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*Saving Sam Seymour*

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## Ch. 1 The Announcement

We sat around wooden picnic tables in the center of the wine cellar, happily drinking the summer night away and ignorant of the city that continued above. Our dear friend David stood on a chair. His head nearly touched the cellar's low ceiling. He wanted to make a toast that marked the beginning to an end, though David didn't quite know what end he was marking.

"Can I have everybody's attention, please?" David said, clinking a champagne flute and a half empty bottle together.

It wasn't his first glass of the evening, nor his first bottle, but nevertheless, he was up and ready to make a speech. The wine cellar grew quiet as the laughter died and all eyes focused on David.

"Thank you all for joining us this evening as we say goodbye to one of our most favorite people of this glorious city." As he spoke, he directed his gaze and glass towards the man of the evening, my Phillip.

All of our friends clapped and whistled and hollered. The wooden racks of fine wine around us shook from excitement. Phillip pretended to hide behind me in embarrassment, batting his hand at the group like he was denying a compliment on an award-winning film he had produced.

David continued. "I remember the day we met, mate, like it was yesterday. You were the new guy at the office, and I took you out that night because you didn't know your elbow from Bowery, and now look at you! You still don't!" David bent over with laughter at his own joke, sloshing champagne everywhere on the cold, stone floor. After some time, he managed to compose himself and

wipe the moisture from his eyes and the sweat from his forehead. “Ah, mate, I’m just messing with you. You’re the master of Manhattan. You’re so good at it, we’re exporting you back to Germany in exchange for some Riesling!”

Laughter erupted from our friends and David was in a fit again. The server for our wine tasting motioned for him to wrap it up so that he could introduce the next wine. We had quite the assortment of wine and quite the assortment of people, but after all we were in New York. There was David from London who hated if you asked him about tea but he insisted on saying *mate* every five seconds. Phillip was from Berlin and didn’t deny it. Margaret was our resident New Yorker who we kept on retainer. Cary was her male counterpart and not the other way around. Penelope was a self-diagnosed Parisian but she really grew up in the countryside of France and had an affinity for good butter. Aaron was known for being from San Francisco, but he grew up in Toronto. He said he always wanted to move there after seeing a postcard of the Golden Gate Bridge when he was a child. This left me to reluctantly represent the South. Together we made up a group that brought a sense of contentment that I hadn’t felt in Savannah. We had all met at New York University with the exception of Phillip.

Phillip leaned into me. “Should we shut David up or time how long it takes for the kind man with the alcohol to?”

I looked over at the server and wondered what he thought about our group. I shrugged, “Give David a second, I’m sure he—”

“And I can’t forget,” David emphasized with a finger pointed upward and his brows raised, “the woman who stole Phillip’s heart, the delightful and talented Ms. Samantha Seymour. What are we going to do with you when Phillip is gone for three months?”

Phillip pulled me in tighter as we laughed like one of those couples on a talk show playing along with the host.

David continued. “I mean, it’s a good thing you’ve popped the question before leaving, mate, because there’s a lot of blokes waiting in line to—”

“Dear Lord, David!” I shouted, as Phillip and I simultaneously waved our arms around to make him stop talking. My Southern accent came out when I was angry.

I could see David’s eyes tracing my left arm down to my hand that was minding its own business underneath the table. He smacked his hand against his forehead as to say *duh* to himself. “You’ve not told this bloody lot, have you?”

Phillip and I just looked at each other. We had kept it a secret to enjoy it ourselves for a few days, but with seven of our closest friends staring at us, that was no longer an option. I took my left hand out from my lap and held it in the candle light for everyone to see. I had been wearing the ring all night, but the dimly lit cellar managed to keep the secret that David was unable to.

“Why didn’t you tell us?” scattered voices said.

Taking my hand back, I said, “It was a surprise for us, too.”

That warranted an uproar involving hands over mouths for shock value.

Cary nearly did a spit take back into the glass of red that he was trying.

“Are you guys pregnant?”

Margaret whacked him on the arm and shook her head.

Still ruling at the head of the table, David smacked Phillip on the back.

“That would be some kind of miracle to keep you here, mate!”

There was another uproar. This time all eyes were on my stomach and not my hand. They all laughed and looked carefree, making jokes about my

desperation to keep Phillip in New York and not lose him for three months.

Phillip laughed along with everyone and gave me an elbow.

I was really very good at smiling like I was still on that talk show, like my publicist had told me how to act and what to say. I can remember that moment, the moment in which I felt like my most authentic yet deceptive self as I said the line that would haunt me all summer.

“Yes,” I said, “it would be a miracle.”

## Ch.2 Sam the Southerner

As the saying goes, New York is the city that never sleeps, but I always slept just fine. In the South, I got the feeling that friends and family imagined my life as a New York City movie set: Statue of Liberty always visible, never without a cosmopolitan, a yellow cab always on hand. The truth was I lived most of my New York life within a few contained blocks of the East Village, only venturing out for my doctor's office and good wine.

I thought about this as Phillip and I walked up the streets of our city after good wine and good company. We were strolling past that awkward part after Bowery stops being Bowery but Third Ave. is not yet Third Ave. It was actually called Coopers Square. The Standard was the prominent figurehead of that confusing block. We passed by the outdoor seating at the bar.

I looked at Phillip. "Could I tempt you?"

He shook his head. "I need sleep. I'm not as young as I used to be." He said this in jest but also with sincerity. He could still handle alcohol better than me, though. He was German after all. Phillip was approximately five years older and five years wiser. He was mature and I felt as though he had matured me in our relationship like a bottle of fine wine.

