and I never jumped at them. Therefore, now I have to do the best friend thing. I have to bow out. I have to put her happiness before my own.

Even though I knew I was making the right decision, it hurt so damn bad. Almost like my heart was physically breaking inside my chest, the pieces all sharp and jagged edged as they pricked my insides.

And that's why I went out with Tara. I knew it was stupid. In fact, it's even more apparent this morning now that she's over at my house acting like my goddam girlfriend. But I couldn't help it. I was hurt and Tara was all over me like I was god's gift to women or something. My ego was so bruised, I needed a pick-me-up. She provided that, but now I don't know how to get rid of her.

If it had been any other night I wouldn't have responded to her advances. In fact, I've turned Tara down before. Multiple times, in fact. She's worked at Ruby's for about a year, and every time I come in she flirts with me, making suggestive comments. Last night I didn't have it in me to turn her down though.

After we went out, I made the mistake of bringing her back to my house. Now she knows my damn address. And apparently to Tara that's as good as an invitation. She showed up early this morning, surprising me with a coffee. I'll admit it was sweet, and that's why I invited her in.

And that's when things got out of hand. Mom started talking to her about Mateo's wedding, and next thing I know Tara's helping Mom bake and she's planning to attend the wedding. I have no idea how I lost control like this. I'm brainstorming a way out of it when I hear a knock on the door.

Gabe is closest to the door so he offers to get it. I peer out the kitchen window, but I can't see anyone. After Gabe opens the door I hear him say, "Hey, Sloane."

"Hey, Gabe," her sweet voice responds. I can't help feeling a little grateful that Tara's here now. Maybe this thing with Tara is good after all. It's the perfect way for me to show Sloane that I'm all right with her dating Adam. Perhaps I can even find a way to like Tara. Maybe she can even help me get over Sloane.

"Annette's already baking, huh?" I hear Sloane say, her voice coming closer to the kitchen.

“She’s been at it all morning. Prepping for Mateo’s wedding,” Gabe responds.

“Oh. Right.”

“Come on in. Cruz is in the kitchen.”

My heart kicks into high gear as Gabe enters the kitchen, Sloane at his heels. Tara and I sit on the barstools next to the counter. Mom leans over the counter spooning batter into muffin tins. Her long black hair is tied at the nape of her neck, and an apron wraps around her middle.

“Hi, Sloane,” Mom greets her.

“Hey,” she says. “Everything smells amazing.”

“Thanks. I would offer you some, but I have to save it all for Mateo.”

“Yeah.” Gabe snorts. “Just because he’s getting married he gets all the perks.”

I smile at his remark. Mom just waggles her fingers. “Oh, you get spoiled every day.”

And it’s true. We are never without our share of baked goods. As Mom and Gabe quibble about food, Sloane’s looks at me and smiles, stepping toward me.

“Sloane, what’s up?” I ask.

Her gaze flickers toward Tara, and I see a flash of uncertainty. “You left the coffee shop last night without saying good bye. Just wanted to check on you.”

“Oh. Yeah. Sorry about that.” I nod my head toward Tara. “That’s because I met Tara and we were going out, so I had to take off.”

Her smile is so tight it looks like it would hurt. “Hi, Tara. I’m Sloane.”

“Nice to meet you,” Tara responds in a soft, high-pitched voice.

“I’m Cruz’s best friend,” Sloane says, and I feel a pinch of satisfaction. If I didn’t know better, I’d say that Sloane is a little jealous. As soon as the thought enters I shake it away. *So much for bowing out.* “You two are helping prep for the wedding?”

“Yeah.” I flash Tara a smile. “Tara’s coming with me to the wedding. She’s my plus one. I’m guessing that you’re bringing Adam?”

She nods slowly. “Yeah. Of course. We are dating, after all.”

“Cool. Then it will be the four of us.” I nudge Tara in the side, and she

giggles. God, I'm a jerk. Why am I leading this poor girl on? I know I'll never want to see her again after the wedding. Hell, I don't even want her there. I want to go with Sloane. I want to dance with her, hold her in my arms, and feel her body against mine. I was fooling myself to think Tara could help me get over her. She doesn't hold a candle to Sloane. *No one does.*

Doing the right thing is going to be even more difficult than I originally anticipated.

"Yeah," she says, but her voice is hollow sounding. "Well." Shifting from one foot to another, she fiddles with the bottom of her t-shirt. "Glad you're okay. I guess I should go now."

I nod, hating how weird things are between us. "Plans with Adam today?"

"Yeah."

"Have fun." I want to smile, but I can't even make my lips curve upward. There's nothing more that I want than to stop all of this. Then to chase her, pull her into my arms and tell her how I really feel. I'm losing her, and it's like I'm powerless to stop it. It's like when you witness a car accident and you know there's nothing you can do to prevent it.

And just like a car accident, I have no idea if the damage will be permanent when this is all said and done.

17

sloane

When I first met Mateo he was tall and gangly, an uncoordinated mess of knees and elbows. Pimples covered his face and metal filled his mouth. I can hardly believe that I'm sitting on a white folding chair in the middle of a beautiful grassy field watching him get married. Gone is the lanky kid I once knew. His body has filled out, his face has smoothed, and his teeth are white and straight. He walks with confidence as he steps toward his soon-to-be bride, Ella. I feel a little choked up watching him make his way toward her.

My gaze slides to Cruz who stands between his brother, Gabriel, and Mateo's best friend Alex. My stomach twists when I notice that Ella has four bridesmaids. It makes Julian's absence that much more real. The empty spot next to Alex is a glaring reminder of the missing groomsman. When Cruz's eyes meet mine, I can tell he knows what I'm thinking. We've often joked over the years about being able to read each other's minds. This is one of those instances. He flashes me a sad smile before turning his attention back to Mateo.

As the preacher begins speaking, a warm hand rests on my thigh. I glance over at Adam, and my heart flutters. He looks amazing in his black slacks and blue collared shirt, his hair neatly styled. When he smiles at me, I place my hand over his, curling my fingers around his palm. It's surreal having him here with me. It feels like such a "couple" thing to do. It makes this relationship seem so real.

I imagine what it will be like when school starts again. Hopefully we will have defined our relationship by then. In my mind I envision walking into school with Adam, our fingers linked. Lauren and all her friends will be shocked to see us together. Adam will walk me to class and give me a kiss before the bell rings. Everyone will see that they've misjudged me. The sound of Mateo speaking draws me out of my reverie and back to the wedding. My head bobs up and I stare forward as Mateo and Ella say their vows.

I've never been one of those girls who spends time fantasizing about her wedding. In fact, the idea of being in a stuffy dress all day and having to pose for pictures and stand in front of a crowd of people reciting vows has always sounded a little like torture. But today it all seems romantic. As I watch Ella, I don't think she looks stuffy and uncomfortable in her dress. I think she looks stunning and happy. And for the first time, I think I might

actually like to be in her position. What would it be like to be her today knowing that you're embarking on this new life? As I try to picture myself up there, my gaze inadvertently lands on Cruz. He looks incredibly good in his tux, the jacket fitting over his muscular body perfectly. When he throws me a wink, my insides leap and I'm taken aback. *What the hell was that about?*

It must just be all the romance in the air. Adam squeezes my fingers yanking my attention back to him, and I turn away from Cruz. Smiling at Adam, I wonder what just happened. Taking a deep breath, I stare back up at Mateo and Ella and attempt to keep my thoughts focused on them.

By the time the preacher announces Ella and Mateo as husband and wife there is hardly a dry eye in the crowd. Cruz's parents are sniffing, and so are Ella's. Even Cruz seems to be blinking a little more rapidly than usual. I'll admit I had to fight back tears when they exchanged their rings. Adam is the only person who seems completely unfazed, but I guess that's to be expected since he doesn't know Mateo at all.

It's warming up, so I'm grateful that the reception is inside. When we step into the banquet hall I'm grateful for the air conditioning that spills from the vents. I excuse myself and head to the bathroom. Mostly I just want to air out my armpits. After sitting in the hot sun for the past half hour, I'm worried that I've sweated all over myself. I'm certain there will be dancing later, and I don't want to stink or be covered in sweat. As I slip into the bathroom, I wave my arms around. Catching my reflection in the mirror, I'm thankful that there aren't any sweat stains on my sundress. Stepping forward, I smooth my hair down with my fingers. Then I reach into my purse and snatch out my tiny bottle of perfume and spritz some on. After dropping it back inside, I yank out my lip gloss. As I glide it over my lips, a toilet flushes in one of the stalls. A girl walks out, and my stomach drops. It's Tara. I had forgotten she was even here.

She wears a short black skirt and white top, peep-toe heels on her feet. Honestly, she looks cute, but I don't dare say that. I don't know why I dislike the girl so much.

"Hey." She smiles at me as she turns on the faucet to my left and runs her hands under the water. "Sloane, right? Cruz's friend."

"Best friend." I mentally slap my forehead. *Why do I keep doing that?*

She frowns. "Right. Sorry." After turning off the faucet she turns, reaching for a paper towel. "Wasn't that a beautiful wedding?"

Nodding, I rub my lips together and drop my lip gloss back into my purse. "Yeah, it was. Especially when you've known the groom as long as I

have. Practically my entire life.” *Damn it, what is wrong with me?* I have to get away from this girl. She brings out this horrible side of me.

“Of course.” She bites her lip. “Yeah, I get it.”

But I can tell by her expression that she doesn’t. I don’t either really. “Well, I better get back to Cr—” I clamp my mouth shut. *Why had I almost said Cruz?* I’m going back to Adam. *Adam.* The guy I’m dating. “Adam. My date.” Before I can say anything else I’ll regret, I hurry out of the restroom.

Adam is standing against the wall waiting for me. When I approach him, he smiles and pushes away from the wall. My heart skips a beat at his dimpled smile. Leaving behind all thoughts of my bizarre behavior around Tara, I grin back.

“I was starting to worry that you’d snuck out the bathroom window or something.”

“Nope. Still here.”

“I’m glad.” He glances around the room. “Because you’re pretty much the only person I know.” His eyes meet mine. “Not to mention that you’re the prettiest girl in the room.”

“Thanks.” I blush. Then I turn my head, afraid to look Adam in the eye. When I do, I spot Julian entering the banquet hall. He’s wearing a pair of ripped jeans and a black t-shirt bearing the name of some rock band. His hair is longer than it was the last time I saw him, and his movements are jerky and manic. I inhale sharply when I see Gabe approach him, a stern look on his face. It’s clear by Julian’s reaction that he’s not going to bow out peacefully. Nausea rolls over me when their voices start to raise. *Oh, shit.* Julian is going to start a scene. This is going to devastate Cruz.

Cruz. I’ve got to find him.

“Um...Adam. Can you excuse me for a minute?”

“You’re rethinking the whole bathroom escape, aren’t you?” He chuckles, clearly oblivious to what’s happening. Then again, how could he know?

I force a light laugh. “No. Not at all. I just have to take care of something. You can find our table. I think they have place cards with our names.”

He nods, a confused look on his face. “Okay.”

“I’ll be right back. Promise.” Spinning on my heels I take off in search of Cruz. I have to keep him away from Julian and Gabriel. I’m sure Gabe will

handle everything, so there's no need for Cruz to have to be involved. It would be too hard on him. Julian and Cruz were really close when they were younger. Julian was the brother Cruz most looked up to; the one he connected with. The path Julian has decided to go down has been harder on Cruz than his brothers.

The room is filling up fast. Laughing and chattering swells around me. The scent of musky cologne and floral perfume linger in the air, and music plays quietly in the background. I scan the crowd, colorful pastel dresses filling the room like flavors at a candy store. My gaze flickers over Cruz's dad and Mateo, but no sign of Cruz. I elbow my way through people as I frantically search for him.

I pass a table filled with food and a bar with wine and spirits. Still no sign of Cruz. *Where is he?* I even find myself looking for Tara, hoping she'll lead me to him. My heart beats erratically in my chest as I race around the room. When I move back toward the door, Cruz's voice stops me cold.

"Julian."

Shit. I didn't get to him in time.

"Hey, little bro," Julian slurs. "Thank god you're here. Maybe you can talk some sense into this asshole."

Whirling around, I hurry toward the three brothers gathering by the door. Cruz stands stiffly staring at his older brother. I sidle up next to him, resting my hand on his arm to offer him encouragement.

"Hey, it's Sloaney, baloney," Julian says, his voice thick and muffled as if it's full of something.

That's a nickname I hoped to never hear again.

"You need to leave, Julian," Gabe's voice is hard, firm. He stands in front of Julian, his chest puffed out reminding me of a bouncer. His stance blocks Julian from walking in further. "No one is helping you here."

"C'mon. At least let me talk to Dad. He'll help me." His bloodshot eyes rove around the room.

"This is Mateo's wedding. It's not the time to beg for money." Gabe runs a hand over his head, groaning in frustration.

Cruz frowns, hurt passing over his features. A few other people are gathering around, looking on curiously. "You didn't come here for the wedding? You came to ask for money?" He speaks slowly. "Unbelievable."

"It's time to go, Julian." Gabe looks at Cruz. "Help me out. We've got

to get him outta here before Dad sees.”

“Yeah. Okay.” Before they can do anything, Mr. Vargas’ voice booms from over my shoulder.

“Son?”

I cringe. Cruz looks stricken. Gabe appears royally pissed.

“Julian, you made it.” Mr. Vargas moves around us and sweeps his son into a hug.

Cruz gives me a wary look.

“Dad.” Gabe taps his father on the shoulder “C’mon, let’s go outside and we can all talk in private.” He gives Julian a pointed look.

As Mr. Vargas pulls back, Julian narrows his eyes in irritation. “No. We can talk in here. I have every right to be here. It’s my brother’s wedding.”

Mr. Vargas frowns. I’m sure he’s noticing how high Julian seems. “Of course you’re welcome here, son. But I think maybe Gabe is right. We should go talk outside, just until it’s time to eat. Okay?”

Skepticism passes over Julian’s features, but he nods and plays along. Gabe, Julian and Mr. Vargas head outside. Cruz stands frozen in place.

“You’re not going with them?” I ask gently.

“No way.” He narrows his eyes. “God, I can’t believe that’s why he’s here. For a minute I thought....I mean, I know it’s stupid....but I had hoped that maybe he was here for us. You know, like he actually cared. Like the way he used to be.” He shakes his head. “It doesn’t matter.”

“It does matter, Cruz.” I touch his shoulder. “I know this is hard for you, and I’m sorry.”

Cruz peers up at me, our gazes colliding. “Thanks for being here. It means a lot.”

His words surprise me. “Of course. I wouldn’t miss this wedding for the world. You know that.”

“No. I mean, here, right now. You didn’t have to come over here when you saw Julian.”

I shrug. “Of course. I’m your best friend. I’ll always be here for you.”

Reaching forward, he plucks up one of my hands. “I’m glad. I need you, Sloane.”

There is something oddly intimate about the way he says my name,

and a tingle runs up my spine.

“Hey, there you are.” Tara walks up to us. “I’ve been looking everywhere.” Her eyes shift to our hands, and she furrows her brows. “Everything okay?”

I want to tell her to go away. I want to tell her that she’ll never understand what just happened, and that I’m handling it. I’m the one Cruz needs right now. But then I realize how irrational that is. I’m here with Adam. *Shit, Adam.* I need to find him. Hopefully he hasn’t left yet. I wouldn’t blame him if he did. I’ve been ignoring him ever since we got in here. And Cruz is here with Tara. She should be the one comforting him.

For some reason Cruz doesn’t let go of my hand, so I release my fingers, allowing my arm to fall by my side. “Cruz can fill you in on everything, Tara. I need to go find Adam anyway.”

“Right. Adam,” Cruz says.

I ignore his tense tone. “We’ll talk later, okay?” I say softly to him.

“Yeah. Later.” Without cracking a smile, he turns to Tara. “Let’s go find our seats.”

As they walk off, I go in search of Adam, praying he’s still here. When I find him sitting at a table with my parents drinking a glass of water, shame fills me. I shouldn’t have run off and left him all alone.

“There she is,” Dad says as I approach the table. He and Mom are both smiling, and I pray they won’t fight at all today.

Adam’s head bobs up and he smiles, causing my earlier worry to dissipate a bit.

“Sorry. I had to take care of something.” I slide into the chair next to Adam, smoothing down my skirt.

“I figured it was a woman issue,” Mom says wearing a knowing smile.

This seems to appease Adam, who touches my thigh from under the table. His fingers brush over my skin, causing goose bumps to rise on my flesh. I nod, allowing them to think what they like. Not really a lie, exactly.

All through dinner I’m pleased at how cordial my parents are being to Adam. I had sort of expected Dad to come down hard on him. I’ve never dated anyone before, but I always assumed Dad would be mean to anyone I did. I’m glad I was wrong.

After dinner we watch the couple’s first dance, the father-daughter dance, and the mother-son dance. Then they open up the dance floor to the

rest of us. Couples hurry out of their chairs and make their way to the dance floor. In the corner I spot Cruz and Tara dancing.

“Shall we?” Mom leans over, placing a hand on Dad’s arm.

“Sure.” Dad pushes his chair back and stands, taking Mom’s hand in his. A warm feeling descends into the pit of my stomach as I watch them walk hand in hand. Maybe things aren’t that bad between them. Today seems just like old times. Long before they started fighting constantly.

“What about you?” Adam asks. “Want to dance?”

My heart flutters against my rib cage. The thought of being in Adam’s arms causes me to feel dizzy. Unable to speak, I nod slowly.

“Great.” He stands, extending his hand.

I take it in mine and allow him to guide me out onto the dance floor. The song that had been playing winds down, becoming softer and softer until it’s silent. When the next song starts it’s a slow song. Adam moves in close to me, his arms snaking around my waist. My heart pounds in my chest as I loop my arms around his neck. I lock my fingers together to keep my hands from shaking. Our chests are pressed together, and I worry that he’ll be able to tell how fast my heart is racing. The scent of his cologne wafts under my nose, a mixture of spice and mint. Feeling bold, I peer up at him. His hair falls gently over his forehead as he lowers his head to meet my gaze. I’m frozen, my breath captive in my throat.

The music seems so far away, and the other dancers vanish. All I can feel is Adam’s hands on my skin, and all I can hear is the blood rushing through my ears. Afraid I might pass out or something, I lower my head onto his shoulder. His arms tighten around me, holding me steady. For the remainder of the song we stay like that, swaying to the beat of the music.

Disappointment fills me when the song ends and is replaced by a manic, fast beat. I’ve never been a very good dancer. Ask Cruz. He’s teased me about it for years. In fact, as I attempt to move as gracefully as possible, I find Cruz across the room. He dances as if he’s merely an extension of the music. His body moves fluidly, easily, effortlessly. If only I could do that. When I return my attention to Adam, I am relieved that he doesn’t possess Cruz’s dancing skills. In fact, he appears to be struggling as much as I am. So I guess there is one thing he’s not perfect at. Somehow it makes him even more endearing.

“I’m not a very good dancer,” Adam says with an apologetic grin.

“Me either.” I giggle. “But it’s still fun.”

“It is with you.” Adam winks, and my knees soften.

I grab onto his arm to keep from falling. He hooks one arm around my waist and draws me closer. He leans in, his mouth hovering my ear. “Maybe we could just turn every song into a slow one?”

I shudder. “Yeah, I’d like that.”

“May I cut in?” I’m startled at the sound of Cruz’s voice.

Adam releases me. “Sure, man. No problem.”

When he walks away, I frown. “What was that about?”

“I want to dance with my best friend. Is that a problem?”

“No, of course not. It’s just that…” I have no idea how to finish. It’s just that things were getting hot and heavy, and I kind of liked it.

“Besides, I figured you’d like the diversion. I can help detract from your less-than-stellar dancing skills.”

I chuckle. “As a matter of fact, Adam isn’t the best dancer either so he didn’t care.”

“C’mere. I’ll help you just like when we were kids.” Cruz holds out his arms.

I swat him away. “But we’re not kids anymore.”

“C’mon, it’ll be fun.” He grabs my hips and starts swaying me side to side.

Embarrassed, I jerk away. I’m not sure why this is bothering me so much. Normally I think it’s funny when he does this. But lately things feel different between us somehow. “Really, Cruz. I don’t need your help. Besides, shouldn’t you be with your date?”

Darkness flickers in his eyes. “Yeah, probably.”

“Don’t sound so excited.”

“No, I am. I like her,” he says, but it’s not convincing. Clearly something is going on.

“You’re still worried about Julian, aren’t you?”

He nods.

“Did he leave after your dad talked to him?” I hadn’t seen him come back in.

“Yeah.”

The song ends and another slow one starts. Cruz reaches for me, and this time I let him. I know he won't try to make me gyrate this time. Reaching up my arms, I drop them around his shoulders. Together we sway in time.

"Do you know what your dad said to him?"

"Just that he wouldn't loan him money, so Julian took off." Anger cuts through his words. I can feel it like the piercing of a knife against my skin.

"I'm sorry."

"Not your fault." Cruz shrugs. "I guess I'll let you get back to Adam. The poor guy looks lost standing over there by himself."

Smiling, I pull away from Cruz and head over to Adam.

18

CRUZ

I want to bleach my eyeballs.

Seriously.

Anything to erase what I'm seeing right now.

When I arrived home after Mateo's wedding, I hopped out of my car, and that's when I saw Adam and Sloane. They were standing on her front porch, the bright porch light making them impossible to miss. It's like they had a damn spotlight shining on them.

He had his hand on her cheek, running his fingers all over her skin like a blind man reading braille. And at that moment I wanted to be blind so I wouldn't have to see any of it. I contemplated yelling out, startling them so they'd stop. But apparently I was too late, because before I could say a word their lips fused together. The sight rendered me speechless, unable to utter a word.

I was hoping it would be a quick kiss goodbye. A fast peck that would be over before it even began. But no. I'm starting to wonder if they're mouths have actually attached. Like maybe they have superglue on their lips and they can't physically pry them apart.

If that's the case, I'd be more than happy to help. I'll pull that jerk off Sloane. *No problemo.*

Her hands are in his hair while his fingers dig into her waist. Their bodies move slightly as they practically eat each other's faces off. It makes me feel physically ill.

Honestly, where is that damn bleach?

For a moment my air is cut off, and I have to loosen my collar in order to gulp some in. Finally they separate and I let out a long exhale. As Adam heads back to his car, I close my eyes willing the images away. But I know it won't be that easy. Their kiss is seared into my mind, tattooed onto my brain.

Once Adam drives away, I call out to Sloane before she heads inside.

"Sloane." She flinches slightly. I see her squinting in an effort to see me. It's dark outside, and I'm sure my black tux isn't helping things.

“How long have you been standing there?” she asks, bounding down the porch steps. Her purse bounces against her hip with each sexy swagger. Reaching up, she tucks her thumb under the strap to hold it in place.

“Long enough,” I respond sourly.

She walks over the grass and across the street until she’s standing in front of me. Hell, she looks so hot in that sundress, her hair flowing down her shoulders, her cheeks pink. My gaze drops to her lips that are cracked and a little swollen, a line of lip gloss trailing over her cheek. My stomach drops, knowing it wasn’t me who made her look like this.

“So, I guess things are serious with you and Mr. Quarterback.” Regret lodges in my throat, choking me. Why did I let it get this far? Why didn’t I say something sooner? At least I should’ve told her how I felt. It would have given me a fighting chance. Why the hell did I just stand on the sidelines and let her start falling for Adam? Grunting, I run a hand over my head. “God, Sloane, I can’t believe this is happening.”

“What?” Her brow furrows in confusion. “What’s happening?”

“You and Adam.” I shake my head. “I should’ve said something sooner, but I didn’t think it would go this far.”

“What does that mean?”

“I assumed he’d take you out a couple of times and then move on.”

Hurt and anger surfaces in her eyes. “Wow. Glad to know you think so highly of me.”

“No, I do. I really do.” *God, I keep screwing this up.* I reach for her arm, but she yanks it back. It’s like a slap in the face. “You took that wrong. What I’m trying to say is that—”

“Cruz!” Gabe tears out of the front door, still wearing his tux. His eyes are wild and manic. “Cruz!”

“Yeah. I’m right here.”

“We have to get to the hospital right now!”

“What?” My insides knot. “Why?”

“It’s Julian. He’s hurt. Mom and Dad are already there. They went straight from the church.” Gabriel races toward his car, keys jangling in his palm. “Hurry! C’mom.”

My body goes numb, fear strangling me. I turn back to Sloane, snatching up her hand. “C’mom.”

She stands still, unmoving. “I think he’s just talking to you.”

“I need you, Sloane. I can’t do this by myself. Please?” I plead with her, holding tighter to her fingers. There’s no way I can face this alone. She’s my strength. I know she’s always thought I was the strong one, but she was wrong. It’s always been her. I only wish I’d figured it out sooner. Then maybe none of this would be happening.

“Okay,” she says softly. “I’ll come.”

Sloane texts her mom on the way to the hospital to let her know where she’s going. Gabe drives swiftly, yet cautiously, through the Folsom streets. From the passenger seat I have a clear view of his fingers that are turning white as he grips tightly to the steering wheel. Clasping my hands in my lap, I think about how different Julian used to be. He didn’t treat me like I was an annoying little kid the way Mateo used to. Julian would even let Sloane and I hang out with him sometimes. He’s the reason I love rock music so much. I wonder if he knows that. I wonder if I’ll have the chance to tell him.

Please let him be all right.

I don’t pray often, but hopefully God hears my prayers tonight.

Gabe drops Sloane and me at the entrance of the hospital and then drives off to locate a parking space. The minute we step through the glass doors a sterile scent spins around me. Nurses rush past, their tennis shoes squeaking on the shiny linoleum. It’s loud as voices echo off the walls. The waiting room is packed with people sitting in bright colored chairs or standing against the wall.

In the midst of the crowd, I catch a tuft of black hair, a white collar, the sleeve of a black tux. Swiftly, I weave my way around people to reach Dad.

“How is he?” I ask.

Dad shakes his head, worry etched in the lines of his face, sorrow in his eyes. “I don’t know. Your mom is trying to find out right now. We don’t know anything.”

Gabriel races in, and we wave him over. A couple vacates two chairs near us, and I nod in Sloane’s direction. “Wanna sit, Sloane?”

She nods, her discomfort evident. As I lower into one of the hard chairs, it moans beneath me. Sloane sinks into the one next to it, her back

rigid. I lower my head into my hands, doing my best to keep the panic at bay. A hand rests on my back, and I'm grateful for Sloane's comfort right now.

Names are called over a loudspeaker, a man on a stretcher is pushed past. My shoulders stiffen, the muscles flexing. I'm warm in my tux, a stark reminder of what this day was supposed to be. A celebration, not a disaster. A wedding, not an emergency. Leave it to Julian to mess this all up. Anger boils inside my veins. I don't want this. Not for my family, and not for Julian. We deserve better.

"I'm going to find Mom," Gabriel announces before walking away.

"I'll go too." Mr. Vargas follows him.

I lift my head, craning my neck in Sloane's direction. "Thanks for coming."

"I'm not sure I'm helping at all. I sort of feel like I'm in the way." She sighs. "Don't you want to go with your dad and brother?"

I sit up, resting my back against the chair. As worried as I am about Julian, I want to stay here with Sloane. Maybe it's denial, like I'm postponing the inevitable, but I don't want to get up out of this chair. Not right now anyway. "No. I want to stay here with you. When they know something, they'll tell me."

She nods, nervously folding her hands in her lap. To her right, a child plays on the ground with a toy car and her gaze lands on him.

"Sloane?" I yank her attention back to me.

She turns to me, her eyes wide and bright. "Yeah?"

I know it's not the time to bring up her kiss with Adam, but I have to know. "What I saw tonight. It was your first kiss, wasn't it?"

She nods, each bob of her head like a knife slicing through me.

"So your first kiss was with Adam?"

"Yeah." She doesn't look upset like I am. In fact, her eyes are dancing as if she's elated. It hurts me even more.

I shake my head. "It shouldn't have been him, Sloane. God, I'm such an idiot."

She reels back. "What?"

I take a breath, inhaling through my nose and exhaling slowly through my mouth in an attempt to gather courage. It's time to come clean. Being here in the hospital is proof that life is fleeting. Julian was fine when I saw him

earlier today. Yeah, sure, he was high as a kite, but he was intact. He seemed healthy enough. Now he's in the hospital, and I have no idea if he's going to make it or not. I have no idea what's wrong at all. Who knows what tomorrow will bring. What if all I have is today? If that's the case, I want Sloane to know how I feel. With quivering fingers, I reach over and cover her hand with mine. "It should've been—"

"Cruz," Gabriel interrupts. *Where the hell did he come from?* When I glance up, his gaze lands on my hand, and his eyebrow lifts slightly. Quickly, I slide my hand off of Sloane's. "C'mon, we can go see him now." He throws Sloane an apologetic look. "Sorry, Sloane, family only."

"Of course. I understand." She nods to me. "You go. I'll be right here."

"Okay." I pause for a minute, not wanting to leave her. But I know I have to go see my brother. I have to know if he's okay. "I'll be right back," I say to her before following Gabe down the hall.

My nerves rattle around inside of me as we walk. By the time we reach Julian's room, they're completely frayed. I feel like that shirt I wear when I play football with my brothers, all torn and ripped to shreds.

Julian's room is dimly lit, lights flashing and machines beeping. He lies in the bed, his face battered and bruised. It turns my stomach. When he sees me approach he attempts a smile, but then winces as if it was painful.

"Thank god it's you, bro. You're the only person in this goddamn family I can stand." His voice is scratchy. "Everyone else is so judgmental and shit. You're the only cool one."

I'm not sure if that's true. I don't feel cool right now. In fact, it's safe to say I'm just as critical of him as the rest of them. But I keep my opinion to myself, holding back my true feelings in favor of being what Julian needs right now.

"What happened to you?" I ask.

"I owed these guys some money. It's why I went to the wedding to talk to Dad."

My stomach knots, knowing where this is going.

"When they came to collect, I didn't have it, so I had to pay with my face." He attempts a joke, his laugh strained and painful sounding.

Oh, Julian, what do you have yourself mixed up with now?

"I'm sorry," I say softly. As I stare at my brother's black and blue

face, I feel sick. If only we'd helped him. If only we'd taken him seriously. I mean, what if they had killed him? My stomach churns at the thought. Reaching out, I cover his hand with mine, wishing there was something else I could do, but knowing there isn't.

When I return to the waiting room, Sloane rises from her chair and hurries toward me. I'm sure I look like shit. I know I feel like it.

"You okay?"

I nod, a knee-jerk reaction. Then I pause, shaking my head.

"What happened?" she asks.

"I guess the reason Julian needed money was to pay back some kind of debt. Since no one would give him the money, he didn't have any when the guy came to collect, so he got the shit beat out of him."

She slaps her hand over her mouth. "Oh, my god. Is he all right?"

"He's pretty jacked up, but he'll live." I rake a hand down my face. "If only I'd helped him. Maybe I could've talked to Dad or something. I never should've listened to Gabe."

"No. This isn't your fault. You did the right thing. It was Mateo's wedding."

"So that's more important than Julian's safety?"

"Of course not, but Julian put himself in this situation. It's not your job to protect him." She speaks gently.

A toddler waddles past me, her mom chasing her. I move a little to make room for them.

"Remember that time we rode our bikes down by the creek even though our parents told us not to?"

Sloane nods. "Yeah, and we ended up popping your front tire."

"Who helped us and kept it a secret so we didn't get in trouble?"

"Julian." An elderly woman slides into the seat Sloane vacated, so we move toward an empty space near the wall.

I cross my arms over my chest and lean my shoulder against the wall to prop myself up. It's late, and I'm getting tired. "He's always been there for me, Sloane."

“Not always. The last few years he hasn’t been. And that instance at the creek was totally not like this. This is big, Cruz. The stuff Julian is involved in is a lot worse than sneaking off to play at the creek.”

“I know.” I drop my head, staring hard at my shiny dress shoes. “I just wish I could help him. I want my brother back.”

Sloane reaches for me, her arms gently draping over my body. It’s not the passionate way she touched Adam, but maybe this is better. It’s real and intimate. As I lean into her, pressing my chin into her shoulder, I know it’s what I need.

“You guys ready to go?” Gabe approaches us, looking as exhausted and worried as I feel.

“Yeah.” I lift my head, wiping my face.

“We’ll come back tomorrow, but you and I need to go home, change, and get some rest.” Gabe clamps a hand down on my shoulder, as he turns to Sloane. “You look like you could use some rest too, Sloane.”

“Gee, thanks,” she teases, and I’m grateful to her for bringing some normalcy to this moment.

“You know what I mean,” Gabe says with a smile.

I grin and reach for Sloane’s hand. Her skin is soft against mine, her touch warm and tender. As we walk out of the hospital together, I decide not to share my feelings with her tonight. When I do it, I need to do it right. And I know just the way.

19

sloane

I get up early for a run. The sun is barely starting to rise, and it's dark in my room while I quickly change into my running shorts and tank top. I was up late last night at the hospital, but I can't skip out on my run today. And it'll be too damn hot to go later. I've hardly ran at all the last couple of weeks, and I miss it. Besides, my pants are fitting tighter, so it's time.

Perching on the edge of my bed, I slip into my running shoes and lace them tight. After rubbing sleep from my eyes and letting out a large yawn, I head across the hall to the bathroom. I quickly brush my teeth, wash my face, and pull my hair back in a tight ponytail. Then I hurry down the hallway. I've got to get out of the house before I answer the soft call of my bed and sink back into it. A little more sleep is definitely tempting right now.

Resisting temptation, I wearily make my way to the front door. Dad's voice stops me cold as my hand closes around the knob.

"I can't see you today. I'm sorry," he speaks so softly I can barely hear him.

Taking deliberate steps forward, I move toward the sound. Peering around the corner, I catch a glimpse of him talking on his cell phone in the kitchen. His head is bent and his hand is cupped around the phone. My stomach knots.

"I'll see you soon. Promise," he whispers. "I have to go now though. Call you tomorrow, okay?" Pause. "I love you too." When he pivots in my direction, I duck behind the wall, my heart hammering in my chest. With sweaty palms, I reach for the doorknob once again. My hands are so slick it's hard to open, but I force it. Then I step out into the crisp morning air and close the door softly behind me. *Who the hell was he talking to? Who can't he see today?*

I shove off the door and start jogging down the driveway, knowing that I have to get out of here before Dad sees me.

I love you too. The last words Dad said in his secret phone conversation float through my mind as I turn onto the sidewalk. I know he wasn't talking to Mom because she was still in bed, Regan is miles away, both of his parents are dead, and he has no siblings. So who else does he love? My head spins.

“Hey.”

My head snaps up at the sound of Cruz’s voice. He jogs up beside me, sweat forming on his brow.

“What are you doing up so early?” I ask, continuing to run. He steps in line with me and we jog at the same rhythm, as if our feet are a drumbeat keeping time.

“Couldn’t sleep. I saw you leaving your house and thought I’d join. Thought maybe a run would clear my head.”

“Is it working?” We round the corner, turning on the neighboring street. My legs and arms are becoming warm, a little bit of sweat trickles down my shoulder blades and spine.

“A little,” he says.

I feel his eyes on me, but keep my face straight ahead. One time I was running with Cruz and I was so busy talking that my toe hit a curb and pitched me forward. I ended up getting a pretty big gash on my head. Ever since then, I make sure to stay focused ahead.

“Is it working for you?” he asks.

Sometimes I hate how well he can read me. “No, not yet.”

“What’s going on?” His breath is a little more labored than before.

“I overheard a weird phone conversation of my dad’s this morning.” I smile at a man watering his front lawn. Once we pass him I continue, “He was whispering and apologizing for not being able to see the person today. And then he ended by saying ‘I love you’.”

“Huh. Maybe he was talking to Regan.”

I shake my head, my ponytail swinging like a pendulum behind me. “No, because it sounded like the person thought they could see my dad today. Regan is in another state. She wouldn’t think she was seeing Dad today.”

“Ask him about it.”

I wipe sweat from my brow. A car drives past. “I can’t. I don’t want to admit I was eavesdropping.”

“Well, you can’t keep driving yourself crazy with the what-ifs. I’m sure there’s a reasonable explanation, but you’re never going to know what it is if you don’t ask him.”

I’m not sure that Cruz is right, but I just nod. No need to argue with him about it. I’m sort of known for jumping to crazy conclusions. I have a

pretty active imagination, and it's gotten me in trouble a lot. So I'll let it drop for now. But I know there's more to this story than what Cruz thinks. I can feel it deep in my gut. Call it woman's intuition, but something is not right.

"Yeah, maybe," I say noncommittally. "What about Julian? Any news on his condition?"

He shakes his head as he runs, his arms tucked in near his chest. "Last night Dad said that he's being released today. He offered Julian his old room back, said that we could all help him get clean or whatever."

"Do you think he'll take him up on the offer?"

"I don't know. I doubt it. Dad didn't seem hopeful."

"I hope he does. He needs to get help."

"Yeah. Everyone can see that except for him, I guess."

I nod, sucking in some air. It's warming up, and sweat covers me like a second skin.

"So, you wanna hang out later?" Cruz asks, changing the subject.

"Can't." My lungs burn, and it's getting harder to carry on a conversation.

"Hanging with Adam?"

"No. Becca. It's her day off."

Even without looking at him, I know he's scrunching up his nose in disgust.

"What about tonight? Coming to practice?"

"Yeah."

"Cool."

Cool? That's it? No quip about Adam or anything? I'm pleasantly surprised. Maybe he's finally accepting my relationship with Adam. After his weird comments last night, I wasn't sure. I was starting to worry. But I know he was overly emotional with everything that was going on with Julian, so maybe that's all it was. When I quickly glance over at him, the funny expression on his face gives me pause. It's the look he has when he's got something up his sleeve. And in my experience that's never a good thing.

Becca claims she's too pale and in desperate need of a tan, so we meet at the pool at the apartment complex where she lives with her mom. Since it's a weekday, it's quiet at the pool. Only one woman with a toddler play on the steps near the shallow end. Other than that we have the place to ourselves. Becca and I find two lounge chairs and spread out our stuff. I put on a wide brimmed hat to protect my face and then lather sunblock all over my body. When I glance over at Becca she's spraying on suntan lotion and staring at me like I'm crazy.

"You're never going to get a tan that way," she says.

"I'm also not going to get skin cancer." Lying back, I turn my face upward and close my eyes.

"Morbid much?" Becca sighs.

I giggle.

"You may not get skin cancer, but you're gonna die of a heart attack if you don't learn to loosen up a little."