I didn't feel like being mature tonight as you can't always be mature. I did a little spin in front of him, feeling absorbed by the night of wine. "But this is the city that never sleeps."

He reached out for my hands and spun me under his arm to return me to a strolling position. "That may be true, but my flight's tomorrow morning."

I accepted his ambivalence towards being in a scene from a musical in which the characters dance down the sidewalks of New York, so I gave it a rest

and settled under his arm. It was my favorite thing to walk down the sidewalk hand in hand or with his arm draped across my shoulders, and he liked it, too. He had never shied away from being affectionate in public. Commitment was not something that he feared.

I sighed. “But it’s our last night together for *three* months. There should be fireworks or a petting zoo or an alarming amount of fast-food paper bags in our fists. This is America after all.”

“Some of us have real jobs and don’t get to stay home all day,” he said, squeezing my shoulder.

I narrowed my eyes at him and pretended to be angrier than I was. “I work from home some days. So what? There’s a big difference between staying home and working from home. One usually involves soup and tissues, and the other involves laptops and loungewear.”

We had passed St. Marks Place. The street was lined with primarily Asian cuisine, except for the odd coffee shop and my trusty Papaya King, a hot dog stand that was much more than a hot dog stand. My last chance to fulfill my Papaya King desires were drifting out of eyesight as we carried on up Third Ave.

“This is why I don’t get why you don’t join me in Berlin,” Phillip continued. Phillip was born and bred in Berlin. He loved it so much I often heard him singing love ballads in the shower to his lost city. Phillip was a terrible singer, but it never stopped him from trying. Most of the time he was a very serious soul, but in little moments he surprised me. Recently, he was surprising me a lot.

“I *am* joining you for two weeks, remember?”

“But why not come for the whole time?”

I rolled my eyes. “We talked about this, I need to be in New York.”

“But what will actually happen if you leave?”

“The magazine won’t find my editorial pieces on lederhosen relevant.”

“Come on, be serious, Sam.”

“I am being serious. I need to know what’s going on here to write about it and get paid.”

We turned onto East 13<sup>th</sup> Street, the street we had lived on for nearly six months. Phillip dropped his arm from my shoulders and trotted up the stairs to let us in.

Fiddling with the key, he said, “You don’t have to write those three months.”

I stood with my hands in my shorts pockets. “They would fire me.”

“I know how jobs work, Sam.”

The main door swung open and let us into the dark hallway. We were lucky to live on the ground floor, another reason I didn’t want to move and let our treasure apartment go. Our apartment wasn’t large but it wasn’t small considering one of us was a writer and the other was frugal. Inside our living room, we had room for a workspace, a couch we bought from David, and a computer monitor that doubled as a television for Phillip’s video game addiction. I stepped around game controls left on the floor to prevent a sore foot and headed for the bedroom.

Phillip followed in my footsteps, avoiding the controls for their well-being, and began again. “I can afford it. We can afford it,” he paused, “and what are you doing?”

I was picking at the pile of clothes accumulating on the bed that he hadn’t yet packed and began folding his socks. “You said you needed to pack. And the answer is no, I refuse to be a dependent.”

“You mean you refuse to depend on me.”

“No, I refuse depend on anyone.”

Our apartment felt a lot less ambient than the wine cellar had.

Phillip stood across from me on the other side of the bed. “I’ll be making plenty for two,” he said, pausing, “or three.”

“Are you adopting polygamy? Do you already have a German wife waiting for you back in your homeland?”

“You can never be serious, can you? I was talking about a child,” he said.

I stopped folding socks and sat down on the bed. Phillip walked around the bed and sat next to me. He picked my hands up and held them to his mouth like he was trying to warm them up with his breath. The truth was it was already too warm in the summer season in that small apartment with no air conditioning.

“Is it so bad to want a child with the woman I’m going to marry?” he asked.

“No,” I said, “no, it’s not.”

“Okay, then what’s the problem?” He tried smiling to lighten the mood.

“I can’t.”

“I know you won’t take the money, Sam, I’m not talking about money anymore.”

“I’m not either,” I said.

I was looking at his shoes lined up against the window, ready to be packed away like soldiers, lined up perfectly two by two. I wanted to hop into the suitcase with them, being stored and taken away to continue living life somewhere else blissfully ignorant. I thought I had done that in New York, though.

Phillip let go of my hands and straightened his back. “You can’t—”

“Well *can’t* might not be the right word, but I’m not sure if I *can*,” I said.

“But how are you not sure? I mean, how do you know? And how do I not know? Were you waiting on telling me this after we married? Or was it a fun honeymoon surprise you were going to drop on me? Or were we just going to go on about our lives until you decided—”

“I had cancer, Phillip. I had ovarian cancer when I was sixteen.”

All questions halted as Phillip fell silent. We sat still on the bed like strangers the morning after, like if one of us moved the other one would likely vanish. I wondered if that would be reality. All the reasons I had loved being with Phillip were all the reasons I hadn't told him.

~

“I avoid East Village and the rest of Manhattan as I avoid hoards of people, so where do you like?” Phillip had asked, the first day we met.

I had stood on the corner of East 2nd Street and Bowery outside of my apartment with a stranger that my friend David knew and wanted me to know. He had said he was different and smart, so I said okay and he gave him my number. He was older. He was mature. He had called, not texted, which impressed me at the time so I told him to meet me on my corner the next day.

“Across the street is okay,” I had said, motioning to Think Coffee.

We stood at the intersection, waiting for the crosswalk man to turn green. The problem with strangers is there was too much information to exchange, so instead we waited in silence, neither sure what to say.