"Whatever." I keep my eyes closed, my lips curving a little.

"I'm serious. You spend too much time worrying." A finger jabs me in the shoulder. "It won't kill you to throw caution to the wind every once in awhile."

I suppose she does have a point. I've always been a little neurotic. Cruz says it's part of my charm, but maybe he's wrong. Maybe it's hindering me.

"I've been doing that a little." I roll my head to the side to look at Becca. A pair of oversized sunglasses cover almost her entire face. "I mean, going out with Adam was outside of my comfort zone."

"True." Her gaze roves my body. "And don't you think he'd like you even better with a nice golden tan?"

"I could argue that he likes my pale skin since we're already dating," I point out.

"Touché." Her glossy lips curve upward. "But I still have to work on my tan. Graham hasn't asked me out yet."

"Graham?"

"Yeah. That guy I work with. I told you about him."

I vaguely remember her mentioning him. "I didn't realize you liked him though."

“How could I not? He’s totally hot.” She turns her head, settling back on the lounge chair. “And I think he’s close to asking me out. I’ve been laying it on pretty thick lately.”

I chuckle, having been witness to Becca laying it on thick. “I’m sure he’ll ask you out, Becca.”

“Me too. I just hope he hurries up. I don’t want to be single on Fourth of July.”

“Why not?” The sun beats down on me, and the water looks pretty inviting. The lady with the little kid is now gone, and we’re the only ones out here.

“Because Fourth of July is romantic. I want a guy to kiss during the fireworks.”

She says all this as if I should know. However, I’ve never had a boyfriend, much less one on July Fourth. My insides coil when I think of Adam. Will we watch fireworks together? And more importantly, will he kiss me during the fireworks show? Glancing over at Becca, I realize that I still haven’t told her about my kiss last night. I’d been so preoccupied with everything else that happened last night and this morning that I’d sort of forgot.

“Adam kissed me,” I blurt out.

Becca sits up, her mouth agape. “And you’re just now telling me? I want all the details stat.” She scoots to the edge of the chair, swinging her legs over the side. Then she leans close to me.

I shift uncomfortably in my lounge chair, suddenly wishing I’d kept my mouth shut. “Um...I don’t know. It was nice.”

“Nice? That’s it? Girl, if it was only nice, maybe you need to work on your kissing skills. Or maybe it’s him that needs to.”

I giggle. “No. Trust me. He doesn’t need to work on anything.” My face warms. “It was really...great.”

“Did he use his tongue?”

“Becca!” I clutch my chest, appalled.

“What? I want to know.” She shrugs. “I told you I was living vicariously through you. You’re the one who gets to kiss him. The least you can do is give me details.”

“Fine.” I exhale, realizing what a prude I’m being. “Yes. He used tongue.”

Becca smiles. "Was it your first kiss?"

I frown, remembering Cruz's weird statement at the hospital last night. "You sound like Cruz."

She cocks her head to the side, and I can see her squinting her eyes behind her sunglasses. "Cruz knows?"

"He sorta saw."

"What?" Becca slaps my thigh. "Your life has turned into a regular daytime talk show."

I cringe at her analogy. Not exactly what I had been hoping for. I don't even like daytime television. "It's no big deal. He happened to get home from the wedding around the same time as us. We do live across the street from each other, you know?"

"Yeah. Believe me, I know." Her tone turns sour.

I freeze. "What does that mean?"

"Nothing." She waves away my words with a flick of her wrist. "Anyway, so go on."

"So he saw, and then he sort of acted weird about it."

"Weird, how?"

"He said something about how Adam shouldn't have been my first kiss, but before he could say anything else he had to go back to see Julian in his hospital room."

Becca furrows her brows. "Okay, I'm clearly missing something here. Why was Julian in the hospital?"

I groan. "Oh. It's a long story, but basically he got beat up by some guy he owes money to."

"Yikes." Becca bites her lip. "Sounds like you had an interesting night. How's Cruz now?"

"I saw him this morning. He seemed fine, but he holds a lot of stuff inside. You know how he is."

"Not as well as you do," she mutters under her breath.

"What?"

"Nothing." She grins. "Let's get in the pool. I'm melting out here."

Ignoring her statement, I follow her into the pool. If only people

would stop saying such cryptic things lately. I feel like I'm the only one not in on some inside joke. Like I'm the one person in the comedy club still trying to figure out the punch line while everyone else roars with laughter. Frankly, it kind of sucks.

"Whoa." Cruz's eyes widen when I show up to practice. "Someone got a sunburn."

"Gee, thanks for pointing it out. I hadn't noticed before," I deadpan.

"What happened?" He closes the front door and ushers me inside. "You're usually so careful."

"Becca and I went to the pool at her apartments. I fell asleep, and Becca didn't wake me." Glancing down, I cringe. God, it's getting redder by the minute. And I'm sure it will start to peel any day now. *So much for not getting skin cancer.*

"You fell asleep by the pool?"

I nod. "I was tired."

"She should've woken you. I would've."

"Yeah, I know." I sigh. When we round the corner and head toward the garage, I bump into Annette.

"Hi, Sloane," she says cordially, but there is a hollowness to her tone that isn't normally present.

"Hi," I respond. After she passes by I turn to Cruz. "Is she okay?"

"Yeah." He nods, clouds passing over his eyes like a storm rolling in. All dark and grey as if rain is imminent. "Julian left the hospital today. Didn't tell anyone where he was going. Dad went to see him, and he was just gone. Vanished. The nurses said he had already checked out."

I feel sick. "Oh, I'm so sorry."

He shakes his head. "It's crazy, you know? He should've taken Dad's help."

"He will someday. When he's ready."

"If he lives long enough."

I want to tell him not to say things like that, but I won't lie to Cruz. I can't give him useless platitudes. And none of us know what's going to

happen to Julian. He makes destructive choices. If only he could see how much it's hurting those that he loves.

When we reach the garage door Cruz turns the knob and pushes it open. I step into the room, white spots filling my vision as my eyes adjust.

"Hey, there's my tambourine girl." Adam stands up and walks around the drum set. Then he swaggers toward me. He looks amazing in a white clingy t-shirt and cargo shorts. "What happened?" Reaching out, he touches my collarbone, trailing his fingertips over my reddened skin. If possible, it scorches it even more.

"I got sunburned."

"I'm sorry." His fingers continue to graze the skin gently, tenderly.

Cruz walks away from us and sinks down into the chair in front of the keyboard. Trey and Carlos watch from where they stand in the corner. Suddenly I feel self-conscious with Adam's hand on my skin.

"I'm fine." I clear my throat, forcing my heartbeat to steady.

"Ready to get started?" Cruz speaks into the microphone and his voice bounces all over the room.

"Looks like we'll have to finish this later." The wink Adam throws me causes my knees to buckle.

Unsteadily, I walk on my wobbly legs to the drum set. Adam already has a chair set up with a tambourine in it, so I guess I know what I'll be doing again this practice. Not that I'm complaining. Any excuse to be near Adam is one I'll take.

"I gave you each a chord sheet," Cruz says, still talking in that damn microphone. I cringe. He does realize we're all in a tiny garage, right? We can hear him. "It's a song I wrote. I thought we could try it out."

This perks my interest, conjuring up a forgotten memory from a few years back.

Cruz's door was slightly ajar. Gabe had said it was okay to come in, so I pressed it open with my palm. Cruz sat on the bed, a notebook spread open in his lap. He didn't even notice me step into the room, the bottom of my tennis shoes stamping footprints on the carpet. His head was bent, his forehead a mess of squiggly lines as he wrote furiously in the notebook. The pen in between his fingers moved swiftly over the paper. The scratching noise it made when it struck the paper reminded me of matches being lit.

"Hey," I purposely spoke softly so as not to startle him.

He looked up from the paper, his eyes glazed over as if he'd been in a trance, lost in his own world. "Oh, hey, Sloane."

"Watcha doing?" I lowered my body down to sit next to him on the bed. The mattress sloped beneath me.

"Nothing." He smothered the paper with his hands, obscuring the words written over the pages. Still I could catch the edges of some of the words outside of his fingers. An A here an S there. Fragmented words and half-spoken phrases.

"Why are you being so secretive?" I teased him, not used to being kept in the dark.

"I'm not." He stood, taking the notebook with him. "It's just private."

I stiffened, his words like a physical slap in the face. "Private from me?"

He must've caught the hurt in my voice because he turned. "Yeah. I mean, it's nothing big. Just some song lyrics. There not very good. I'll show you when I have something worth sharing."

"Oh." I felt a little less upset now that he at least told me what it was. But I was still curious what he wrote. He seemed so intent on it. Then again, I understood. I had a diary at home that I definitely didn't want Cruz to read. "Okay," I said, deciding to let him have his secret song lyrics.

The sound of the band playing draws me out of my flashback. Adam nods to me and I bang the tambourine against my hand. The smile he flashes me makes it all worth it. I love watching him play the drums. His face is all intent, and the muscles bulge in his arms. When he gets really into it, his shirt sometimes rides up exposing some of his stomach.

Cruz's voice fills the room as he starts to sing. As my mind registers what he's saying, I freeze. It takes all my willpower to keep gripping the tambourine and not drop it.

"When we met you were all pigtails, skinned knees and bright eyes; We started as friends, but now my feelings have taken me by surprise; You swept into my life like a hurricane, blowing everything out of place; You used to need me, now it seems you need space; But I can't let go."

Adam nods to me to use the tambourine, but it's like I'm frozen. As if I'm a glacier, a giant block of ice. Craning my neck, I turn to Cruz. His gaze collides with mine.

"You're my everything, my everything."

The air leaves me, and I grapple for breath. My hands tremble and the tambourine slips from my fingers, crashing to the ground. When I stand, I bump the chair and it scrapes on the concrete. I whirl around to Adam.

"I'm sorry. I don't feel good. I...I...I need to go." I'm not sure if he can even hear me over all the loud music, but I don't care. I have to get out of here. Cruz's lyrics and the pointed way he looked at me causes my head to spin. Confusion clouds my vision as I fumble my way out of the garage and out of Cruz's house. When I get outside, I gulp in the air. I never thought breathing was something you had to think about, but suddenly I do. Taking deep, careful breaths I race across the street. Once I make it to my house, I don't know what to do. I need to talk to someone, but who? Usually Cruz is the person I go to when I need to talk, but clearly I can't talk to him about this.

Becca. I'll talk to Becca. She'll know what to do. Yanking out my cell phone, I shoot her a text, and pray she'll respond quickly.

"So let me get this straight." Becca smacks her pink bubblegum loudly, popping it in between her teeth. "Cruz doesn't like you dating Adam, he's acting all jealous, and he wrote you a love song. And you're surprised by this?"

"Yeah." I nod vigorously, my stomach in knots. "I don't understand."

Becca gives me a skeptical look. "I can't tell if you're messing with me or if you're really this naïve."

"What are you talking about?"

Sighing, she leans forward. "Do you know why Cruz and I broke up?"

I think about what Cruz said about Becca being high maintenance and needy, but decide to keep that to myself. Instead, I press my lips together and shake my head.

"Because of *you*."

I reel back from the strength of her words. "What? No, that's not why."

"Trust me. It is. It's why he breaks up with all of his girlfriends."

"Is that what he told you?"

"He didn't have to. It was obvious the whole time we were together. I was never going to compare with you." Her eyes narrow. "He loves you, Sloane."

“Yeah, I know. I love him too. We’re best friends.”

Desperately she grabs my hand and stares into my eyes. “No. He’s *in* love with you.”

“He is?” My head feels fuzzy while I struggle to comprehend what she’s saying.

“Yes, and it’s totally obvious to everyone.” She pauses, eyeing me. “Except you, apparently.”

I slump against my headboard and take a deep breath as I allow her words to sink in. Could it be true? *Is Cruz in love with me?* A montage of images assault me all at once, swirling in my brain and making my head spin. Cruz’s smile, the way he stares into my eyes as if he can read my very soul, the tender way he holds me, his gentle touch. I think of how he’s always available to me at a moment’s notice no matter what else he has going on. And how he’s never had a relationship with a girl that’s lasted more than a couple of months. Even when he has a girlfriend he spends more time with me than her. Then my mind replays the last month and how jealous and weird he’s been about me dating Adam. *How have I not figured this out sooner?*

“And I think if you’re being entirely honest with yourself you’d realize that you’re in love with him too.” Becca’s voice draws me back to the present.

“But he’s like a brother to me. He’s my best friend. That’s all,” I say the same thing I’ve told people for years when having to explain our relationship. It’s become almost a mantra of sorts. I’ve recited it so many times it comes out without even thinking. But is it true? Is it how I really feel? I’m not sure anymore. Swallowing hard, confusion fills me.

“You and I both know that’s not true. There’s a lot more to you and Cruz than just that.” I blink as Becca smiles at me. “You two have something so special. It’s like you’re soul mates or something. I’m actually pretty jealous of it.”

“But you never said anything.”

“That’s not exactly something you admit to.”

She has a point. “But you encouraged me to go out with Adam.”

“This is something you had to work through on your own.” She slides off my bed. “In fact, you still do. I have faith in you, Sloane Martin. You’re one of the strongest girls I know. It’s why I’ve hung out with you even though you stole my boyfriend.” Standing over me, she winks.

“I’m sorry. I had no idea.”

“I know. If you had stolen him on purpose I would’ve kicked your ass. You may be strong, but I put up a pretty damn good fight.”

I laugh.

“You’ll figure this out.” She gives me a quick hug, and I can tell it’s a little uncomfortable for her. She’s not the affectionate type. “If you need me, you know my number.”

“Hey.” I stop her before she can head out of my room. “Thanks.”

“Anytime.” She stops, pointing at me. “But if you go after Graham, all bets are off.”

“Don’t worry.” *I’ve never even met the guy.* “He’s all yours.”

“You better believe it.” A broad smile sweeps her face as she slips into the hallway, closing the door softly behind her.

With a groan, I fall back on my bed. When my head hits the pillow, I blow out a breath. One thing is certain, I never thought I’d ever be in this situation. Before this summer, I’d never even had a date, much less a boyfriend. And now two boys want to be with me. One is my best friend, and one is Adam freaking Stewart. Turmoil churns in my gut. This sounds much more appealing in theory. In reality, it sucks.

Ugh. What the hell am I going to do?

20

CRUZ

I'm emerging from the shower when I hear a knock on the door. No one else is home, so I hurriedly pull on my boxers and a pair of shorts. Running a hand over my wet hair I walk swiftly down the hall. When I open the door Sloane stands on the front porch. After staring at my chest for a minute, she averts her gaze, staring hard at the grass.

"What's the matter, Sloane? Don't like what you see?" I tease.

"Um...no, it's...you know, it's fine," she sputters, still keeping her eyes trained on the green feathery reeds.

"Okay, okay, I'll put on a shirt. I didn't realize that my bare chest had this effect on you." I feel more satisfied than I should about her reaction. "Come in."

She trails behind me as I walk back to my room. Rock posters are taped all over the walls, my bed is unmade, and clothes line the floor. I reach for a white t-shirt off my bed and pull it on.

"So, cleaning your room hasn't really been your top priority this summer, I see." Sloane looks around.

I sit on the edge of my bed. "Nah."

Giggling, she plunks down next to me. On my nightstand is a stack of papers, my handwriting scrawled all over them. Sloane stares at the top one. It's the song I sang to her, and by the widening of her eyes I can tell she's made the connection. My chest tightens, and I know why she's here. Steeling myself, I wait for her to speak.

She peers at me. "Cruz, I need to ask you something."

"I figured this was coming."

"Was that song about me?"

"You know it was." I pivot so that our knees are touching. "Who else could it be about?" Feeling bold, I lift my arm, my index finger barely touching Sloane's chin. Tenderly I trace her soft skin with the pad of my finger, causing her to shiver. "When we met you were all pigtails, skinned knees and bright eyes," I speak the lyrics softly. "We started as friends, but

now my feelings have taken me by surprise.” My fingertip delicately sweeps across her jawline and up to her lower lip. Then I drag my finger over it, tugging it down slightly, moisture coating my skin. Her eyes grow serious. “I should’ve told you how I felt sooner, but I didn’t know how.”

“So instead you wrote a song?”

Dropping my hand, I nod. My gaze lingers on her mouth, on the lips that I just touched. My heart slams into my ribcage. I want to kiss her so damn bad, I’m afraid I won’t be able to stop myself. “It was the easiest way to get my feelings out.” My hand curves around her face, my fingers sliding under her hair. The long strands are soft and silky against my skin. “God, you don’t know how badly I wish I had told you before you went out with Adam.”

“You felt this way even before I dated Adam?” Something flashes in her eyes that I can’t quite place – desire, regret, betrayal.

“Long before.” I scoot closer, her familiar scent cocooning me. “I can’t even remember when I didn’t.”

“Why didn’t you tell me? Why wait until now?”

“Seeing you kiss Adam was like a knife cutting me open.” I lower my face until our foreheads touch. “I couldn’t stand it. It should’ve been me. I should’ve been your first kiss. I always thought I would be.” His warm breath fans over my face.

With her open palms she shoves me back. “But you’ve kissed other girls,” she says, her tone hard. “You wanted to be my first kiss, but I wasn’t going to be yours? How is that fair?”

Her words hit their mark, like a dagger to my heart. “You’re right. I’m a selfish asshole.”

She softens a little, her eyes crinkling around the edges. “Well, I didn’t say that.”

“It’s true. I never should’ve dated anyone else. I only did it in an attempt to get over you.”

“Get over me? Why?”

“Because you’re my best friend, Sloane.” I lightly brush my fingers over hers. “Remember the pact we made when we were younger?”

“How could I forget? You made us seal it with blood.”

I chuckle, remembering.

“Tommy’s a jerk anyway.” Sloane swirled her stick into the ground,

painting circles into the dirt. “Don’t worry about him.”

“I should’ve punched him in the face.” I threw a rock into the bushes.

We were sitting in my backyard having a pretend campout. Dad set up a tent for us and everything. It was his way of making up for the fact that my friend Tommy flaked out on the camping trip we were supposed to take. A couple of weeks prior Tommy had invited me to go camping with his family this weekend, but then at the last minute he changed his mind and invited another boy in our class, Isaiah.

“No, that wouldn’t be good. Then you’d be grounded too.” Sloane nudged me in the side. “At least you can still hang out with me. And isn’t that better?”

I turned to her. “Yeah, actually. It is.” There was no hint of teasing in my voice. At ten years old I mostly joked around. I was rarely serious, but this time warranted it.

“Because I don’t stink like Tommy, huh?” Sloane bantered.

“That’s true.” I raised a brow. Dropping the rock in my hand, I stood up. “But seriously, you’re my best friend, Sloane. The only friend I can count on, really.” I turned to her. “Let’s make a pact.”

“A pact?” Fear flashed in her eyes like I had just asked her to make a suicide pact or something.

“Yeah.” I shoved my fingers into the pocket of my shorts and snatched out the swiss army knife.

Sloane jumped up. “Look, I know you’re upset about the camping trip, but I don’t want to kill myself.”

I laughed, realizing that my assessment had been correct. Did I know this girl or what? “Sloane, we’re not committing suicide. We’re making a best friend’s pact.”

“A best friend’s pact?” She appeared to relax a little, but she still eyed the knife warily.

“Yeah. We’ll promise to be best friends always. We’ll promise to never let each other down, to always put each other first. Then we’ll seal it with our blood.”