He looked like winter, dressed in all black with his black double breasted pea coat buttoned as far up as it could go to cover his neck. His dark hair and olive complexion wasn't what I expected when hearing he was German, but I didn't expect the slight British intonation in his accent, either. This is why I loved New York. There were so many different possibilities of how your life could turn

out based on the infinite number of people from far away places, unlike the South where you knew all of your options in high school.

“So where did you live to get that accent?” I asked just as the crosswalk man turned green.

“What accent?” he said expressionless.

“The one...”

He began to smirk. “It’s a nice feeling when you can make jokes in your non native language.” He paused to appreciate it. “I studied in London,” he said, holding the door open for me.

“Why choose New York if you’re never in the actual city then?” I asked.

The menu of Think Coffee was not the most extensive, but it did take some thought. He stood a foot taller than me staring up at the board and ignoring my question. He stepped forward and said, “Ah, yes I’ll take an iced coffee, please, and...”

I stepped forward. “Who drinks iced coffee in the middle of winter?”

“We do, if we want.” He paused. “Do you want?”

I shrugged. “Why not.”

“She’ll have the same,” he said to the barista as he tapped his card to the machine.

I grabbed us a table in the other room while he waited for our January, iced coffees at the counter. The table was in the corner, half booth half chair seating, and the perfect division for a first date. He came to the corner and placed the coffees on the table and took a seat.

“You had asked why New York if I don’t like it. It’s not that I don’t enjoy New York, I just find it saves me time not having to take the subway in from

Brooklyn if I don't need to," he said, swirling in the milk that sat at the top into the rest of the coffee.

"You came in today," I said.

He smiled. "Because I needed to."

"Why's that?"

"To meet this great Southern writer I have heard all about," he said.

"I'm not sure if I'd say great. Or Southern actually."

"Are you not from Georgia?" he asked, furrowing his brow in genuine confusion.

"It's not an identity I like to claim."

"What is an identity you like then?"

"I don't mind writer."

"Okay, then you will be changed from Sam the Southerner to Sam the Writer in my phone," he said, taking out his phone to do just that.

And that was the moment I fell in love with Phillip. He made me feel like I could be anyone I wanted, as cheesy as it sounded. He didn't know my past, so I could be who I had envisioned myself being all this time. The word *cancer* wasn't associated with me in his head. *Writer. Southerner.* That was literally what came up when he thought of me. It was a true release meeting him. He was my forever escape route from the past, making my last eight years in New York feel like a permanent state of being. How was I supposed to give that feeling up and expose my past? Or was exposing your past what you surrendered for love?

~

A minute passed and Phillip stood up and walked to the window. His hands rested on his hips as he paced back and forth like he could come up with a solution. I thought he was going to say he had a magical time machine that would take us

back so we could fix things or that he was secretly best friends with the most brilliant doctor in the world.

With his back to me, he finally spoke. “Does Will know?”

Out of all the things he cared about.

“Are you really asking this now?”

“Does he?” he demanded.

“Yes,” I said.

His hands fell to his sides as he turned around to face me. “Figures,” he said, wandering into the living room.

“He was there when it happened, Phillip, you didn’t even know me then. It was a decade ago,” I yelled through the wall.

Walking back into the room with his unzipped suitcase, he threw it on the ground and started shoving his shoes in the left side. “This is so like you, not telling me about anything,” he said.

I grabbed an armful of clothing and threw it in the other side. “What am I supposed to do?” I faced him and grabbed his right hand. “Meet someone and while shaking their hand say, hey, I had ovarian cancer in high school and my only chance of children are some frozen eggs, nice to meet you?”

Phillip shook my grip away and continued packing. “We’re getting married, Sam, this is something you tell the person you’re marrying.”

“I was going to, it just—”

“What, kept slipping your mind?”

“Well, yeah, as a matter of fact, it did. I worked hard to get over that chapter of my life and put it behind me.”

“You did a damn good job because you forgot to tell your Catholic fiancé.”

“You’re Catholic?”

“Can you be serious for one goddamn moment?” Phillip yelled.

“I’m sorry, I just don’t know why you want to bring God into this,” I said.

“I’m Catholic, Sam. I don’t think I believe in anything but natural conception.”

“You don’t think you do?”

He sat back down. “I don’t know what I believe. You’re messing with fate.”

I shook my head like I was trying to shake the nonsense out of it. “Are you Catholic or a fortune teller?”

“This is all a lot to take in.”

I dumped the last of the socks in his suitcase and sat down on the bed again.

He knelt next to me like he had done when he proposed. “I think we need to discuss this more.”

“I agree. There’s lots of things that can be done, I mean, I’m not even sure—”

He paused. “I mean our engagement.”

### Ch. 3 They Always Return

It was the first Sunday of June and the air-conditioning was working double-time trying to cool the whole apartment. Despite being from the South, New York summers somehow felt hotter to me, surrounded by concrete that locked in the melting heat. I was face down on the mattress in shorts and a t-shirt, the most clothing I could bear with the humidity. The apartment felt bare because half its contents were gone and on a plane to Berlin by now. It was mine for the next three months, but I couldn't stay. I needed to get away. As soon as he had left earlier that morning, I booked a last-minute flight for later that day to return home. Savannah was never a place I thought I'd be so eager to flee to but I was. A few friends had called me to see if I wanted to go for a walk or for a meal to keep me distracted from Phillip's departure that day, they would be all free for me. If they only knew what kind of departure it really was.

So I waited in the humid air of our apartment to hide away in the South like I was a celebrity, avoiding paparazzi with my new lover in a remote destination. That scenario sounded quite romantic compared to what would be waiting for me at home.

~

"What are you doing in Savannah, sweetheart?" asked the woman sitting next to me on the plane.

We had taxied but they wouldn't let us get off yet. The cabin temperature was quickly rising since it was a whopping ninety degrees outside. I felt the dampness of my skin make my t-shirt cling to the small of my back.

I forced a smile. "Just visiting my parents."

The woman stared at me like she wanted me to elaborate. That was the thing about Southerners. They wanted to know your story just as much as they wanted to share their own. That was something I wasn't used to anymore after being gone for eight years. Sometimes it was comforting. You know, when you feel like talking but there's nothing to talk about so you just recycle pleasantries. Southerners were great at that, shooting the shit. These were the times, however, that I wished I was in the North, the times when you just want to be left alone tapping your leg and thinking calming thoughts like an empty, all-white bedroom or water stretching out as far as you can imagine.

I spoke again. "Just need a break is all."

She nodded satisfied, but raised her eyebrows like there was something else.

"Sorry, are you visiting Savannah?" I asked, dabbing my forehead with the back of my hand, removing pills of sweat along with my foundation.

A big grin appeared on her face. Southern women liked to be flattered. "Oh no, honey, I'm not from New York, just visiting the Big Apple. I'm from Pooler!"

She said that like it was an exciting fact. In reality, Pooler was not an exciting place. Pooler was just outside Savannah and near the airport. People moved to Pooler to get nicer houses for less. People went to Pooler to go to the nice, new movie theater. However, there was nothing charming about Pooler. Savannah had a lot of charming things about her, but Pooler was not one of them.

She continued. "Had enough of the North and coming back home for good? Us Southern girls always return."

People began to stand in front of us and it was our turn to follow. I made a gesture to the front and shrugged, "Well, it was nice speaking to you."

Exiting the plane at the Savannah airport, it slowly came back to me why I lived in New York. The Savannah airport had at the maximum fifteen gates running at a time. It was truly a small airport with one terminal that had slow renovations over the last eight years I had been flying home. The Starbucks was finally getting an upgrade from a seven-foot kiosk to a dining-in experience. The seafood restaurant had shut due to the lack of allure eating seafood in an airport had. If tourists hadn't had seafood in Savannah, they sure as hell wouldn't eat it in an airport. There were advertisements throughout the building for kayaking and charter boats with catchy slogans like *Get the Coastal Experience* or *Every Day Is Vacation in Savannah*, trying to trick tourists into moving here, furthering the false perception of how nice it was to live here.

I made my way through the one perpetually grey terminal and headed down the escalator to baggage claim where traditionally my mom would be waiting. Halfway down the escalator, the world was in order and there my mom stood, beautiful as ever, with her blonde, straight hair and olive skin. We looked similar, except for our hair. A premature grey streak struck the women in our family, running from our widows' peaks straight back. I got mine a year ago. My mom chose to cover hers with blonde, but I went for a chocolate brown, a little darker than my natural color.

"You look like you need a drink, kid," she said, hugging me and trying to take my carry-on out from under my arm.

"I need more than a drink."

"I'm sorry about all of this." She paused and looked at my hand. "Did you at least keep the ring?"

"Mom."

“What? I didn’t say we would hawk it.”

We walked over to one out of the five baggage claim belts and watched the bags go round and round. You could feel the humid air rush in and out through the automatic doors, allowing locals and tourists to enter as they wished. My mom and I had never had a quieter reunion, but I didn’t know what to make of my own thoughts let alone what to tell others. I still had to tell the others...

“Is it weird I’ve got it on?” I asked, raising my hand to eyelevel.

She took a good look at it. “I’d take it as a good sign it’s not in a drawer.”

I nodded.

“How was the flight?” she asked.

“I got my annual *you can take a girl out of the South* speech on the plane,” I said, bending over to get my bag.

“Was your dad on the plane?” she said, miming laughter at her own joke.

“I wish.”

Outside we made our way to short-term parking. My dad was pacing next to the car and looked up when we approached.

“Dad?”

He forced a fatigued smile and shrugged. “Congratulations on the engagement?” he said, giving me a hug.

I could feel my mom giving him daggers behind my back.

“Is this an intervention?” I asked.

My dad just smiled and opened the doors for us like this was a normal day. Now, this may not have been an unusual situation to the naked eye, but it was for me. My parents had been divorced for over a decade. Sure, they were on friendly terms, but only one of them usually picked me up from the airport.

My parents were opposites. My dad had always been a serious man, while my mom missed her calling to be a standup comedian, a true entertainer at heart, always trying to get a response from her audience. My mom grew up in Dallas and my dad grew up in Macon but lived in Atlanta for a lot of his adult life until he met my mom. Atlanta was one of those southern cities that could swing either way, feeling very southern or very northern depending on what area you stayed. There were a lot of transplants from the North that moved there, as it was really becoming a city of big business over the last few years. Of course, many people said that about Savannah.

I had pondered what my relationship would become in self-pitying silence as we drove down the interstate, but as we turned off the exit to downtown Savannah I had to say something. “Is one of you dying or moving to Venezuela?”

“Why Venezuela?” my mom asked.

“You would be entering economic turmoil and need to borrow some money,” I said. “Hey, Dad, can you take Broughton instead of Oglethorpe?”

My dad nodded and took his blinker off, and we waited for the light to continue on to Broughton. Whenever I came back to Savannah, I had to drive down Broughton Street. The stores and restaurants were in constant flux and there were always people out. Downtown as a whole was my happy place in high school before I moved to an actual city. Its forever-cobbled streets that I complained about as much as I loved were laid out in squares that enclosed gardens the city took pride in. Historic townhomes, old by American standards, lined the squares, sometimes acting as museums and other times were actually lived in (probably passed on in families). I did love Savannah no matter how

much I complained about it being too small, but that wasn't why I became desperate to leave.