She shivered. “Blood?”

I clicked the lever on my swiss army knife. A tiny blade sprung out, glinting in the darkness. “Ready?”

“I don’t know.” She squirmed. “How much blood are we talking?”

“Just a tiny prick.” I placed a hand on my hip. “C’mon, don’t be such a wimp.”

She puffed out her chest. “I’m not a wimp.”

“Great. Then hold out your hand.”

Her arm trembled as she held it up. I pricked my own palm first. It barely hurt at all. Sort of reminded me of a bee sting or a shot at the doctor’s office. Sloane was brave when I nicked her palm. She winced a little, but held her head high.

I gripped her hand and said, “Repeat after me. I, Sloane Martin, promise to be best friends with Cruz Vargas for the rest of our lives.”

Obediently, she repeated it.

“I will never let him down, or choose another friend over him. I will be loyal to him and always have his back.”

Again, she repeated.

Then it was my turn. I spoke loudly and firmly. As weird as it was, I actually found myself thrilled with the whole ceremony. It gave me a sense of security I so desperately desired.

“I never want to lose you. And I worried that if we ever went out it would change everything.”

Sloane searches my eyes. “And you’re not worried about losing me now?”

“No.” I speak firmly. “Because I know I won’t. What you and I have will never go away, Sloane. I’m sure of it. Besides, ever since I saw you kissing Adam, I’ve realized that I can’t fight my feelings anymore. They’re real and they’re not going away.” I bring both hands up to frame her face. She sucks in a breath. “I’d give up every date, every kiss, every girl I’ve ever gone out with to be with you. I wish I had told you sooner. I wish I’d never dated anyone else. I regret it. All of it.”

Our eyes lock. My hands move in her hair, my face nearing hers. I lick my lips, ready to feel her mouth on mine. My only regret is that I didn’t do this sooner. When she scoots nearer to me, my heart soars. I tilt my face, our lips so close I can feel her breath on my mouth. Our lips almost touch, when suddenly her hands come up and she turns her head.

“No, I can’t do this.” Pushing away from me, she slides off the bed. “I’m sorry.”

My heart sinks. "Please don't tell me you're picking him."

Falling to her knees in front of me, she knots our fingers together. "Cruz, you've been my best friend my entire life. I care about you in a way I've never cared about anyone."

This doesn't sound like the words of someone who is about to declare their undying love. I guess I overestimated Sloane's feelings for me. I wasn't anticipating how awful it would feel if I was rejected by her. "Why do I feel like there's a but coming?"

She bites her lip. "I'm afraid to mess up what we have." Her eyes plead with mine. "We won't, will we?"

That's what she's worried about? Our friendship? Hope sparks once again. "No." I squeeze her fingers, needing to reassure her. "You'll always be my best friend, no matter what. I promise."

"Okay, because I can't lose you. Ever."

"You won't." I lower my head again, my pulse racing. "So we're in agreement then?"

"Not quite." She draws back.

"Why not?"

"I need some time to think. You just sort of sprung this on me."

"Not really, Sloane. You've had a lifetime to know how you feel about me." Disappointment sinks into my gut.

She releases my hands and stands up. "But I like him too."

"Seriously?" I push off the bed and stand up. She's known the guy for like two seconds. How can she be this torn?

"And what about Tara?"

"Tara?"

She shoots me a pointed look. "Yeah, you know, the girl you're dating."

"Oh." I wave away her words. "No. We just went out the one time. I broke it off after the wedding."

Sloane nods. "Okay, but I need some time to figure this out. Can you give me that?"

Taking a step forward, I reach for her. "Yeah. I can do that. But I need you to do something for me."

“What’s that?” Her expression is wary.

My arms circle her waist, drawing her to me. “I think we need to even the playing field. I think even Mr. Football would agree that it’s only fair.”

She cocks her head to one side. “What does that mean?”

“It means that he got to kiss you, so now I should be able to.” I yank her so close that our heartbeats mingle together.

“No. I can’t do that. It wouldn’t be right. I’m dating Adam.”

“It’s not like he’ll ever find out.”

“But I’ll know.” Her hands ripple over my chest, the pads of her fingers gingerly touching me through my shirt. It makes me want to take it off again. To feel her fingertips on my bare flesh. “He’s a nice guy. He deserves honesty.”

“Okay.” I throw up my arms, unable to listen to her mention that guy. It’s bad enough that I can’t get the image of the two of them kissing out of my mind. “I don’t want to hear about *him*.”

“Fair enough.” She smiles. “I just want to do this right, Cruz. I want to treat you both with the respect you deserve.”

“Maybe I should take my shirt off again. Get you all hot and bothered.” I wink.

She rolls her eyes, pushing me away. “You wish.”

“I think you’re the one wishing.”

She sighs, and I worry that I pushed too hard. I’m just so used to teasing her. “I should probably go.” Before leaving she stops and studies me a moment. “Are we good? I mean, you understand, right?”

“I wish you were as sure about your feelings for me as I am about my feelings for you. But I get that you need some time, Sloane, and I’m okay with that. And I understand that you need to sort things out with Adam. Your loyalty is one of the things I’ve always loved about you.”

“Wow, you’re taking this well.”

“It’s just because I know you’ll pick me.” I grin. “I’m sure of it.”

“There’s that humility I love so much.” She giggles, and I savor that wonderful, melodious sound I love. “I’ll be back soon.”

“I can’t wait,” I say as she leaves my room.

21

sloane

Adam doesn't seem surprised when I text him. In fact, he responds as if he'd been waiting for me to contact him. It makes me feel guilty about my mixed feelings. I mean, I like Adam a lot. And before Cruz admitted his feelings to me, I thought I wanted to be with Adam for a long time. I had even been hoping our relationship would progress. Now I don't know what to do. And I can't ignore the fact that I almost kissed Cruz. And even though I didn't, I wanted to. Badly.

Ugh. This is crazy. I can't believe this is happening to me.

As I drive to the coffee shop to meet Adam, my mind flies to all the plans we had for the rest of the summer. The fireworks show this week, the trips to the lake with his family. Not to mention that ever since we started dating I'd been fantasizing about how cool it would be if I was his girlfriend when school started. This thought stops me cold. Is that the only reason I want to be with Adam? Because he's popular? Because of the way it will make me look?

I lower my foot to the gas and turn into the parking lot of the coffee shop feeling conflicted. Adam is already there, standing outside of his truck. He has one hand shoved into the pocket of his jeans as he leans against his truck. He looks so hot that my heart skips a beat. As I hop out of my car, snatching my purse off the front seat, my earlier panic wanes. I know that's not the only reason I'm dating Adam. I truly like him. I've had a crush on him for years, and now that I've gotten to know him, I like him even more.

Relief is replaced by dread as Adam flashes me one of his heart-stopping smiles. *Choosing between Cruz and Adam is going to be harder than I thought.*

He greets me with a light peck on the cheek. The feel of his lips on my skin reminds me of our kiss the other night. It also reminds me of how close I came to kissing Cruz just moments earlier. *Seriously, what am I going to do?* When I was with Cruz I thought I knew what I wanted. It seemed that my feelings for him were stronger than my feelings for Adam. But now that I'm with Adam, I'm not so sure. As he places his hand on the small of my back, I'm confused further. His touch sends shock waves through my body, and shivers up my spine.

I'm in a daze as we order our drinks and make our way over to an empty round table in the corner. After plunking down in the seat across from Adam, I nervously run my fingers over the handle on my ceramic mug. My mind is racing as I try to come up with what to say.

"Is something going on between you and Cruz?" Adam asks.

I guess I didn't need to worry so much about how to start this conversation.

"No, nothing's going on really." An image flashes in my mind of Cruz holding me, begging me to kiss him. My body heats up. "Um...I mean, I don't know. It's complicated."

"When we first started dating I asked you about your relationship with Cruz, and you assured me that you were just friends. Were you lying?" His eyes pierce mine.

Staring into my coffee cup, I feel sick. "No, I wasn't. We are just friends. I mean, we were just friends." I press the heel of my hand into my forehead. "God, I don't know what to say. This is all so confusing." Taking a deep breath, I lower my hand and look up at Adam. Gathering my thoughts, I square my shoulders. Adam deserves an explanation. I've got to get it together. "Cruz is my best friend, and I've never really thought of him as anything more. Until now."

"It was the song, wasn't it?"

I nod.

"Yeah." One side of Adam's mouth curves up a bit. Not quite a smile, but sort of. "It was pretty obvious that it was about you."

"I honestly didn't know he felt that way."

Adam nods. "I know. I could tell by how freaked out you got. It was pretty clear you weren't expecting it." Reaching across the table, his hand covers mine. "But I need to know how you feel now. Do you want to be with him?"

This is the question I was dreading. I don't want to lose Adam. Dating him has been amazing, a dream come true. But I know that my feelings for Cruz are more than just friendship. Maybe they always have been. And now that I've faced them, I'm not sure I'll be able to ignore them anymore. No longer can I live in blissful denial. God, it took every ounce of willpower I had not to kiss him earlier today.

"I don't know," I finally say.

Adam draws his hand back, and I feel it like a slap in the face.

“But I like you a lot,” I say quickly. “I’ve liked you for so long, Adam. I never want to hurt you. I’m really sorry about this.”

“Hey, we never said this was exclusive.” He shrugs. “Besides, you didn’t know the dude was gonna write a song about you.” Smiling, he leans forward. “Wish I had known. Maybe I would’ve done it first. One upped the guy.”

I freeze. “You would’ve written a song about me?”

“Song writing’s not really my thing, so probably not.” He winks, causing me to melt a little. “Just wishful thinking, I guess.”

“So where does that leave us?” I have to know. If he’s through with me, I need him to tell me now. My heart can only take so much today.

“That’s up to you.”

I’m sure he thinks this is a good answer, but honestly, I don’t want to be the one making this decision. My emotions are all over the place. I have no idea what to do. “The truth is that I don’t know what I want. I like you both.” I lower my gaze. “But I know that sounds selfish.”

“Tell you what.” His hand snakes across the table, linking with mine. “How about we don’t make any decisions today?”

Curling my fingers around his, I smile. “I like that idea.”

“We’ll just hang out, be together, enjoy each other’s company. No preconceived notions or strings attached.”

My chest expands with each word as if a weight is being lifted from my chest. “Thanks. I like the sound of that.”

“Me too.” He smiles from across the table, his thumb swirling over my palm, causing a chill to shoot up my arm. “I meant what I said the other day. I really like you, Sloane.”

God, he’s killing me here. The relief I felt a few seconds earlier is replaced by choking panic. I’m going to have to decide at some point, and it’s going to be awful. They’re both amazing guys. When this happens in a book I read or movie I watch, it seems pretty awesome. In fact, it’s safe to say I’ve been jealous of the girl since she has two guys that want her. Isn’t that every girl’s fantasy? But really, this isn’t fun at all. I mean, sure it makes me feel good that both Adam and Cruz like me. However, with that comes the sick revelation that I’m going to end up hurting one of them. And there’s nothing fun about that.

With my free hand I reach for my coffee cup and lift it to my lips. The mocha tastes sweet on my tongue, chocolate flavor coating my mouth. When I lower the cup, I look around the room. The place is packed with people. Many are on their laptops, there is a lady at a table with two children, another couple drinking coffee across the room. The line is several people long, and there is a couple leaving with paper cups in their fists, his hand on her back. *Wait a minute. No, it can't be. Not again. Is coffee their thing or what?* They turn the corner after walking out of the coffee shop, and I catch the man's profile in the window. Yep. It's definitely my dad.

I can't believe this is happening. There's no way that girl is just a colleague from work. I can't ignore this any longer. When I get home I have to talk to my parents and find out what's going on. Bile rises in my throat. I breathe in through my nose and exhale out through my mouth to ward off the nausea.

"You okay?" Adam squeezes my fingers.

"Yeah," I lie. "I'm fine."

Of course Dad isn't home when Adam drops me off. He rarely is lately. Apparently he's too busy to spend time with his family, but not too busy to get coffee with beautiful, young women. Bitterness seeps into my veins, poisoning my insides. But I shove the feelings down as Adam walks me up to the front door. The fact that he even wants to still hang out with me after everything that's happened is pretty surprising. I don't need to screw it up any further.

"So, can I call you later?" Adam asks, a little shyly, endearing me to him even more.

"Yeah." I smile, facing him. "I look forward to it."

He steps closer to me. "Hey, I want you to know that there's no pressure on my end, okay?" His finger sweeps across my cheek as I nod. "I just like hanging out with you." His head tilts to mine. "And kissing you." His lips close over mine, his mouth tasting like chocolate and coffee. Reaching up, I clutch the back of his neck, as his arms wrap around my waist. When his tongue darts between my lips sliding over my tongue, my mind flies across the street. I chase it right inside the Vargas home, down the hall and into Cruz's room. Cruz's chocolate brown eyes fill my head, the intensity of his gaze, and the feel of his hands as they gently drew me close. *Damn it, why am I thinking of him right now?* Guilty, I wrestle with my thoughts, making them

return to Adam.

When we part, Adam smiles at me and throws me a wink. “I’ll call you.”

“Okay.” I nod as he whirls around and swaggers to his car. My eyes shift to Cruz’s window, his blinds shut. Thank god he’s not standing outside. The last thing I need is for him to see me kissing Adam again. Adam waves from his car while pulling away from the curb. As I wave back I think about how cool he was about all of this. He didn’t seem to care if I made a decision or not.

Remembering how desperate Cruz was about it gives me pause. Adam seemed fine with me continuing to date him while I explored my feelings for Cruz. I know Cruz wouldn’t be okay with me stringing him along. He wants me all to himself, and he wants me now. I can tell that sharing me with Adam has been like ripping his heart out one piece at a time. And didn’t I feel the same way about him dating Tara? I couldn’t figure out why she bothered me so much. Could it have been because deep down I have been harboring feelings for him? The truth is that I’ve never really liked when Cruz dates other girls. I mean, I’ve dealt with it. But if I’m being entirely honest, it’s always sort of bothered me.

“Sloane?”

I whip around at the sound of Mom’s voice. She stands in the doorway, her arms crossed. She’s wearing shorts and a t-shirt, her hair down.

“Are you all right? You’re standing out here staring at the street.” Her lips curl in amusement.

“No. I’m not okay,” I say, my stomach souring. “I need to talk with you about something.”

“Okay.” Mom draws the word out, a wary expression on her face.

As I follow her inside I wonder if she knows what I’m going to ask her. By the time we enter the family room, I’m starting to regret saying anything. Maybe I don’t want to know. Perhaps I can just put it all behind me. Facing it might be too hard. Steadying myself on the arm of the couch, I breathe deeply.

“Sloane.” Mom touches my arm, her skin silky and smelling of vanilla. “Sit down.”

Her eyes betray that she knows what I’m about to say. There’s truth and quiet resolve written inside. Nodding, I swallow hard and sit next to Mom. The couch springs squeak like I sat on a mouse.

“What do you need to talk about?” Mom calmly slides her palms over her thighs.

It's now or never. Sitting up straight, I think about Cruz's words when he told me there was probably a reasonable explanation. I cling to that like it's truth as I open my mouth. “Mom, I saw Dad with another woman today at the coffee shop. Actually, I've seen him with her twice.”

She bobs her head slowly up and down, her lips pressed into a thin line. Her fingers tremble slightly in her lap. “Kacey.”

“You know her name?” I'm dumbfounded.

“Of course. He told me all about her.”

“And you're okay with it?” The room spins around me. How can she be okay with this? Have I walked into an alternate universe or something?

“I don't really have a choice.” She rotates the wedding ring on her finger, fiddling with it nervously.

“What do you mean you don't have a choice? He's cheating on you, Mom. You have to do something.” The memory of me almost kissing Cruz sparks in my mind, but I shake it away. That was different. Adam and I aren't married. We're not even exclusive. He said so himself.

Mom's hand flies to her mouth. “Cheating? Is that what you think? Oh, god, no.” Her hand drops from her mouth and touches my arm. “Honey, your father's not having an affair.”

“He's not?”

“No. Kacey's not his mistress. She's his daughter.”

Daughter? The words slam into me like a freight train, stealing my breath. “But that's not possible. Regan and I are his daughters.”

Mom's face softens, her eyes crinkling around the corners. “Sloane, before your dad and I met he had been engaged to another woman. Apparently when your dad broke things off with her she had been pregnant, but she didn't tell him. He just found out.”

“Why now?”

“Kacey sought him out. They've been trying to get to know one another.” Mom smiles. “I know you're probably upset. I was at first too. But I've learned to accept it, and you will too.”

“That's why you two have been fighting so much?”

“I'm sorry about that, honey.”

I shake my head. “No, this doesn’t make any sense. What about all dad’s late nights at work? Why is he never home? Is it because of her? He’d rather be with his new daughter than with me?” Standing up, I feel dizzy. Anger blinds my vision as I stumble out of the room.

“Sloane,” Mom calls after me, but I can’t stop. I have to get out of here.

My air supply feels like it’s cut off, and I choke, gasping. Holding my throat, I drag myself to the front door. I don’t know where to go, but I know I can’t stay here. Not right now. Not until I process this. Snatching my purse from where I’d tossed it on the floor, I hook it over my shoulder. Flinging the front door open, I step outside into the warm air. I inhale the scent of roses and honeysuckle as I stomp down the driveway.

I think of going to Cruz’s, but I need time to myself. As I hop into my car, I know exactly where I’ll go. A place I used to go when I was younger and needed to be alone. It’s the perfect place for tonight. Pulling away from the curb, I spot Mom watching from the window, her face blurry behind the glass.

Averting my gaze, I slam on the gas and peel down the street. It only takes a minute before the tears start to fall. My thoughts drift to Regan, and I wonder if she knows. Glancing down at my purse I contemplate calling her, but then think better of it. I can’t handle that right now. What I need is to be alone with my thoughts.

When I was little I used to worship my dad. I thought there was nothing in the world he couldn’t do. It was Regan who first made me privy to my dad’s shortcomings. She was older and had already figured out our dad wasn’t perfect. Still, I would defend Dad to her. Even when I found out there were things he couldn’t accomplish. Even when I knew that he wasn’t the best at everything he did. He was still my dad, still my hero. And he and I were way closer than he and Regan were. He may never have vocalized that I was his favorite, but I knew I was.

How can it be that he has another daughter out there? I remember the way he looked at her in the coffee shop, the way his hand was placed ever so gently on her back. Does he love her like he loves me? Is she his new favorite? He’s certainly been spending a lot of time with her.

I arrive at my destination and cut the engine. After yanking my purse off the seat, I fling it over my shoulder and hurry out of the car. Slamming the door shut, I walk on the dirt path until I come upon a clearing. The lake is visible in front of me, shimmering and beautiful. My shoulders relax a bit, the tension starting to leave them.

As I find a boulder to sit on, my phone vibrates in my purse. I lower myself down on the rock, then pull my phone out. When I read the text, a smile forms on my face. He's so thoughtful and sweet. And suddenly I don't want to be alone. I want to be with him. I know he can help make this better.

So I shoot a text back letting him know where I am and asking him to meet me. Without hesitation he responds that he's on his way. Tucking the phone back in my purse, I set it down, and I wait.

22

CRUZ

It's nighttime. I haven't heard from Sloane ever since she raced out of my room this afternoon. And now I worry that maybe I came on too strong. Maybe I pushed her right into Adam's arms. Perhaps coming clean was a huge mistake. Maybe it would have been best to let things happen organically.

Knowing that I'll drive myself crazy with questions, I pick up my cell phone and shoot off a text. When I see the reply come through almost immediately, relief flows through me. Until I see her words. Then my stomach plummets. She's in trouble. I can tell.

And why is she at the lake?

I heard a rumor that there was going to be a big bonfire party at the lake tonight. Carlos was talking about it. As I race down the street in my car, I pray that she's not at the party. Sloane isn't a partier, but I know Adam is. I just hope he wasn't able to talk her into attending this one with him. God, if only I could've kept her with me this afternoon.

After parking my car, I sprint to the location where Sloane said she was. As I near it, I'm thankful it's so quiet. I find her sitting on a boulder, her knees tucked up to her chin.

"Sloane?"

When she turns to me, tears glisten on her cheeks.

"You okay?"

She shakes her head.

I sink down onto the boulder next to her, terrified of what she's going to say. My eyes drink her in, searching for something amiss. "What's going on?" I drape my arm over her trembling shoulders.

Leaning over, she nestles into my neck. "I found out who that woman is that my dad's always with. She's not a work colleague."

"She's not?" I squeeze her tight, dreading what she's going to say next.

"No. She's his daughter."

"What?" I'm stunned. It's not at all what I'm expecting.

“Yeah. Apparently he got some lady pregnant before dating Mom. He didn’t know she had a baby until now.”

“So that’s where he’s been all the time? With his other daughter?”

She nods, sniffing.

“I’m so sorry.” Even as I say the words, I know they’re lame. “Does Regan know?”

“I don’t think so.” A sob leaps from her throat. “I just can’t believe this is happening. I don’t know what to do.” Lifting her head, she wipes the tears from her cheeks with the back of her hand. I grab her hand, stilling it. Her gaze crashes into mine as I lower her hands from her face, guiding them into her lap. Then I reach up and brush away her tears with my fingers. The moonlight slices across her face, her eyes sparkling.

“I hate that you’re sad, Sloane.” My hands glide up her cheeks, my fingers slipping beneath her hair. “I want to wipe away all your sadness.” Scooting closer, my face nears hers, my lips hovering her skin. “I want to make it all better.” She shudders as my lips move over her cheek. Reaching out, she rubs her hands along my chest. Her fist closes around my thin t-shirt, her fingertips grazing the muscles underneath. My breathing becomes more labored as her touch ignites a fire deep in my gut. My lips sweep over her cheek, softly. I lower my arms to her waist while my lips trail across her cheek, stopping at the edge of her lips.

My lips are suspended over hers, our breath weaving together. Our gazes lock and I wait for her to give me the green light. I don’t want to do anything she doesn’t want me to. As badly as I long to press my lips to hers, I need to know she wants it too.

“Cruz.” When she speaks, her lips skim mine. “You were right.”

I raise one brow “You’ll have to be more specific. I can’t pinpoint which time you’re talking about, since I’m always right.”

She giggles. “When you said you were sure I’d choose you.”

My heart lifts off like a plane on the runway. “You mean it?”

“More than I’ve ever meant anything before.”

“God, you can’t know how relieved I am to hear you say that.” I grip her tighter, my gaze landing on her lips. “Does this mean I can finally kiss you?”

“You better.”

I chuckle, loving when she gets like this. “Pushy. I’ve always liked

that about you.”

She shoves me in the shoulder. “Shut up and kiss me.”

“Man, you really know how to turn me on.”

Before she can banter back, my lips crash into hers. There’s nothing gentle about the way I kiss her. My mouth claims hers, my tongue stroking along her lips until she opens them. When my tongue swirls inside her mouth, she drags her fingers up my neck, burying them in the hair at the nape of my neck. Damn, it feels so good that a guttural sound comes out of my mouth, resembling a growl. My hands leave her waist, raking up her spine. My fingers tangle in her hair, my hands curving around her neck as the kiss deepens. This is nothing like any kiss I’ve ever experienced. This kiss leaves me breathless and hazy. It stirs up feelings deep inside that I didn’t even know existed.

But more than anything, it leaves me wanting more.

When we separate, Sloane’s head falls to my chest. My fingers play lazily in her hair, painting circles on her back. One of her arms is fastened around my back, while the other palm is splayed over my chest. It’s odd. Sloane and I have hugged countless times over the years. I’ve held her more times than I can remember. But this time feels different. It feels charged, electric.

“How did Mr. Quarterback take it?” I ask, needing to know that what she had with him is over. Needing to know that she’s mine, and only mine.

She stiffens, biting her lip.

“Please tell me you told him.”

“Not yet.” Her voice is muffled against my shirt. “I didn’t exactly make my decision until I saw you tonight.”

I draw back. Tipping her chin with my index finger, I force her face up so I can look into her eyes. “Were you even going to call me tonight?”

“I don’t know,” she whispers.

“So all of this happened because I texted you.”

She nods.

“What if he had texted you?”

“He didn’t. You did.” She reaches for me. “And I’m so glad it was you.”

I shake her away, dumbfounded. “But what if it had been him? I need

to know.”

“I wouldn’t have invited him here. Really. You were the only person I wanted to see tonight. I promise.”

I cup her face with my hand. “Sloane, I need to know that you’re gonna break things off with him. This wasn’t just an emotional decision you made because you were upset about your dad, was it?”

“No. Absolutely not.” She shakes her head firmly. “I saw Adam earlier today, and when he kissed me all I could think about was—”

“He kissed you.” I jump back, her words like a punch in the stomach. “Did you kiss him back?”

“Cruz, please.” She grabs my arm.

“You did. You kissed him.” I stand, prying her fingers off. “I can’t believe this.”

“It didn’t mean anything.”

“And what about when you kissed me? Did it mean something?”

“Yes. It meant everything.”

I run a hand over my head. “I can’t do this anymore.”

“What are you saying?”

“I’m saying call me when you’ve finally broken things off with Adam.” Without another word, I storm off. I don’t even look back when I get to my car. Instead, I turn on the engine and gun it.

23

sloane

My heart sinks when he drives off. I may have waffled with my decision before tonight, but the minute Cruz kissed me I knew I wanted to be with him. It was nothing like when I kissed Adam. Kissing Cruz was like coming home. The truth is that I've fantasized about kissing Cruz a million times throughout our friendship. But it was so much better than any fantasy. That's what I had been trying to say when I screwed everything up.

I sigh, kicking a nearby rock with the toe of my shoe. There's no way I can go home right now. I'm not ready to deal with my parents. I'm sure Mom has told Dad that I know about Kacey, and that's a conversation I'm dreading having with him. I certainly don't want to have it tonight. I'm emotionally spent at this point.

Plopping back onto the boulder, I shove my fingers into my purse. My fingers graze my lip gloss, a pack of Kleenex, and finally light on my cell phone. I yank it out and shoot off a text to Becca.

Me: I just screwed everything up with Cruz.

I'm staring at the screen when it rings, a picture of Becca flashing on the screen.

"You can't send a text like that," she says into the phone. "What happened?"

"Well, I know now that I have stronger feelings for Cruz than Adam."

"Tell me something I don't know."

I groan. "How do you know everything before me?" The moon bounces off the smooth lake, radiating around me in a soft glow like a million candles are lit.

"Don't be so hard on yourself. I'm more perceptive than most people."

I chuckle. "I think it's safe to say I only befriend egotistical people."

"It's that strong personality of yours."

"I don't feel strong." I bring my knees up to my chest and rest my chin on it while still holding my phone to my ear.

"That's because you're too hard on yourself," she says. "Now tell me

how you screwed this up. I would think Cruz would be elated that you chose him.”

“He was.” I pause. “Until I accidentally let it slip that I kissed Adam today.”

“You kissed Adam today? The same day you realized you wanted to be with Cruz? Why would you do that?”

“Well, I didn’t know I wanted to be with Cruz until he kissed me tonight.”

“Girl, you are in trouble.”

“Thanks. That’s helpful.” I grunt in frustration. A car drives by behind me. I turn and watch the headlights painting the road. It’s getting later, I should probably head home soon.

“Have you broken things off with Adam yet?”

“No.”

“Well, then I think you know what you have to do.”

“Yeah. I’ll call him tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow? No, you need to do this now.”

A gentle breeze rustles a bush nearby. I flinch until I realize what it is. “Tonight? But it’s late.”

“If you wait it’s only going to be harder. Besides, if Cruz is upset, you need to make this right,” she says. “You want to be with Cruz, right?”

“More than anything,” I answer truthfully, running my fingers through my hair.

“Then that’s your answer.”

“Okay.” I sigh. “I’ll do it now.”

“Hey,” Adam answers on the second ring. “I figured you’d call tonight.”

“You did?”

“Yeah.” His tone is soft, almost sad. “I’m guessing this means you made a decision.”

“Um...yeah. You wanna meet somewhere?” I glance around at the

darkening sky, the smattering of stars and the bright crescent moon. “I’m at the lake right now, but I can meet you wherever you want.”

“It’s okay. You can just say what you need to on the phone.”

I’m taken aback by this. “You sure?”

“I think I know where this is going, Sloane. Let’s not make this any harder than it needs to be.”

It’s like a stone has landed inside my gut. With the hand not holding my phone, I play with the edge of my shorts, rolling the fabric between my fingers. I have no idea what to say. Have my feelings been that obvious even to Adam?

“The reason that I told you I wasn’t pressuring you to make a decision was because I knew what decision you would make. I guess I should’ve figured he’d push you to make one though,” he says. “That’s why you’re calling, right? Because he wants you to?”

Having no idea what to say to that, I simply respond with, “I’m sorry, Adam.”

“I get it. I see the way the guy looks at you. And you two have a connection I can’t compete with,” he says. “I hope he makes you happy, Sloane.”

“Thanks for understanding, Adam.”

“Sure. And if the guy breaks your heart, you know how to get a hold of me.”

“Duly noted.” I smile as I hang up. That didn’t go as bad as I had thought it would. I imagine if I had chosen Adam, my conversation with Cruz would’ve gone much differently. Suffice it to say, it would have been heart-wrenching.

I think that means I chose right.

Tucking the phone into the pocket of my shorts, I slide off the boulder. My feet hit the ground and I take a step forward, pivoting toward my car. I inhale sharply at the sight of a dark figure standing in front of me. My whole body sags with relief when I realize it’s Cruz.

His hands are in his pockets and he wears a sheepish grin. “I’m sorry. I acted like an ass. We made a pact, and I let you down.”

“Oh, Cruz,” I breathe. “It’s okay.”

“No, it’s not. We promised we’d have each other’s backs forever no

matter what. I got mad and took off on a night when you needed me.” He steps toward me. “How can I make it up to you?”

“I can think of a few ways.” I grin seductively, trailing a fingernail up his arm.

His eyebrows raise in surprise.

“I’m really sorry about kissing Adam,” I say, still touching his arm. “I wish I’d never kissed him at all. I wish you had been my first kiss.”

He lifts his arm, his thumb grazing my chin. “You *were* my first kiss.”

“No, I wasn’t.” I purse my lips, confused. “Believe me, I remember your first kiss. It was with Amy Thomas.” My stomach sours at the memory. “I remember that like it was yesterday.”

Cruz furrows his brows. “What? How do *you* remember it?”

I take a deep breath. Am I really going to share this with him after keeping it inside all these years? I guess if I am, now’s the time. “Do you remember our eighth grade dance? How I made you take me because I told you I was turned down by another boy?”

He nods.

My face heats up, embarrassed that I’m going to admit this out loud. “There was no other boy. I sort of had a crush on you that year, and I was hoping something would happen between us. I had this whole plan to seduce you at the dance. But then you started liking Amy Thomas.” I swallow hard. “I’ll never forget when you kissed her. I was watching through my bedroom window. It broke my heart.” Biting my lip, I drop my gaze.

“I do remember you were kind of mean to me while Amy and I were dating, but I didn’t know why.”

“I vowed to never let myself have any feelings for you other than friendship after that. I knew nothing good could come of it.” I peer up at him. “That’s why when you sang that song to me it freaked me out. You’re the most important person in my life, Cruz.”

“I feel the same way.” He clutches my face in his hand, but not hard. No, it’s gentle and firm at the same time. “God, Sloane, I had no idea how you felt at that dance. If I had, things would’ve turned out differently.”

“It’s okay. I think things turned out exactly like they were supposed to.”

“When I said that you were my first kiss, I meant it. Not technically, but here in my heart.” He places a palm on his chest. “The kiss with you

stirred things in my heart that no one else ever has before. It felt like my first kiss, because it was the first kiss that ever mattered to me.”

“I feel the same way,” I say. “That’s why I broke it off with Adam. I called him after you left.”

“You did? Tonight?”

I nod.

His face falls. It’s not the reaction I was expecting. “I’m sorry, Sloane. After what you learned about your dad, I should’ve been more understanding. I shouldn’t have pushed you to do that tonight.” His hands run down the length of my arms. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine, Cruz. Really.” I grin as if to prove it. “In fact, Adam took it well. Said he knew I’d pick you. Apparently we aren’t as good at keeping our feelings a secret as we had thought.”

“I wish I had never even tried.” His head lowers close to mine, and my heart picks up speed. “Just think. We could have been doing this for years.” His lips sweep over mine, gingerly. I moan quietly, lifting my head, wanting more. “Someone’s eager,” he jokes just before sucking my lower lip into his mouth. After he releases it, he brushes his lips over mine once again. The night air smells like flowers and water. The moonlight illuminates us. It’s magical as he sweeps me into his arms kissing me firmly.

24

CRUZ

“We should’ve left earlier. It’s hot today.” Sloane wipes sweat from her brow as we jog around a curve in the trail.

“Maybe we would have if someone hadn’t overslept.” I wink at her. She doesn’t turn in my direction though. She keeps her gaze trained in front, her arms tucked up to her body, her back straight. Damn, she even looks hot when she runs.

“That’s because someone kept her up late last night.”

“Who is this someone? I’m gonna kick his ass.”

Sloane giggles. “That someone is my boyfriend, and I’d like to see you try to kick his ass. He’s pretty damn strong.”

My heart flips in my chest at her use of the word “boyfriend.” It’s odd how quickly we’ve slipped into this new relationship. It’s been seamless. I think it proves it was meant to be. When we round another corner, the lake comes into view. As our feet pound on the concrete, I stare at the cool water with longing. I would give anything to jump in right now.

“Wanna take a swim?” I jog closer to Sloane, nudging her gently in the ribs with my elbow.

“I wish,” she says, breathing hard.

“We can.”

“No, we can’t. We’re in running clothes.”

“So?”

She slows down, her neck swiveling. “I’m not skinny dipping with you, Cruz.”

I chuckle. “I hadn’t even thought of that. You really need to get your mind out the gutter.”

Rolling her eyes, she focuses ahead again. “I guess I’ve been hanging around my best friend too much. He’s rubbing off on me.”

“Your best friend? I thought I was your boyfriend now?”

“You’re both,” she replies simply.

God, I like her so much.

Sweat soaks my back, causing my shirt to stick to my flesh.
“Seriously, Sloane, let’s jump in the lake. It’s too damn hot out here.”

“I know.” She blows out a breath. “If only I had my suit.”

“We don’t need them. We can just jump in in our clothes. It’s warm enough out that our clothes would dry by the time we got home,” I say.
“Besides, it would make the last half of the run easier if our clothes were wet.”

“It is tempting.”

I can tell that I’ve almost convinced her. The water beckons me, so I reach for her hand. “Come on.”

She’s normally so serious about her runs, but it is stinking hot today, and I can tell her resolve is slipping. Even though it’s only nine in the morning, it’s got to be close to a hundred already.

“Okay.” She sighs, allowing me to drag her forward. When we reach the sand, she halts. “Wait. Let me take off my shoes.”

We both kick off our shoes and then walk down to the water in our bare feet. My toe hits a rock, and I curse under my breath.

Sloane reaches out, threading our fingers together. “You okay?”

I nod, my toe still stinging. It’s quiet, the water sharp and still like glass. A couple of bicyclists roll past on the trail when Sloane and I take our first step into the icy water. A chill runs up my calf, but it feels good. I peel off my sweat-soaked shirt and discard it on the ground.

“I hope you don’t think I’m doing that.” Sloane eyes it, a splash of blue in the sand.

“You might be more comfortable if you did.” I tug at the bottom of her shirt.

She wriggles away from me. “It’s okay. I’ll take my chances.” With her fingers still curled around mine, she steps further into the water. We walk hand in hand until the water is up to our waists. Then I release our fingers and dive under. The water is so cold it steals my breath. When I break the surface, I gulp in the air.

“You’re crazy.” Sloane shakes her head.

“Hey, it’s easier if you just do it.” I swim toward her, water trickling from my hair into my eyes. It beads in my eyelashes, and I blink in an effort

to see.

Sloane reaches out and wipes the liquid away. Circling my hand around her wrist, I draw her to me. She sinks lower in the water as I drag her until she's up to her neck, her long brown hair skating along the top. When she reaches me, I loop my arms around her waist. Her chest bumps mine, and then she brings her legs up to straddle me, interlocking her ankles at my back. Our noses touch as we bob in the gentle waves we created. Her shirt is white. I just noticed that. Too bad she's wearing a dark green sports bra under it.

"Damn, you're sexy," I say.

She bites her lip. "Really?"

"Yeah. Really."

"It's so weird hearing you say that."

"Why?"

"Because you never have before."

I smile. "I was always thinking it though."

"So was I." Her gaze lowers to my bare chest and her hands follow. She plays her palms over my stomach and then glides her hands up, her fingers exploring every ridge, every muscle. I stay still, afraid to even breathe. When her hands reach my shoulders, she curves them around my neck. "I've sort of always wanted to do that."

"Well, don't stop now." I lean forward, suspending my lips over her ear. "You know what I've always wanted to do?"

She shivers. "I'm kind of afraid to ask."

"Then don't," I whisper. "I'll just show you." Dropping my lips, I brush them over her ear and down to her neck. She arches her back, and I press my lips to the inside of her neck. A tiny gasp sounds in her throat. Her hands lower back down to my chest, her fingers skating over my skin. Goosebumps rise, coating my flesh. I pepper kiss all along her neck and collarbone, enjoying the feeling of her hands on my chest. Once I reach her chin, I leave a trail of caresses up to her lips.

She breathes out, parting her lips when my mouth hovers hers. I pull her as close as possible, our bodies so close it's as if we're fused together. And that's how I like it. I want to be as close to Sloane as two people can be. Her hands slip out from between us and grip my neck.

"Kiss me," she breathes.

God, it's the sexiest thing anyone's ever said to me.

"It's not something you ever have to beg for, Sloane. I'd never stop kissing you if I had my way." Tilting my head, our lips brush. I nip her lower lip with my teeth and she giggles. "Have I ever told you how much I love your laugh?"

She shakes her head, her fingers tickling the tender flesh on the back of my neck. "You've always teased me about it."

"You know teasing is my love language, right?"

"I thought kissing was." She throws me a challenging look, her gaze landing on my lips.

"Damn, someone's impatient."

"You did promise to never stop kissing me. Problem is, you haven't even started."

"Oh, I'll start." I gingerly press my lips to hers, just one little peck. More of a tease than anything. "And then I'll kiss you until you can't stand it," I whisper against her mouth. The scent of her apple shampoo and mint toothpaste lingers. Then I graze her lips with mine, slowly, softly. Her grip on my neck tightens, her fingernails grazing my skin. It excites me, and I want to kiss her hard. But I don't. No, I want it to last this time. I want to drag it out, to savor every minute. It will be a kiss to rival all other kisses.