It was inevitable with me missing so much school my junior year that someone would realize something was wrong, and if that wasn't obvious enough I was added to the prayer list in assembly. Not only do I remember the day when the whole school found out why I had been absent so much, but I also remember that people started to look at me differently. There was a tinge of pity in every adolescent eyeball that watched me in the halls those last two years. Even long after my recovery till I was back to "normal", those glances didn't change. To say I was eager to graduate and move elsewhere would have been an understatement. I was eager to escape a reputation generated for me by a disease, a nonvisible entity, unlike the way many high school reputations are fashioned.

The funny thing was before I was struck with this misfortunate, I had dreamed of moving to New York City, the city that never sleeps, the Big Apple, whatever you call it, but my parents wouldn't hear of it. My father saw me attending some XYZ Southern liberal arts college similar to the one he had been captive to, and my mom saw it as an opportunity to see me more rather than not. There are statistics on people marrying people from the same college and staying in that town and getting married and starting a family. My parents had definitely read those statistics and not that they were pushing marriage on me, they were aware it would happen one day.

Cancer became my get-out-of-jail-free card of the game called Living-Up-To-People's-Expectations and staying in the South forever. I felt an odd sense of relief being told it would be challenging for me to have kids. I was allowed to move away because of the guilt my parents felt for my calamities. I was allowed to move away to a big city where no one knew my struggles in high school. I

could date whoever I wanted and had no pressure of marriage, but somehow I ended up engaged sooner than I had imagined. It was a weird weight off my shoulders that my peers didn't have, but there remained a different kind of weight.

Still primarily silent, I saw my mom and dad looking at each other in the front seat like they were having an entire conversation with their eyes.

Apparently my dad lost because he began to speak. "Sam, we need to tell—"

"Are you kidding me right now?" I interrupted. I couldn't believe it. As we turned down Broughton Street, a McDonalds couldn't have slapped me in the face any sooner. I continued, "McDonalds is ruining the spirit of small town USA. I mean, the nerve of them to put a McDonalds in historic downtown. It's changed the whole aesthetic of the street!"

"But you were okay with the Starbucks a block down?" my dad chuckled.

"That's different. Anyways, seriously, what's going on with you guys?"

My parents looked back and forth at each other again.

My dad won that round, so my mom cleared her throat. "Sam, your dad and I want to tell you something."

They hesitated, looking at one another like they were offering a settlement in a court case, wondering if I'd take the offer.

"Sam," my mom said again, "we've decided to move in together."

"You guys, I'm really fine. I just needed some time to regroup is all."

"It's not because of you, honey, we have been seeing each other."

"Oh," I said, "like *seeing* each other?"

We were already at the opposite end of Broughton passing the famous Leopold's Ice Cream Parlor and the SCAD Theater.

They looked at each other again and both nodded.

I wasn't sure if it was lack of sleep from my own problems, the traveling all day, or the spoils of being an only child, but I began to feel frustration boiling up inside. "When were you planning on telling me? Did you really think you should wait until now to tell me?" I paused. "Wait, how long has this been going on?"

My mom shrugged. "It's been a long time since you've come home, sweetie. It didn't feel right telling you over the phone."

"But it felt right springing it on me that my parents, who have been divorced for a decade, are all happy again in a car ride home?"

My dad cleared his throat. "We didn't know how to bring it up and we would have sooner, but then—"

"My relationship has been put on hold," I blurted out.

We were now turning onto Islands Expressway that took us to the Islands. We lived on Tybee Island, which was the farthest island away by about twenty minutes or so.

"Well, I wouldn't put it like that," my mom said.

I put my head against the car door and closed my eyes.

She tapped my dad on his non-driving arm. "Roger, did you see the ring?"

"I did. It's nice."

When I woke, we were parked in the driveway of my childhood home. I hadn't lived there permanently since I was fifteen. When my parents announced their recent reconciliation, I hadn't thought of which house they were going to cohabitate in. I guess they had decided on the beach house as a neutral location, literally, because it was the last house we all lived in together. I didn't have the energy to question it, so I let muscle memory do the work. I got out of the car,

walked up the stairs, and headed straight for my old bedroom. The bed was made up with fresh, all white bedding. I plopped down and went back to sleep.

In my parents divorce, my mom kept the house, but we eventually moved out and rented it to vacationers. Tybee Island was one of the main draws for tourists coming to Savannah. First stop was usually historic downtown and then to the beach they went. Tybee wasn't your typical beach, though. Filled with eclectic locals, there were no luxury resorts or finely groomed beaches. Tybee was unapologetically Tybee with its below average motels and privately owned rental house market. Tybee was a strange mix of ordinary and extraordinary. It attracted rednecks from the surrounding areas and doctors that wanted second homes two lots away from the beach. The nicest restaurant on the island was located in a gas station's strip mall, but they do the best seared tuna any five-star restaurant could offer. The main road running through the island was home to the first restaurant I ever ate in, the first date I had, and the first alcoholic drink I had. Tybee hosted my memories I wanted to remember. Maybe it would make me lose the ones I wanted to forget for the time being.

Ch. 4 *X's* and *O's*

“Your coffee is getting cold, Sam,” a familiar voice said.

“Will?” I opened my eyes to see my childhood best friend with his back towards me as he raised the blinds, letting some light into my bedroom.

The mid morning sun illuminated the all white room with all white linens. The room was bare, only being a sometimes summer home or a rental property, neither summoning personal trinkets to collect on the empty bookshelf opposite the bed. The only non-white décor was a blue accent chair in the corner, not really accenting anything because it had faded over the years into a chambray color.

Will tried handing me the cup of coffee that I could smell from the nightstand, but I shook my head and sat up.

“That’s how you greet special visitors?” he teased.

Will was sporting his usual summer uniform of white button-down and khaki shorts that hung off his tall, slender but broad frame. Nothing about him screamed southern, so when he moved to Chicago for college he was able to blend in. No southern accent haunting him, only the wardrobe of a southerner that he quickly shed before leaving. He always returned to it when he came home, though, unlike me. In the last few years since attending law school at the University of Georgia, he had created a modern mix of southern and city.

Setting the mug on the nightstand, he threw himself onto the bed next to me. “What do you say we head down to the beach today?” His body was radiating a lot of heat beside me, but I wasn’t sure if he was nervous or it was the walk over to my parents’ house.

“What are you doing here? I thought you were still up in Athens,” I said, rubbing my eyes like he was an illusion, created to make me even more confused than I already was.

“Wanted to surprise my oldest friend.” He paused and looked down.

“Your mom called to say you were back.”

“Sounds like you and my mom should just be friends.”

“You aren’t my only friend left in this town, you know.”

He picked up my hand and moved it back and forth just as my mom had done earlier. The ring had continued to expose me and give me a false persona of the relationship status I didn’t understand myself.

Will spoke again. “So are you engaged or what?”

“Can we not do this now?” I asked, taking my hand back. “I’m still not pleased with you.”

Will sighed and stood up, walking around to my side of the bed. He kneeled down so we were face to face and I had to look at him. The only thing time had done to his appearance was the maturation to grow facial hair, which he never grew anyway. His hair had always been a caramel color with a slightly nineties haircut style, enhanced by summer sun, and his skin just past the point of sun kissed. His prominent nose and full lips made him different but handsome.

I could feel Will also examining my face, perhaps taking note of how I had changed as well. I wondered how he felt about the last time we saw each other when he visited me in New York. He didn’t appear to be thinking anything bad, though, his face relaxed with a slight smile curled on his lips that matched his usually happy-go-lucky disposition. He was unusually cheerful given the last time we saw each other wasn’t all laughs and giggles.

He spoke again, but this time he took my hand out from under my chin and used a serious tone. "I have something to tell you," he said pausing, looking at me like he was going to apologize or confess something deep.

"Okay," I said, patiently waiting.

"Your *fiancé* takes a punch as good as he gives one." The seriousness evaded his face and he broke into hysterics. So Will was going to joke his way out of this one.

"Oh for God sakes, Will," I said, shoving him away from the bed and jumping up.

Still laughing, he said, "Ah, come on, Sam, you didn't think you were that lucky to have two proposals in one week, did you?"

And just like that, we were Sam and Will again.

I went out into the hallway and went into the bathroom. "Very funny. Tell my mom I'll be down in a minute," I said, closing the door.

I heard him gallop back down the stairs, murmuring something presumably to my parents as he hit the last step.

Since we both moved away from Savannah for college, we had our biannual reunions and that was about it. But that was the plan for the both of us all along. We were never meant to remain next-door neighbors the rest of our lives, meaning we were never meant to stay in Savannah. We were meant to fly the nest and pretend we belonged somewhere else. It was working for a good eight years until now. Well, nine for Will, actually. He was a year older in school, but he took five years to finish his degree plus law school. I had been proud of us getting out and staying gone, up until Will decided to follow in his parents' footsteps and attend their alma matter, the University of Georgia. After five years in Chicago, he knew it would be a culture shock attending a southern university, but he

claimed it was who he was or who he was meant to be. You can only fight the current for so long, I found him saying right before he moved to Athens. It would be easier for everyone involved. His future was laid out for him. He would attend the University of Georgia, working summers back in Savannah at his parents' law firm. His parents would have a successor; he would have a guaranteed career.

When he went off to college a year before me, I wondered how I would survive my senior year of high school without him. I had alienated myself from everyone imaginable except Will. I spent that last year dreaming of my fresh start that he told me I'd love. And I did love it. I loved New York, but now it felt tainted like it wasn't my escape but I was an escapist trying to make my way through and out of a maze.

I could hear my mom's voice changing octaves every few minutes when she would get excited in the conversation. I threw on my NYU hoodie over my t-shirt and sweatpants and trotted down the stairs to find only my dad sitting in the living room despite it sounding like they all were. That was always the problem with this house. It was too condensed so the sound traveled quite easily. It was a beach house, so it was built up high. We finished the basement off to be an extra room, but really it was two stories with the main living area on the first floor and the master and two guest beds on the second floor. The downstairs was completely open so you could see the ocean view through the glass doors. The living room drifted into the dining room, which was connected to the living room so there was no privacy. On the other hand, I loved this house for the very same reason because you couldn't escape people. You couldn't hide. Maybe I did need to be here.

"Sleep well?" my dad asked, trying to be casual and act like he was reading his paper and not waiting for me to come down.

Will came from around the corner and plopped down next to him on the couch. He looked more at ease than my dad despite my dad and my mom bought the house together many years ago.

“Okay, I guess. Did you eat already?” I sat down next to my dad.

My mom poked her head out from around the corner. “Did someone say they were hungry?”

My dad stood up, putting down his paper and rubbing his stomach. “I think we’re all hungry.”

Will nudged me and whispered, “What they’re not telling you is we’ve eaten twelve times. Each time we heard you make a noise, your mom would make new eggs in anticipation of you coming down so we just had to keep eating and eating. And now we will pretend to eat if you’ll eat.”