And hopefully, it will completely erase the one she had with Mr. Quarterback.

I draw back, touching her lips with the tips of my fingers. Then I lean forward and gently kiss her all around the edges of her lips. For one second I close my lips around hers. She opens her mouth, ready. But instead of giving her what she wants, I dart my tongue out, licking softly along her bottom lip. She breathes hard, her eyes closed. Damn, it's almost too much. Her hands curve around the back of my head, her fingers massaging up into my hair. Her legs are still tightly woven around my middle, and I can feel the beating of her heart against my bare chest. I can't go slowly anymore. It's physically impossible at this point. Thrusting my tongue into her mouth, I kiss her hard. Our tongues slide together, our lips moving in sync. I'm glad my feet are solidly locked in the sand, because I feel dizzy and out of control as if I could float away at any moment. Honestly, I'd gladly float away with Sloane in my arms, her lips on mine. I could be lost at sea and I wouldn't want for anything if she was with me. I could live on her kisses, feed on her lips, and find sustenance in her arms. And we wouldn't have to worry about our family issues, or school, or friends. It could be blissful.

The kiss deepens, going from slow and steady to fast and manic. Our mouths move swiftly, our tongues battling it out, our hands and fingers dancing as if they have a mind of their own.

When our lips reluctantly separate, Sloane shivers in my arms.

“Cold?” I ask.

She nods.

“Let’s get out then. In this heat we’ll warm up in no time.” I stamp a kiss on her forehead as she releases her legs. As much as I hate it, I unhook my arms and move away from her.

“Cruz.” She stops me.

“Yeah?”

“That was...” her eyes shift as if she’s trying to come up with the right word. It reminds me of how I look when I’m writing a song. When I’m trying to figure out the perfect word to convey what I’m feeling. “Incredible is the word that comes to mind, but it doesn’t seem to do it justice.”

“No, you’re right. It doesn’t. But I’ll take it.”

“You know, I thought dating Adam was my dream come true.”

Her words slam into me like a sucker punch. I don’t even see them coming, but they pummel me, and I worry I might fall down from the strength of them. “Wow, you sure know how to ruin a moment.”

“No. Let me finish.” She reaches for me, her hands on my chest again. Damn, if she keeps touching me like this she can say whatever the hell she wants. I can’t think clearly anyway. “What I’m trying and failing to say is....”

“I’ll give you a minute to gather your thoughts. I don’t want you just blurting out shit about some other dude,” I say.

“Sorry. It was supposed to be a compliment.”

“You might want to work on them.”

She peers up at me, her gaze colliding with mine. The intensity behind her eyes makes me grow serious. “Cruz, you’re my dream come true. You’re a dream I didn’t even know I had.” Her hands slide up my chest. “And now that I know, I never want to wake up.”

“You don’t have to.” I clutch both of her hands. “Ever.”

25

sloane

“Have you told your parents about us yet?” Cruz sits on my bed, my head in his lap. His fingers play in my hair, causing chills to race up and down my spine.

“No, have you?”

“Yes,” he says.

“How’d they take it?” I pick up one of his hands, circling my fingertips over his skin.

“Just like I knew they would. They were happy about it.”

“They were?”

“Of course. You know they love you.” He brings my hand up to his lips and kisses my knuckles. “Why haven’t you told your parents yet?”

“I’ve been sort of avoiding them,” I admit.

“You still haven’t talked to your dad about Kacey?”

My body goes rigid at the sound of her name, and I shake my head.

“You’ll have to at some point you know.”

“Yeah, I know.” I sigh.

“I’ll be there with you, if it’s helpful.”

“Thanks.” I peer up at him. “But it doesn’t have to be today.” Smiling, I sit up. “Besides, I don’t want to talk about my parents right now. I don’t even want to think about them.” I frame his face with my hands.

“Are you trying to distract me?”

“Is it working?”

“Hell yeah.”

Giggling, I smother his mouth with mine. His arms come around me, his hands gliding up my back. Then they sweep up into my hair, gathering the long strands in his palms. Chills skate down my spine as his lips explore mine with an intense hunger, his tongue swirling in my mouth. Gently he guides my back down onto the bed, his body hovering mine. Straddling me, he

continues kissing me, slowing down every once in awhile and then ramping back up again. His hands skate across my stomach and around my hips. Reaching up, I slide my hands under his shirt, my fingers skimming his muscles. They flex beneath my fingertips, exciting me.

“Whoa, what’s going on in here?”

I’m startled by her voice. Cruz leaps off of me like I’m on fire.

“Regan? What are you doing here?” I sit up, smoothing down my disheveled hair with my fingers. Cruz stands awkwardly next to my bed, pulling his shirt back down over his stomach. But not before I catch a glimpse of his abs, a splash of black hair. It makes me want to tell Regan to get the hell out so Cruz and I can get back to what we were doing. But I know I can’t do that. I can tell Cruz is thinking the same thing, though, when his gaze shifts to mine briefly.

“Nice to see you too. I would think you’d have a warmer welcome for the sister you haven’t seen in months.” She leans against my doorframe, her long dark hair sleek against her face. In her floral top, khaki shorts and flats, she looks even prettier than the last time I saw her. It makes me feel frumpy in comparison.

Tucking my legs under my body, I lick my lips. “I’m sorry. Of course I’m happy to see you. I’m just surprised, that’s all.”

“Didn’t Mom tell you I was coming?”

“No. I haven’t really been talking to her.”

“Yeah. She told me.”

“So you know?” I venture.

“About Kacey, yes.” She glances between Cruz and me, her lips curling at the edges. “About this, no. But I can’t say that I’m surprised. You two have been in love since grade school.”

My cheeks flush. “Is that why you’re here?” I change the subject. “Because of Kacey?” Saying her name leaves a bitter taste in my mouth, and I swallow it down.

“Yeah,” she admits.

“So you’re going to talk to Dad?”

She nods. “And you need to as well.”

I wrinkle my nose.

“We can’t change what’s happened, Sloane, but we’re a family, so we

have to deal with it.”

God, I hate when Regan is home. She’s always so bossy. I like it better when she’s gone. It’s not that I don’t like my sister, it’s just that she’s larger than life. She sucks up all the energy in the room, leaving nothing for the rest of us. Let’s say I breathe easier when she’s not around.

“Fine.” I groan.

“I’m going to put my stuff away.” She gives Cruz a stern look. “I trust you two will be on your best behavior?”

“You’re not my mom, Regan.”

She shakes her head. “No, but if Mom were home she’d say the same thing.”

I stick out my bottom lip in a pout. *Seriously, how does Regan always bring out the bratty kid in me?*

“You’re cute when you pout,” Cruz says when Regan leaves.

“Sorry. She totally ruined our day.”

Cruz sits on the edge of my bed. “Nothing’s ruined. I still get to be with my girl. There’s nothing better than that.”

His words melt my heart. Regan may be home, but I’ve got Cruz on my side. And that’s the only thing that matters to me right now.

I try to hole up at Cruz’s all evening, but Miss Bossypants doesn’t let me. She comes over to Cruz’s and drags me back home. I’m glad Regan’s not my mom. She’s way stricter than Mom is, that’s for sure.

“We’re a family, Sloane,” she lectures me when we get back to our house. “And families work through their issues.”

“You know, we were all perfectly content with how things were before you blew into town.” I follow her into the kitchen and sink down into one of the wooden chairs around the kitchen table.

“Denial is not the answer.” Regan opens the freezer door and sticks her head inside.

“Is that what they teach you in psychology 101?” Regan is studying to be a psychiatrist. I think she’ll be great at the job. She loves telling people how to run their lives.

“That’s not even a class, Sloane.” She reappears, a carton of ice cream in her hand.

After grabbing two spoons, she joins me at the table placing the carton in the center. When we were kids we shared ice cream like this all the time. It used to royally piss off Dad. But he’s not home yet. And he wouldn’t care anyway. In order to even notice me lately my name would need to be Kacey.

“Oh, this is nice.” Mom sweeps into the kitchen wearing a pair of sweatpants and t-shirt, her hair tied back at the nape of her neck. “Both of my girls are home and sharing ice cream just like old times.”

“Come join us.” Regan indicates the empty chair next to hers. “I was just about to squeeze all the juicy details out of Sloane about her boyfriend.”

Mom slides into the chair, smiling widely. “Ooh, have things gotten serious with you and Adam?”

I push the carton of ice cream away, suddenly not hungry at all.

“Adam?” Regan’s eyebrows knit together. She shoves her spoon into the ice cream. “Who’s Adam? I was talking about Cruz.”

“Cruz?” Now it’s Mom’s turn to look confused. “I thought you were dating Adam Stewart.”

“Adam Stewart?” Regan’s caramel colored eyes widen. “The football player?”

I nod. “We were dating, but now we’re not.”

“Oh, no. What happened?” Mom places her hand over mine.

Regan pushes the carton of ice cream toward me. Now I could use some sugar for courage. I pick up my spoon and scoop some ice cream into my mouth. With the ice cream on my tongue, I shrug. After swallowing, I say, “I decided I wanted to date Cruz instead.”

“It’s about time,” Mom says, surprising me. Then she nudges my sister. “Hand me a spoon, please.”

Regan hands Mom her spoon, and I shove the carton in her direction.

“So you’re not upset?” I ask Mom.

“Upset?” Mom asks. “Why would I be upset? I love Cruz like he’s my own son. Besides, I’ve seen this coming for years.”

“Apparently everyone has,” I mutter under my breath.

“You two are perfect for each other,” Mom says, her mouth filled with

ice cream.

I smile, relieved that she's okay with it.

Regan's eyes lift to the wall clock. "What time is Dad going to be home?"

"Pretty soon. He's just wrapping a few things up at the office." The smile leaves Mom's face. "And actually I wanted to talk with both of you before he gets home."

My stomach coils, and I'm praying she's not going to dump any more bad news on me.

"I just want you girls to go easy on your dad. He loves both of you so much, and he knows he hasn't handled this whole thing with Kacey well. He feels terrible that he didn't tell you both sooner. But how does anyone know how to behave in this kind of situation? It was all so unexpected."

You can say that again.

Mom turns to Regan. "He's really excited that you're here for a visit. Maybe we don't have to discuss this tonight, okay? Tonight why don't we all just enjoy some family time?"

I hold my breath, awaiting Regan's answer. When she nods, I exhale, relief washing over me. Regan may like confrontation, but I hate it. And I've had more of my fair share lately. I'm grateful for the momentary reprieve.

Today is Fourth of July, and the house is quiet. Regan is going out with some old high school friends, and Mom and Dad are attending a barbecue at one of the neighbor's. While getting ready for the fireworks show that Cruz is taking me too, I get a text from Becca.

Becca: Guess who asked me out?

Me: Graham.

Becca: Bingo. We're going out tonight.

Me: Yay! Have fun.

Becca: U 2. Have fun with Cruz tonight.

Me: I will.

Sometimes it still seems weird to talk to Becca so openly about Cruz. She is his ex-girlfriend, after all. But she seems cool with it, so I suppose it's

all right. Dropping my cell on my dresser, I pick up my brush and run it through my hair. I'm wearing a pair of jean shorts and a red tank top. The nice thing about dating Cruz is that I can truly be myself. When Adam and I dated I worried so much about how I looked all the time. It's like I felt like I had to fit into a certain mold or something. But with Cruz, I know he likes me exactly like I am. It's freeing.

Cruz: I'm heading over.

I quickly swipe on some lip gloss and then head to the front door. When I open it, Cruz stands on the porch looking hot in a grey t-shirt and cargo shorts. He greets me with a kiss, effectively wiping off the lip gloss I just applied. But it was worth it.

"You look beautiful," he says, and I blush. I don't know when I'll be used to him saying things like that. Maybe never. In some ways I hope I never do. Then I won't take it for granted.

"Thanks." I bite my lip. Stepping outside, I close the door behind me.

Cruz and I used to sometimes attend the fireworks show when we were kids. I remember sitting in the stands with our parents watching the fireworks explode in the black sky, illuminating it with bright colors. Cruz and I would drink soda and eat chips. Afterward, we'd chase each other through the parking lot. Then we'd head home and play with sparklers in the front yard.

Everything about this time is different.

For starters, Cruz's fingers are threaded through mine as we sit down on the bleachers, crammed in with hundreds of other spectators. That's the funny thing about being a kid, you don't notice things like crowds. At least I didn't the last time I came. Now I'm feeling a little claustrophobic. I glance over at Cruz, knowing that he's probably feeling the same way.

When he catches me staring, he leans over and pecks me on the lips. Another thing that never would've happened the last time we came here. I think about Becca's statement about being kissed during a fireworks show. Little butterflies tickle the inside of my stomach, and I squeeze Cruz's fingers.

The sky is almost completely black now, so I know the show will start at any minute. I lower my head onto Cruz's shoulder and stare up at the blackening sky. The splattering of stars wink at me, the moon watching on. Patriotic music plays over the loudspeakers, and Cruz hums along under his

breath. It makes me think of his band and how happy he was with how they were progressing. I hope my relationship with Adam didn't mess everything up.

"So what's going to happen with the band?" I peer up at him, staring up at his chin through my hair.

"I don't know." He shrugs. "We're taking a little break because Trey's on a family vacation, and Carlos is grounded the rest of the summer."

I lift my head. "What?"

"Yeah. He was at some bonfire party at the lake the other night and the cops busted it. He was drunk and his Dad flipped out." He shakes his head. "And I haven't talked to Adam, so I don't know if I still have a drummer or not."

"I'm sorry," I say softly, my words almost drowned out by the loud chattering of the crowd around us.

"Don't be." He winks. "I'm not."

My heart flutters against my ribcage. *How had I resisted him all these years?*

"But I know how much your band means to you."

"Don't you know by now?" His gaze finds mine. "Nothing means as much to me as you do."

Having no idea how to respond to that, I kiss him softly on the lips. As our lips connect, a loud sound resembling a gunshot rings out. Startled, I jump back just in time to see a splash of red in the sky. The firework sprays across the sky like it's a splatter of paint on a black canvas. A grin leaps to my face when another firework is let off. This one is white, and it drips from the sky like droplets of liquid.

"God, you're beautiful," Cruz whispers in my ear, and I shudder.

When I crane my neck in his direction, he's so close that my nose sweeps his. His mouth skims mine, our lips puckering until they touch. Fireworks glimmer in the sky, the sound piercing my ears. Cruz's hands are in my hair, his thumbs grazing my face. His tongue thrusts into my mouth, his lips moist and warm. We move in sync with the fireworks show, explosive and bright.

And it's even better than Becca said it would be.

26

CRUZ

The crowd is thick as Sloane and I leave the fireworks show. I hold tightly to Sloane's hand as people shove past us. The scent of sulfur and fire is thick in the air. A mom pushing a stroller bumps me. I move over only to be rammed by a man holding a little girl in his arms. A couple staggers past, holding beer cans. The woman has colorful tattoos spiraling her arms.

Scouring the area, I find an opening. It may take a little longer to get to the car if we take another path, but anything is better than being jostled in this crowd.

I yank on Sloane's arm, hollering above the crowd. "C'mon, let's go this way."

She nods, following me. We pass a group of little boys playing with blow up swords. I remember Sloane and I doing something similar when we went here as children. At the memory I squeeze her hand. It's surreal to me that we're together. My best friend - the girl I've loved since we were in kindergarten - is now my girlfriend. It's almost too good to be true.

We finally make it out of the crowd, and my chest expands. "Man, that was brutal."

"You've never been a big fan of crowds. Remember our first trip to Disneyland together? I thought you were going to have a panic attack."

"You have a knack for remembering my low points."

"I remember the high points too, believe me."

"Like what?" I prompt her, wanting to hear what my high points are.

"Like the way you held my hand and calmed me down when I freaked out the first time we went in the Haunted Mansion."

"I'll always help you when you're scared, Sloane. That will never change."

"I know." She grins.

I steal a kiss on her cheek and then pull her forward. "All right. Let's see if we can get outta here." Glancing around at the large crowd and all the cars filling the parking lot, I have my doubts.

“Maybe we should wait.” Sloane suggests.

“And do what?” I raise my brows.

“We can walk over to the park and hang out. Wait until the crowd dies down.”

“Good call.” I lean in close. “I can think of a few things that will keep us busy.”

“A few, huh? You overachiever. I only thought of one.”

I chuckle as we turn away from the crowd and walk in the other direction. The inky black sky is streaked in smoke. It’s hazy still from the fireworks show. When we reach the park, there are no lights on so it’s pitch black. We duck under a grouping of trees and find a bench to sit on. It’s rickety and unstable, groaning beneath us. Earlier the park had been filled with people, but now it’s vacant. The light breeze causes the chains on the swings to rattle lightly. A few leaves skitter across the pavement like little insects. In the distance I can hear the sound of the crowd’s laughter and chatter.

Turning toward Sloane, I bring my hand up to stroke her face. Her skin looks blue in the moonlight. Our faces turn toward each other, our lips locking together like two puzzle pieces. Like they’re meant to fit together. Her hand lowers to my thigh.

A leaf crunches in the dirt followed by the sound of footsteps on the pavement. My head snaps up, my hand dropping from Sloane’s face. A man wearing a black hooded sweatshirt walks near us, a cigarette dangling from his fingertips. It sizzles in the pitch black sky, plumes of grey smoke circling. A sense of foreboding grips me at the sight of him. I’m about to tell Sloane that we should leave, when the stranger turns in my direction.

“Cruz?”

As recognition slams into me, my stomach drops.

“Sloaney baloney?”

Sloane stiffens. “It’s actually just Sloane, Julian.”

“Nah, to me you’ll always be Sloaney baloney.” He brings the cigarette to his mouth, the orange tip glowing in the darkness. There are still traces of bruises on his face from the beating last month, a little swelling, a cut running the length of his eyebrow.

“Great.” She gives me a pained look.

I chuckle. “Julian, what are you doing here?”

He pauses, and that's when I know that the next thing out of his mouth will be a lie. Whatever he's doing, it's probably not something I want to know about. Drawing the cigarette out of his mouth, he exhales a stream of smoke. "Watching the fireworks show." Shoving me over, he plunks down on the bench beside me. He reeks of sweat and smoke. "What about you two? Looks like you were making your own fireworks show." He nudges me in the side. Then he tosses his cigarette on the ground, grounding it out with his foot. "I always knew you two would hook up at some point."

I remember our conversation in the hospital. Then I think about my family's reaction when I told them about us. I guess our feelings were clear to everyone for a long time. It seems that the two of us were the ones in the dark.

Two men dressed in black come into view, walking in our direction. Something about them shoots off warning signals in my brain. I snatch up Sloane's hand, knotting our fingers together. The closer they get, the more nervous I become. My pulse quickens.

"Oh. I'll be right back. Just gotta take care of something." Julian hops up.

No way am I waiting for him to come back. This is clearly a drug deal or some other illegal shit like that. I'm not going to stand around and watch my brother destroy his life. It's bad enough to know about it, I don't need a front row seat. While Julian ambles over to them, I tug on Sloane's hand.

"Let's get outta here."

"Yeah." She nods quickly. In her eyes I see the same wariness I feel.

We stand up.

"Hey, man. I'm not trying to start trouble," Julian says from just feet away.

I freeze.