Poking her head out again, my mom said, “I heard that, William.”

We all stood up and went to the dining table as my mom shuffled serving trays and pans onto the table with oven mitts. I’m not sure if it was only a southern woman thing, but my mom was in full hair and makeup at all times of the day. She was naturally a pretty woman with no makeup, so I wasn’t sure why she bothered. It wasn’t over the top, though. It was no makeup makeup, as the beauty bloggers called it.

After we all took a seat, my mom began to rattle off the menu for the morning in her faux Southern accent. “So, this mornin’ on the table are warm, buttery sausage biscuits that are so good they make you wanna slap your mama, but don’t because Mama wouldn’t like that. Next, we have quiche a la Pooler, which means I put everything leftover in the fridge in it. That’s what you get, Child, for not given Mama a warning.” She paused and ran over to the oven and pulled out a third dish, examining it like it was her examination for Le Cordon

Bleu in Paris. She looked at us out of the corner of her eye. “The sweet potato soufflé is for later, so don’t get any ideas.”

My dad cleared his throat like it was the go ahead to begin the feast, so Will and I began on the sausage biscuits. After my mom was done fiddling in the kitchen, she took a seat with us and began serving the quiche on everyone’s plate.

“So, Will,” my mom began, “your mom tells me you’re graduated and working at the firm as a permanent thing, now?”

Will nodded and managed to get out a *yes ma’am* in between bites of quiche.

“Does that mean you’ll give me free legal advice if I decide this marriage is a mistake again?” my mom asked, punctuated with her signature wink. She leaned over to my father and kissed his cheek. “I’m joking, Roger, I’m joking.”

I swear my mom was a better flirt that I ever was. She would always get mad at me for not being friendly enough to bartenders or waiters that were young and handsome. She could command a room with just a line or two and a friendly smile. After bringing us a cocktail at a bar, she would grab my arm and say, “It wouldn’t kill you to smile at the poor boy.” That would follow with me saying, “You can have him if you like him so much,” and then it usually died there. My point is my mom was an exceptional flirt. Maybe it was another southern woman thing. I missed that etiquette lesson in Cotillion. That must have been why my Debutante invitation went missing...

Will just laughed and then swallowed a forkful of quiche before speaking. “Well of course, Ms. Seymour,” he said, narrowly avoiding the direct question.

I spoke up. “I still don’t get why you don’t just try going out on your own for a bit before coming back *here*.”

My mother ignored my comment and continued the interrogation, prying some more. “Trisha also says Catherine might be moving down with you?”

Will’s face went blank. “Well my mom doesn’t have all the facts. We’re just playing it by ear for the summer.”

“Catherine?” I asked.

Stuffing more quiche in his mouth to avoid answering, Will just nodded.

My mom went on. “Yes, Trisha says it’s getting quite serious. It’s been a year now?”

We both ignored my mom. Will and I just stared at each other.

We both had secrets.

I began to grip my fork tighter. “So you were seeing her when—”

“Yeah,” Will interrupted, “I was.”

“Interesting,” I said, finally breaking Will’s stare and looking at the clock above his head on the wall like I had somewhere to be. For once in eight years, I had nowhere to be but so desperately wanted to have to run across the city to make a deadline or jump in a cab to drop off photos for a cover. But no, I was here with nothing to do but endure. I spoke again. “So how did that happen? You’ve never really been a dater.”

“Neither have you,” he said.

“So how did you meet her?”

Will put his fork down. “Well, it just kind of happened. We’re both in law school, and then it just happened, you know?”

I nodded, “Yeah, I can imagine.”

I don’t know exactly what I was imagining, but it wasn’t how a classmate relationship blossomed suddenly and he forgot to tell me.

My mom looked back and forth at us trying to figure out what code we were speaking, but my dad just continued eating and periodically clearing his throat to get my mom to stop staring at us staring at each other. My dad had always been busy eating and never present in the first half of meals like his drill sergeant in the Army was still standing in front of him yelling at him to finish. The second half of the meal was his time to shine in the conversation, though. Unfortunately, it wasn't halftime yet and my mom was still in the game.

“But you two have been apart for the last semester?” my mom continued.

Nodding, Will said, “Yeah, Catherine was in London for an internship this last semester, so she has one more to go and we may or—”

I got up from the table and headed towards the front door as everyone turned to watch.

“Sam!” my mom shouted, “where are you going, sweetie?”

“To the beach,” I said with no expression.

“But you're not dressed properly for—”

Her voice silenced as I closed the door behind me. I shuffled down the stairs and as I hit the concrete of the cul-de-sac, I regretted skipping shoes. The late morning sun had always been unkind to the black asphalt, but I knew when I hit the wooden bridge to the beach, I'd be okay. Pink oleanders lined the sidewalk before the bridge, which I never understood because they're technically poisonous. They could kill a small dog if it ate enough. I asked my dad once why no one ever removed them if they were poisonous, and he said, technically a lot of things are poisonous. I guess everyone was used to having something toxic around them.

Reaching the top of the arch on the bridge, I stopped and looked back at our street. Seven houses were laid out on the cul-de-sac, all which had been first

homes at one point but were now unused second homes to all but one, Professor Jacobs. Once upon a time, Professor Glen Jacobs was a professor of physics at The University of Edinburgh. He was a Southerner by birth, but shortly moved to study in the United Kingdom and went on to become a world-renowned physicist. My mom, the nosey person she is, read all about him when he first bought on our street around the time she and my dad did years ago. She would say there was something sad about him traveling the world and speaking at conferences to some of the smartest people in the world, only to move back to Tybee Island, nowhere Georgia, zip code *no one knows who you are*. I felt sad for him, too. I know I didn't move away and become something great, but I felt like I couldn't become something great if I didn't move away again. But he was in his eighties, widowed, and had money from books and speaking engagements, so I guess he was set to settle and live quietly for now until...