"Who are they?" One of the men asks, pointing toward Sloane and me.

"That's just my brother and his friend. They have nothing to do with this," Julian responds.

Inwardly, I growl. *Shit, why did he tell them who we are?*

"What are they doing here?" The man moves closer to us. And that's when I see the gun in his hand.

I throw Sloane behind me, shielding her with my body. Her body trembles against my back.

“Cruz, let’s go.” Her teeth chatter.

“We will, babe. I promise.”

“Hey, leave them out of it. This is between you and me.” Julian stands between me and the gunman.

I breathe out, grateful that he’s acting like the brother I remember. The one who protected me.

“Yeah, you’re right. It is you who owes the debt,” the man spats, holding up a wad of cash. “And this isn’t going to pay it.”

“It’s all I have,” Julian whines.

“It’s not enough.” The man’s tone is harsh, unforgiving.

I grapple behind me for Sloane. As much as I want to help my brother, I have to get Sloane out of here. I have no idea what these guys are capable of, and I’m not sticking around to find out. “Let’s go,” I whisper, hoping we can run off while they’re distracted with their conversation.

“And that means you have to pay.”

I step forward, my body still in front of Sloane’s. As we take off, the sound of a gunshot slices through the air. If I thought the fireworks were loud, I was wrong. This was much louder. Pain rips through my shoulder and my body pitches forward, slamming into the ground. My head hits the ground, my mouth filling with blood. *What the hell?*

“Cruz!” The sound of Sloane’s ear-piercing scream scares the shit out of me.

I glance down at the blood pooling around my body. *Was I shot?*

“Cruz.” Sloane falls to her knees, her hands fumbling with my face. “Oh, my god. This can’t be happening.” My vision is fuzzy, but I see her pull out her cell phone and dial with shaky fingers. I want to tell her that I’m okay. I want to reassure her. I hate how scared she looks. But the words stick in my throat. My mouth won’t move.

Squinting, I look around for the man who shot me, but I can’t find him.

Sloane is hurriedly talking to someone on the phone while still touching me. Tears fall from her eyes. She drops the phone. “Cruz, the ambulance is on the way. Just hold on. You’re gonna be fine.”

“Is he okay?” Julian runs over to us.

“How the hell could you let this happen?” Sloane shouts at him. “My

god, if anything happens to him.” A sob slices through her words. “I can’t even think about it.” I feel dizzy, so I close my eyes. Hot breath skates over my face. “Please, Cruz, you have to be okay. You have to.”

I try to open my eyes, to respond to her in some way, but I can’t. I just can’t.

“Cruz, please talk to me. I can’t lose you. I love you.”

It’s the last thing I hear before darkness swallows me whole.

27

sloane

I pace back and forth in the lobby of the hospital, rolling the fabric of my shirt in between my fingers. With each tick of the clock panic blooms inside of me. It started as a small bud, taking root when they hauled Cruz into the ambulance on a stretcher, dark red blood soaking his shirt. As I drove Cruz's car behind the ambulance following it to the hospital, the bud started to open up, the petals fluttering inside. Once I arrived here and they wheeled Cruz back to a room, the panic grew into a full blown plant, leaves and petals strangling me.

They won't let me see him, and it's killing me to stay out here. The minute I got in Cruz's car I called his parents. They showed up right after I did, and then they were whisked off by a doctor. They've been gone awhile, and it makes me nervous. If it was good news, wouldn't they be back by now?

If only I were family. What a dumb rule. Who cares if Cruz and I are related by blood or not? We're connected in our hearts. *Deeply connected*. Doesn't that count?

I knew I loved Cruz. I even suspected I was in love with him. But I never knew how much until he was shot. Until his body was thrown to the ground, blood spurting. Until his eyes rolled back in his head and he passed out. It was at that moment that my true feelings surfaced. I love Cruz so much it hurts. So much that I can't imagine one minute without him, much less a lifetime.

If he doesn't make it, I don't know how I'll survive.

My mind can't even imagine a life without him. He's prevalent in every memory I have since I was five years old. Cruz fills every experience, every laugh, every cry. Take him out of the equation and you take away the color. My existence becomes tainted in muted greys and whites, absent of color. Absent of joy.

Out of the corner of my eye, a doctor comes into the lobby holding a clipboard. My heart stutters, my head bobbing up. But he heads over to a woman sitting in a white plastic chair. A sob lodges in my throat, my eyes filling with moisture. Where is Cruz's doctor? Where is his mom and dad? What the hell is going on?

I breathe deeply, attempting to ward off the panic. But it's no use. The panic won't leave until I see Cruz. Until he smiles at me again. Until he speaks. Until I know he's all right.

Damn it, I want to kill Julian. How could he put Cruz in this situation?

Anger hardens my heart, covering it like a shield of armor. He wanted to come with me to the hospital, but I told him to go to hell. I really said that. I yelled, "Go to hell," and then hopped in the car. It's not something I've ever said to anyone, certainly not one of Cruz's family members. But I don't regret it. It's Julian's fault, the boy I love more than life itself is fighting for his life.

Feeling weary, I let out a sigh and then glance around for an open chair. A man and woman enter the hospital, racing through the glass doors. When my gaze connects with them, I sag with relief.

"Daddy," I breathe.

He rushes to me, his arms outstretched. "Oh, Sloane."

I step into his arms, tears slipping down my face. The sobs that I held back rush out unabashed. His arms tighten around me. The familiar scent of his musky cologne spin around me, and for the first time since I got here I start to believe everything will be all right. Mom's hand rests on my shoulder as Dad holds me.

"It's going to be okay, princess," Dad says, calling me what he used to when I was little.

"Oh, Dad. You should've seen him. He didn't look good at all." I stare up at Dad's face. "He couldn't even respond to me. And there was so much blood." The panic rises again, cutting off my breath.

"Shh." Dad strokes my hair. "It's all right. He's in good hands. You did the right thing."

"Thank god you're okay," Mom speaks softly at my side.

I hadn't even thought of that before Mom said something. In fact, I never really felt in danger. I had no doubt Cruz would keep me safe.

His words fly through my mind. *I'll always help you when you're scared, Sloane. That will never change.*

I'm scared now. I need him now.

I clutch my dad around the middle, so grateful he's here. As he strokes my back with his palm, guilt sinks into my gut. I've been so mean to him. And I've questioned his love for me. What if it had been me who was shot? What if I'd never had a chance to tell him how I feel? I would die leaving my

dad to think I didn't love him.

"Dad," I say softly. "I'm sorry I've been so mad lately."

"You don't have to say anything right now," Dad assures me.

"I love you, Dad."

"Not as much as I love you." He smiles down at me. "I hope you know that. You've always held my heart, my sweet little princess."

My lips quiver, my eyes filling with tears. It's what he used to say when he tucked me in as a little girl. Nestling into his chest, I allow him to hold me.

"Sloane."

My head snaps up at the sound of Annette's voice. She looks spent, her eyes red and ringed, her hair mussed.

"Is he okay?" My pulse races.

She nods. "He's awake and he's asking for you."

My heart leaps, grabbing her words. *He's awake. He's awake.*

"Can I see him even though I'm not family?"

"I worked it out." Annette reaches for my arm.

"Thank you," I whisper, my heart bursting with gratitude.

"Of course. You're family to us, my dear."

I nod, my emotions raw and sitting right at the surface. After tonight I'm not sure I'll have any tears left. Annette's hand folds over mine. I glance at Mom and Dad.

"We'll wait right here until you come back," Dad promises. Mom nods.

"Okay." I gather courage as I allow Annette to guide me down the hallway. When we reach Cruz's room, Annette stops walking and drops my hand.

She nods to me, and I take a deep breath before stepping into the room. Nothing could prepare me for seeing Cruz like this. If I thought the sight of him bleeding on the ground was bad, this might even be worse. He looks so helpless and frail, lying in the hospital bed hooked up to tubes and machines, a white sterile sheet tucked up to his chin.

Swallowing hard, I make my way around the bed until I'm standing at

his side. Reaching down, I pick up his hand. His eyes pop open and a slow smile spreads across his face.

“Hey.” His voice is groggy and low, unlike his normal tone.

“Hey.” My voice wobbles.

“No crying, Sloane. I’m fine.”

My gaze lands on the bandage on his shoulder. It’s the only bandage I can find. The rest of him looks unscathed. His skin is a little more pale than normal, and a bruise blooms on his head from where he fell, but other than that he seems fine.

“Promise?”

“Yeah. The doctor says I’m going to make a full recovery. The bullet only grazed my shoulder. I guess I got lucky.”

“None of this was lucky, Cruz. You were shot.” I can’t keep my lips from trembling.

“But you weren’t,” he says. “That’s why I’m lucky. That’s all I cared about it in that moment. Keeping you safe.”

“Oh, Cruz, you crazy boy.” I stroke his fingers. “Don’t ever do that again.”

“I can’t promise that. I will always do whatever it takes to protect you.”

“Don’t you get it? I can’t lose you, Cruz. I l-” I stop myself, the words I want to say dying on my lips. It was one thing to say them when he was unconscious, but it’s another thing to say them when he’s wide awake.

“C’mere.” Cruz scoots over, patting the bed next to him.

“Is it safe?” I stare at all the tubes and IVs.

“Of course it’s safe. We’ll call it therapy.”

“Therapy?” I’m skeptical.

“Having you in my arms is the best medicine there is, Sloane.”

Convinced, I climb into the bed, careful not to pull on any tubes. My body curves around his, our legs tangling together. I lay my head and hands on his chest, grateful that his injured shoulder is on the opposite side.

“I’m not hurting you, am I?” I ask.

“Believe me, this is the best I’ve felt since I got here.” He kisses the

crown of my head. "Thank you for taking such good care of me."

"Of course. I would do anything for you." Our fingers intertwine. I wince at the IV in his forearm.

"What happened to Julian?"

I stiffen. "He wanted to come here, but I sort of told him to go to hell." Shame fills me at what I did.

Cruz chuckles. "Man, I wish I had heard you say that. I can't even picture it."

"You're not mad?" I can't bring myself to look at him, so instead I just stare at his hands, at his tanned, slender fingers that make the most beautiful music I've ever heard. They are a little dirty and scratched up, probably from the fall, but I'm grateful that his hands aren't hurt.

"Why would I be mad at you?"

"Well, he's your brother, and I know how much you love him."

"Sloane, I would react the same way if someone caused you harm." His fingers fold over mine. "Because I love you, just like you love me."

I freeze. "You heard me?"

"Yes, I heard you. I tried to respond, but I couldn't."

"I meant it."

"I know you did. I mean it too." His eyelids flutter, lowering over his eyes.

"You're tired?"

He nods. "A little."

"I can leave."

"No," he says quickly. "Stay."

"Okay." I snuggle back up to him, not wishing to leave either. Frankly, I wish I could stay here for the rest of my life. I never want to let go of him again.

He closes his eyes, his lips curling into a smile.

"What are you thinking about?" I ask curiously.

"The best day of my life."

"What day was that?"

“The day I met you, Sloane.”

I squeeze his fingers as he drifts off to sleep, my mind flying back to the day we met too. Cruz was the cutest little boy, with dark hair and eyes. The day we met he wore a pair of jean overalls and a red shirt. They were both covered in dirt just like the rest of him. My mom had been the one to make me walk across the street and introduce myself.

I had no idea then that the little boy covered in dirt would one day become the most important person in my life.

28

CRUZ

When I awake, Sloane is gone and a nurse is checking my vitals. I scour the room, hoping Sloane didn't leave. Possibly she's in the restroom, or grabbing a coffee.

"She's still here. In the waiting room, I think," the nurse says, obviously noticing my distress.

I nod, figuring one of the staff made her leave the room. I should've known she wouldn't leave voluntarily. My heart leaps when I remember how sweet she sounded when she told me she loved me. It wasn't until she said it that I realized I've been waiting for her to say that since the day we met.

"I'll let your family know you're awake," the nurse says as she walks toward the doorway.

"Um...can Sloane come back too? The girl who was with me earlier?"

The nurse smiles. "I'll see, but I know you have a lot of family members here too."

I nod, wondering who else is here besides Mom and Dad. I'm really not in the mood to see Gabe. Then I remember that Mateo and Ella are back from their honeymoon. God, I really don't feel like a visit from the whole family right now. Honestly, the only people I'm interested in seeing are Mom and Sloane. I have a feeling I won't get that lucky though.

Mom sweeps into the room looking tired and disheveled. My heart goes out to her.

"Hi, mijo." She stands over my bed, staring down at me with a worried expression. Reaching out, she brushes a chunk of hair off my forehead. "You doing okay?"

I shrug. "I've been better, but under the circumstances, I guess I'm all right."

Her eyes darken. "There's someone here who wants to see you."

For one moment I think it will be Sloane, but her serious expression makes me nervous. My gaze flickers to the doorway where Julian stands wearing a black hoodie, his hands shoved into the pockets of his ripped jeans.

Angry, I narrow my eyes at Mom. "I don't want to see him."

Mom runs a hand over my forehead, the way she used to when I was sick as a child. "Please, Cruz. Just talk to him. I can stay here if you need me."

I shake my head. "No, it's fine. I'm not scared to be alone with him." My eyes sweep the room. "Unless you owe one of the nurses money. Perhaps I should be watching out for a gunman hiding in the closet."

Mom clutches her chest, looking stricken. Julian shakes his head. At least he has the decency to look ashamed.

"Julian feels terrible," Mom says.

"He should," I say through gritted teeth.

Julian steps into the room. "Cruz, I know there's nothing I can do to make this better."

"You're right. There's not." I turn my head from him.

"We used to be close, man," Julian says.

His words anger me further. "Yeah, we were, but you changed. You walked away and hurt us all. But you know what? I always defended your sorry ass." Mom places a gentle hand on my arm to calm me. It sort of works. "But no more. This was the last straw."

"I get it. I screwed up really bad."

"This was more than a screw up, Julian. You could have gotten Sloane or I killed." God, when I think about how close Sloane was to being shot it destroys me. It's even worse when I think that it would've been my fault. It would've been my brother who caused it.

"You think I don't know that, man. You think I don't already feel like shit." His voice raises, and he rakes a hand down his face. Lowering his head, he sighs. "I've been wanting to get help for a long time, but I didn't think I could do it. But after tonight, I know I can. I don't want to hurt anyone else."

"What are you saying?" I'm scared to get my hopes up. Julian has said things like this before. He even got clean one time for a few weeks, but then he ended up back on the streets high as a kite.

"I'm checking into rehab."

"Well, I hope it works out for you." I don't even bother masking my doubt.

"I'm serious this time, Cruz."

“I’ll believe it when I see it,” I say.

Mom pats my arm. “We all want to see you get better, Julian.”

Julian nods. “I’ll be in touch, bro,” he says to me.

I nod as he heads out of the room.

Before reaching the door he turns to me. “Oh, and I went to the police. Gave them all the information on the guys who shot you. They’re looking for them now.”

“Thanks.” I know that had to have been hard for him. I understand now how dangerous those guys are, and the risk it was for him to rat them out.

After Julian leaves the room, Mom smiles at me. “I’m proud of you, Cruz. You handled that well.”

“Thanks, Mom.” I lift my head. “Do you think he was serious?” If he was, then my injury wasn’t in vain.

“Time will tell.” Mom appears cautious, but I see a hint of hope in her eyes. And I cling to that, knowing that if Mom can be optimistic then I can too.

29

sloane

“You’re really going to stay home the rest of the summer, huh?” I ask Regan.

We’re sitting in the kitchen sipping coffee out of painted ceramic mugs. They’re actually the ones we made for Mom when we were kids for Mother’s Day. Regan’s is better than mine. She took the time to come up with a design. It’s covered in little hearts and swirly lines. I didn’t have the patience to wait on a design or stencil. Instead I painted all the colors I like. That’s why it resembles the color of puke. But whatever. It’s the thought that counts, right?

“Yeah. I’d like to meet Kacey and work things out with Dad. Besides, what happened to Cruz really rocked me.”

My eyebrows jump up in surprise. “Really? Why?” I mean, I know she cares about Cruz, but I didn’t think they were that close.

She shrugs, gazing out the window. “I guess it just reminded me of the fragility of life. About how we never know when we’ll take our last breath.”

Leave it to Regan to get all deep on me. But I do understand what she’s saying. I’ve thought about that too since the shooting. “Yeah, I get that.” I run a finger around the rim of my coffee cup, thinking about how scared I’ve been since Fourth of July. Every night my dreams have been filled with nightmares. Horrific images of the man with the gun, Cruz’s body lying on the ground, dark blood pooling. I can’t shake the fear and uncertainty that plagues me now, and I’m wondering if it will ever go away. I suspect in some ways it won’t. I’m pretty certain that I’ve been irrevocably changed. At least the men have been arrested. That gives me a little peace. If they were still out there, I’d probably walk around in a panic all the time. Always looking over my shoulder, always wondering.

“You know,” Regan breaks into my thoughts. “My sophomore year I used to have a crush on Julian.”

“Yeah. No kidding.” I tease, grateful for the shift in conversation.

“You knew?” Her mouth falls open.

I nod. “It was totally obvious.”

“It was?” She furrows her brows. “Did he know?”

“I’m sure he did.”

Regan smiles. “He was so hot.”

“All the Vargas boys are.” I stare out the window, my gaze landing on their house, and I know Regan’s looking too. It’s reminiscent of the first time we saw them moving in. All these black haired boys running around the front yard.

“No kidding, and they definitely know how to turn on the charm.” Regan glances at me. “But I guess I don’t need to tell you that.”

A grin spreads over my face. “No, you definitely don’t.”

“You’re like a lovesick puppy, Sloane.” She nudges me. “But I’m happy for you. I really am.”

“Thanks.” Funny, she’s been less annoying this visit. I’m not sure if it means she’s maturing or I am. Either way, I’m glad that we’re getting along. After emptying my coffee cup, I push away from the table. “I’m gonna head over to Cruz’s for a little bit.”

Regan stands, wagging a finger at me. “Be good, Sloane.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

She raises a brow. “Are you forgetting what I walked in on my first day back?”

Dear god, she’s put her shrink hat back on again. I guess my earlier assessment was incorrect. “Don’t worry. I’ll wait until his shoulder heals before getting pregnant.”

“Sloane!” Regan’s eyes widen.

“I’m kidding. Geez. Lighten up. Besides, I like it better when you’re just being my sister, not my mom.”

She bites her lip. “Point taken. Go have fun.”

Smiling, I head out of the kitchen. I race across the street in my bare feet. The asphalt paints the pads of my feet black, but I don’t care. Cruz has seen me dirtier than this, and he still loves me. After knocking a couple of times, the door swings open.

“Hey, Sloane,” Gabe greets me. “The patient is in the family room.” He shakes his head. “Mom is trying to heal him with sweets.”

I giggle, the scent of baked goods reaching my nose. “Maybe I’ll have

to feign some type of injury too.”

Gabe laughs. “Yeah, good luck. I’ve been trying that for days.”

When I enter the family room, Cruz smiles from where he sits on the couch. Regan’s right. The Vargas boys are charmers all right. My heart melts at the sight of him. I sink down onto the couch so close to him that our thighs touch. Just as Gabe said there are brownies and cookies lining the coffee table.

“I see your mom is treating you with her special kind of medicine,” I quip.

“Yeah, but I’ve been craving something a little sweeter.” He snakes an arm around my waist. It’s the arm that isn’t injured.

“You have, huh?”

His gaze drops to my lips. “Yep, but first I have something for you.”

“You do?” I can’t believe he’s recovering from a gunshot wound and he has a gift for me.

Reaching forward, he picks up a white envelope. When he hands it to me, I see my name written on the front in his handwriting.

“What is this?” I ask.

“Open it and see.” His eyes twinkle.

With trembling fingers I tear into the envelope. Inside are numerous white pages, Cruz’s handwriting scrawled all over them. When I yank out the first one, I read a few lines and immediately recognize it as the song he sang to me. After reading it, I turn to the next one, my eyes catching on the date. It’s from several years prior. I’m shocked when I read the lyrics.

“You wrote this a few years ago?”

He nods. “I’ve loved you for years, Sloane.”

“I’ve loved you for years too, Cruz,” I admit. Lowering my head, I read through the rest of the pages. All of them are songs written about me. Some he wrote this week, some he wrote years ago, and some he wrote earlier this summer. By the time I finish, tears glisten in my eyes. Cruz is sort of known as being this tough guy, but I’ve been fortunate enough to get to know his sensitive side too. “How did I get so lucky?”

“I’m the lucky one, believe me.” He grabs my hand, tugging me forward. “I know I haven’t always been an easy person to love.”

“That’s not true,” I protest.

“It is. I’m compulsive and irrational, and my temper is out of control.”

“Well, when you put it that way,” I joke.

“But you bring out the best in me, Sloane.” He reaches up, stroking my face.

“You do the same for me.”

He draws me to him, our lips connecting.

“This doesn’t hurt your shoulder, does it?” I speak against his mouth.

“Not at all. This makes everything better.” His lips smother mine, stealing breath.

epilogue

sloane

“I can’t believe we go back to school next week.” I lie back in the grass in my backyard, Cruz lying beside me. Our fingers are entwined between us. Shade from the large oak tree covers our bodies. A gentle breeze skates over us.

“I know.” He groans. “Then I won’t have you all to myself anymore. I’ll have to share you with teachers and classes and other kids.”

I smile. “Yeah, it’s gonna suck. If only we had more time off.”

“It’s been an amazing summer, that’s for sure.”

“Well, it’s definitely been eventful.” My mind flies to Mateo’s wedding, my whirlwind relationship with Adam, Cruz declaring his feelings for me, my dad meeting Kacey, the altercation on Fourth of July.

“How is everything going with your dad and Kacey? You haven’t really mentioned her lately.”

I stare up at the puffy clouds, primarily one that resembles a tree. My gaze follows the makeshift branches as they curve along the blue sky. “That’s because I’m not really bothered by it anymore. Ever since Dad introduced her to Regan and me, I realized she’s not the monster I made her out to be. She’s his daughter the same way Regan and I are. In fact, I feel kinda bad for her because she didn’t have him in her life the way we did.”

“You’re incredible, you know that?” He squeezes my fingers.

“Yeah. My boyfriend tells me all the time,” I tease. Then a thought sparks. “Oh, you never told me about your phone call with Julian earlier today. How is he doing?”

He smiles, his face upturned. “He’s doing well. Celebrating over a month clean.”

“That’s awesome.”

“I just hope he can keep it up when he’s released.”

“I’m sure he will.” I glance over at Cruz, studying his profile. “You getting shot really rocked him.”

His head cranes to the side, his eyes meeting mine. “Yeah, it did.”

I roll over onto my stomach, resting my hands on his chest. “And you know why?”

“Why?” He raises a brow, capturing one of my hands in his.

“Because he loves you, just like I do.”

Bringing my hand up, his lips brush my knuckles. “I love you too, Sloane. More and more every day.”

I giggle.

“You know you don’t need to seduce me.” He teases. “You can have me any time you want. Day or night.”

I lower my face, my hair brushing over him. Our lips connect with a spark like a fire being ignited. Warmth spreads through my body, flowing through my chest and spreading to my limbs as his arms come around me, pulling me on top of him. I allow my legs to fall to the side, straddling his body. My hands fumble up his chest and neck, my fingertips exploring his skin. His mouth moves greedily over mine, his tongue creating a sensual dance in my mouth. His hands grasp me around my waist, our bodies rocking together. My shirt rides up a little and Cruz’s fingers slip beneath my shirt, tickling my stomach. A giggle escapes from my mouth, causing Cruz to growl in my mouth. This only succeeds in making me giggle more.

He draws back, searching my face. “I didn’t realize kissing me was so hilarious.”

I chuckle again. “So funny you could be a comedian and kissing could be your bit.”

He shakes his head. “It’ll never work because I’m never kissing anyone but you for the rest of my life.”

“Promise?”

“You know I do.” He pulls me to him. “You own me, Sloane. My heart belongs to you. Not just for today, but for always.”

“Is that a pact?” I’m only halfway joking.

“Yes, definitely a pact.”

“You’re not going to make me seal it with blood, are you?”

“Nope. No blood this time. This time we seal it with a kiss.”

“Much better,” I say, as his lips sweep mine.

Read on for an excerpt from **WINNING ME OVER**, available now...

ONE

PAIGE

There is a man standing in front of me wearing a black mask with crude holes cut out of it. His black eyes stare out of the holes reminding me of a creepy Halloween costume. And he is holding a gun to my head.

I so do not get paid enough for this. I knew I should've quit this stupid job at this stupid coffee shop weeks ago.

As he orders me to give him money, I dart my gaze around. *Where is Jon?* When I started closing down the coffee shop he went into the back room to go over inventory or something. Shouldn't he be back out here by now? Then again, I'm not sure that Jon would be much help at this point. He'd probably piss his pants and run away.

No, I'm pretty sure I'm the tougher one out of the two of us. The masked man is more insistent, the gun trembling in his fingers. My heart races and sweat slides down my shoulder blades. I walk swiftly to the counter, the masked man following me. For one moment I imagine turning around and attempting to fight him off. Perhaps if I did I'd end up on the news as a local vigilante.

Nah. I'd probably end up getting myself killed. There's no way I'm risking my life over this place. The guy can have the stinking money. I step behind the counter, push in a few buttons on the register, and the drawer shoots open with a ding. The eyes peeking out of the mask flicker down to the drawer. I take advantage of the momentary distraction by reaching under the counter and pushing the panic button. When I dip my hands in the drawer and start grabbing out the cash, I pray that the cops get here soon.

My eyes land on the sign that reads CLOSED that is lit up in the window. I had just been about ready to lock the door when this guy burst in here. If only I'd been faster. This is exactly the reason I hate working the closing shift.

The man with the gun thrusts out a gloved hand. I deposit the cash into it. That's when my gaze catches on the bottom of a tattoo that snakes out from under his long-sleeved jacket. I can't make out what it is, but I file the information away for later.

The man's movements are jerky and desperate as he shoves the cash into the pockets of his jacket. Clattering sounds behind me, as if something has been dropped in the back room. That must be Jon. The man stiffens at

the sound, and I freeze. My breathing is coming out more labored, and I just want the guy to get the hell out of here.

As if reading my thoughts, the man glances around one last time and then races out of the shop. I exhale loudly and lean over the counter. The room sways around me and my stomach rolls. When my mouth fills with moisture I think I might puke, so I breathe deeply until the feeling subsides.

I am so quitting this job tomorrow.

“What are you doing?” Jon’s tall, lanky frame lumbers toward me. His ear length dirty blond hair swishes around his face, and he blinks behind his glasses. When he glances at the open, empty register, his dull brown eyes widen incredulously. “What happened?”

I can’t even believe this guy is my boss. He’s only a few years older than me. In fact, he’s not even out of college yet. And he’s the most incompetent manager I’ve ever known. But he’s Bud’s son, as in *Bud’s Bean Shop*. Yeah, stupid name, I know. And apparently being the owner’s son qualifies this guy to be a manager. *Go figure*. “We were just robbed, genius.”

“What?” His cheeks turn bright red. They do that a lot. He blushes more than any girl I know. Some girls might think it’s endearing. I think it makes him seem like a wuss. “And you just gave away the money?”

My mouth gapes in exasperation. “Seriously? You expected me to risk my life? The guy held a gun to my head.”

He softens at this. “Oh. Are you okay?”

His tender words almost break me. The truth is that I don’t think I am okay. My insides are quivering, and even though I’m holding it together, I fear that I’ll fall apart at any second. It actually helped me to be angry with Jon, because then I didn’t have to think about how scared I am. I clear my throat, knowing that I can do this. I can remain calm even if I don’t feel that way. It’s a skill I perfected years ago. If I hadn’t, I never would’ve survived everything my family went through.

“Fine.”

Sirens sound in the distance, and my shoulders visibly relax. Jon glances up at me. “You called the cops?”

I nod. “I pushed the panic button.”

“Smart thinking,” he says, surprising me. Then his face grows serious. “I better call Dad.”

“Yeah.” I cast my gaze downward as he walks off. Within minutes

the parking lot is filled with cop cars, red and blue lights illuminating the dark sky. Inhaling sharply, I stare at the colors that remind me of the Fourth of July, and steel myself for what's to come. As a large policeman stalks toward the front door, I yank my phone out of my pocket to text my mom. I have a feeling I'll be home late tonight.

The longer the officer interrogates me, the more I crash from my earlier adrenaline rush. My eyelids are starting to droop a little, and my body aches with exhaustion. There isn't much to tell anyway. All I know is about how tall and skinny the masked man was. And I gave them the information about the tattoo, even though I only saw a tiny portion of it. I rack my brain for anything else, trying to pluck out information from nowhere. I'm reminded of the time I lost my earring in the lake. For hours I combed through the mud and debris under the water, but I never found it. It was too buried. That's how I feel now. Like I will never find any information to help the cops find this guy. And it frustrates me.

Also, it scares me a little. Not that I would ever admit it to anyone. I've been holding it together all night, and I refuse to lose it. I won't give the masked man the satisfaction of breaking me. Unlike Jon, who is sniffing like a little girl. Of course, I'm sure it doesn't help that Bud showed up and got on him for leaving me out here alone at closing time.

"Nothing unusual happened during your shift prior to the robbery?" The officer, whose name I've already forgotten, asks. He pinches his bushy brows together and purses his thin lips. His salt and pepper hair falls over his forehead, and he stares down at me with dark brown eyes. For a police officer he really doesn't look very scary, with his tall, lanky frame.

I start to shake my head when a memory surfaces that stops me cold. Something interesting did happen tonight. In fact, before the robbery it felt significant. I definitely hadn't been able to think of anything else for several minutes afterward. But then the masked man forced his way in, and I'd completely forgotten the whole thing.

"Yeah, actually. A few minutes before closing a guy came in."

The officer cocks one of his bushy brows. It's so large it looks like a giant caterpillar is sitting on his forehead. I force myself to look away.

"I'd never seen him before," I continue. "He said he just moved here from out of town, and he seemed to be about my age. I wouldn't have thought anything about it, except that he didn't order anything. He just

chatted me up and then left. Minutes later the masked man came in.”

“What do you mean, chatted you up?” The officer leans forward at the little round table we’re seated at.

My cheeks warm, and it angers me. I’m not really the blushing type. That’s more my best friend Hadley’s style. The truth is that I thought the guy was hitting on me. And I kind of liked it. There was something different about him, mysterious, yet sexy. I’ve never really been interested in the guys at my high school. Unlike Hadley, who had a crush on the popular Tripp Bauer for years before they got together. The guys at our school do nothing for me. But this guy did something for me. He stirred up feelings that both excited and terrified me at the same time.

I squirm under the police officer’s intense gaze. “Um...I don’t know. He just asked me a lot of questions.”

“What kind of questions?”

“Um...like what my name was, where I go to school, and what time I got off work.” I wring my hands in my lap, the skin raw and chapped from the motion.

“What time you got off work, huh?” His eyebrows knit together.

That’s when I’m hit with the realization. That guy completely sucked me in. He was just milking me for information. He was probably working with the robber. Or maybe he was the robber. I feel like an idiot.

“What was this kid’s name?” The officer asks, his pen poised over his little pad of paper.

“He didn’t tell me his last name, but his first name is Colt.”

TWO COLT

It was a mistake to talk to the girl tonight, but I couldn't help myself. I've been watching her for a few days now. She's seriously hot, but not in the typical way. No, she has a quirky style that's different from any other girl around here. Ever since I moved to this uppity suburban town I haven't met one person who fascinates me. Honestly I thought I was doomed to a life of solitude. It seemed that all this town had to offer me were bleached blond, over-tanned girls who liked to shop and drive expensive cars.

But then one day I passed this little coffee shop with a cheesy name and there she was. I froze, unable to look away. She wore striped stockings, a little black skirt and top, her pink streaked hair in pigtails, and large black glasses perched on the end of her nose. A tiny stud glistened in her nose and more studs lined her ears. When she glanced up at the customer she was helping, she smiled the most genuine smile I'd ever seen. Her blue eyes sparkled, and as I stared I felt the pull to her like I was a magnet and she's the fridge.

So I kept going back to the coffee shop trying to get up the courage to talk to her. Finally tonight I made myself do it. Only now I feel stupid. I mean, I didn't even order anything. And then I babbled on for a few minutes before rushing out of there. I'm sure she's suspicious of me now. *Good going.*

After the few mile walk home from the coffee shop in the dark, I arrive at my aunt's house. I guess it's my house now too, but it doesn't feel like it. Then again, I can't remember any place ever feeling like home. I've never really belonged anywhere.

The minute I push open the door my eight-year-old brother Zander runs to me, wrapping his arms around my legs.

"Hey, champ." I rub my hands in his thick brown hair.

"Colt," he breathes my name like oxygen, and it makes my stomach clench. He shouldn't rely on me like he does. I don't want to let him down again.

"Oh, good." Aunt Callie appears in the doorway of the family room, holding my baby sister Bristol in her arms. "You're home." Bristol opens her mouth and starts wailing. My aunt's face drops at the sound. Her caramel color eyes look tired, her dirty blond hair disheveled. She wears a wrinkled t-shirt and sweat pants, stains in the knees.

“I’ll take her.” I reach my arms out, my worn black leather jacket sliding over my arms.

Zander tightens his hold on my legs, his fingers digging into my ripped jeans. “But I want you to read me a book.”

“Later, buddy. Okay?” I say to him, while taking Bristol from my aunt. She smells like urine, and I scrunch up my nose. Her crying doesn’t quiet even when I hold her securely against me. In fact, her tiny face turns bright crimson with the effort. Bristol cries constantly. I know it’s draining on my aunt. Hell, it drove my mom over the brink. That’s why I make an effort to help Aunt Callie any chance I get. I don’t want her to snap the way my mom did. Mom always said that Bristol was colicky, but I know the truth. There’s more to Bristol’s problem than just that.

Bouncing my little sister up and down in my arms, I speak soothingly in her ear. Zander slinks off down the hallway, his shoulder’s stooped. He’s already wearing a pair of pajamas bearing the likeness of some superhero he likes. It hangs off of his slight frame, and I feel like the three of us could be on one of those commercials. You know the ones where they show a bunch of kids and then ask people for money every month in order to feed them? I guess that means we could be the poster children for poverty. Just the thought of that makes a gruff laugh bubble from my throat.

“Hey,” I call after him.

He turns to me, a question in his dark eyes.

“You okay?” I ask.

He nods. “Just some kids were being mean to me today at the park.”

Protectiveness surges. “Which kids?” I take a step forward. “Need me to take care of it?”

“Oh, no, you don’t,” Aunt Callie admonishes me. She makes her way to the beige couch and sinks down into it. The large painting hanging on the wall looks like it’s balancing atop her head. “You need to stay out of trouble, Colt.”

Her words unnerve me, but I shake them off. Bristol’s cries quiet down to sniffles as I continue to bounce her. She reaches up and grabs my lip ring with a chubby finger. I extract her hand, not wishing her to rip it from my lip. I stick out my tongue and wiggle my tongue bar around. Her eyes widen in fascination. It gets her every time. I steal a quick kiss on her round cheek.

“You sure have a way with them.” Aunt Callie pushes a sweaty strand

of hair from her flushed face. She crosses one slender leg over the other, circling her bare toe in the thick reeds of the tan carpet.

I shrug. "They've pretty much always been my responsibility."

"Oh, Colt. I'm so sorry."

I wave away her words, not daring to look at her. The last thing I need is to read the pity inside them. "Got anything to eat? I'm starved."

"In the kitchen. Here. You want me to take Bristol?" Aunt Callie opens her arms.

"No. She can come with me." I glance down at her. "Wanna go with big brother to get something to eat?"

She flashes me a toothless grin, reminding me of an old man. I head into the kitchen, Bristol still in my arms. She's so tiny that it feels like I'm holding a feather. Just as my feet hit the tile, I hear a car pull up. I step forward and peek out of the heavy, dark curtains in the kitchen window. My aunt's house looks like it was decorated back in the seventies, done all in tans and dark browns. There's no one outside. My shoulders relax when I catch sight of my aunt's neighbor pulling into his driveway. As I drop the curtain, allowing it to fall back into place, I wonder when I'll stop looking over my shoulder. I wonder when I'll stop being scared.

Authors Note and Acknowledgments

I've wanted to write a book about best friend love for awhile. I think there is something magical and beautiful about falling in love with a best friend. Honestly, first love in general is something I love to write about. And what better time to write about first love than in the summer, right?

That's how Cruz and Sloane's story was born. When I wrote the first draft it was all in Sloane's POV and it read more like a love triangle. I oftentimes have no idea what my characters' personalities will be like. I just start writing them and that's how they introduce themselves to me. Honestly, I wasn't expecting Adam to be such a nice guy. But he is, and I didn't want to change that about him. Cruz, on the other hand, is a little rough around the edges. But again, that's who he is and I wanted to stay true to that. But when I read through my first draft, I realized that you needed to hear Cruz's side of things.

So I went through and added all of that in. That made the book less of a love triangle, and more of a straight romance, but I hope you enjoyed that. I hope you loved Cruz as much as I did, and that you enjoyed the story.

As always I have a lot of people to thank.

First and foremost is my best friend and love of my life, Andrew. I love you more than I ever thought possible. You still give me butterflies. Thank you for being the best husband in the world.

Eli and Kayleen, I know it was hard to share your summer with Cruz and Sloane, but thank you for being so understanding when Mom had to work. I love you both more than words can express.

Cambria Hebert and Cameo Renae, thank you for our daily check ins. I couldn't have finished this book without you.

Lisa Richardson, thank you for your amazing editing skills.

Alivia Anders, the cover is so perfect! You're incredible.

Rachel, I'm excited to be working with you. Thanks for all your invaluable help and advice!

Thank you to Megan Squires, Cambria Hebert and Susan Griscom for reading early versions of this manuscript and helping me tweak it to make it shine.

Cassie Chavez and Tiffany Tillman, as always you girls rock! I'm

grateful for your support.

To all the bloggers, readers, and the rest of my family, thank you.

And most of all, thank you to God. All I do is for you!

I love you all. None of my books would see the light of day without your support.

Amber Garza



Amber Garza is the author of the Delaney's Gift Series and many contemporary romance titles, including *Star Struck*, *Tripping Me Up* and *Break Free*. She has had a passion for the written word since she was a child making books out of notebook paper and staples. Her hobbies include reading and singing. Tea and wine are her drinks of choice (not necessarily in that order). She writes while blaring music, and talks about her characters like they're real people. She currently lives in California with her amazing husband, and two hilarious children who provide her with enough material to keep her writing for years.