In all the years we lived out at the beach, we never saw much of Professor Jacobs. I had always imagined him sitting in a laboratory he had created in his basement, still working away, though I wasn't sure physicists actually needed labs.

As I gave Professor Jacobs' house on the corner one last glance, the garage door opened and out came his silver Volvo station wagon. He was in the driver's seat; the passenger seat still remained empty after ten years without his wife. He saw me standing on the bridge and gave a small hand gesture. I waved and continued on down to the beach through the sand dunes. My parents used to be pretty friendly with him and his wife, but over time things changed with his wife dying, my parents getting divorced, and us moving into town as we became those who rarely returned to the street as well. But here we were, all in the house yet again, and it was a weird feeling.

The sand was a weird feeling in my toes, not as hot as the asphalt but it wasn't as refreshing as the water would be. As my feet sunk in the loose sand, I felt my heart simultaneously tugging at my head. Everyone was moving, moving around, and moving on, except for me. I needed to sit, so I powered through the soft part of the beach to the packed sand and lowered myself to the ground. There were a lot of benefits to living on the north end of Tybee, like virtually having a private beach to sit on. Most of the tourists were contained to the south end by the pier, except for ones parked by the lighthouse. But on this sliver of sand in front of our bridge, it was empty and all mine.

No sooner had I picked up a piece of dried marsh grass and started to write something in the sand did I hear Will's voice shouting from behind me. I ran my hands over the three words I had written before he reached me.

Will dropped down next to me in the sand. "I thought you said you didn't want to go to the beach today?" he smirked.

"Cut it out, Will."

He threw his hands up and said, "What do you want me to say?"

"Nothing."

"Fine," he sighed. "We'll just sit here, then."

"Fine."

It felt like we were back in high school again. Picking up my makeshift pencil, he began to draw in the sand on my clean slate. He sketched a tic-tac-toe board and when he was finished he nodded at me. I drew an *X*, then he drew an *O*, and then so on and so forth until it was a stalemate and he cleared it off and we began again. After a couple of games, we started speaking again.

"So what's Catherine like?" I asked.

I remember two years ago when I began dating Phillip, and Will had asked me the same exact question. His voice had sounded so disinterested but interested at the same time in what was to follow. I hoped mine had sounded more convincing.

“She’s nice,” Will said, “You’d like her.”

That was what I had said about Phillip, and we both knew how untrue that was.

“Really? Does she like T.S. Eliot?” I asked.

He chuckled, “No, I didn’t say she was like you, but you’d like her.” He paused. “She likes reality T.V.”

We both simultaneously laughed and shivered as if just hearing the television genre’s name would curse us into having to personally participate in the next show. Halfway through a round of tic-tac-toe, he wiped the sand anew and cleared his throat. “Yeah, but, uh, she didn’t make the cut.”

“No?” I asked, trying to make it sound as sympathetic as possible, despite a smile curled on my mouth for some reason. “Was the reality T.V. really a deal breaker?”

“Like I said earlier, my mom doesn’t have all the facts.” Will looked up and smiled his natural pose.

A positive thing in our friendship was we could always tell when the other person wanted to talk or didn’t. This was a time to leave it, so Will drew another grid and went first.

*O.*

## Ch. 5 South Side

It was a Tuesday morning and I had left Tybee bright and early to head to the South Side to see my doctor. It may have seemed like the only reason I had returned to Savannah was to save myself from explaining my floundering love life to my New York peers, but I needed to get some clear answers once and for all for my own peace of mind, let alone Phillip's.

I always found it funny when tourists would visit Savannah and stay downtown and think that was representative of the whole city. It would be like going to New York and thinking residents of the city spent all of their time feeding the ducks in Central Park or going to The Rainbow Room in Rockefeller Center. It may be something they do from time to time, but it is not the matter of their existence.

A part of Savannah that tourists generally never see was the South side of town, fondly referred to as the "South Side". Every town has it, the part of the city that has yet to be beautified but is slowly being gentrified. It's the commercial, concrete mess that has nothing to offer except a few Starbucks, car dealerships, and a mall that had been continuously decaying.

Before my appointment, I took a detour down Mall Boulevard. Mall Boulevard was next to the mall and housed one of every major fast food establishments. It was one of those areas of town where if we were sitting idle in a car, my mom would say *keep your doors locked*, as if anyone unlocked their doors sitting at a stop light. I would risk my doors being locked or unlocked for Chick-Fil-A. Every major region in the United States has that one fast food chain they are proud of and people obsess over like it's the second coming of Jesus. The West Coast has In-N-Out, the Northeast has Shake Shack, and the South has

Chick-fil-A. I was never one for fast food, but there was something about Chick-fil-A that was just short of an addiction.

Once in the drive-thru, I rolled my window down in preparation to order. I pushed the lock button just to make sure it knew to not unlock while waiting for my chicken.

“Hi, welcome to Chick-fil-A, may I please take your order?” the voice said through the intercom.

“Yes, may I have the chicken minis with hash browns and a sweet tea?”

If you were lucky enough to make it to Chick-fil-A for breakfast, you didn’t skimp on the carbs.

“If that completes your order, you can pull around to the window, ma’am.”

“Great, thank you,” I said, taking my foot off the break to collect my order.

In Savannah, there was always something else waiting for you around the corner.

“Sam Seymour!” the drive-thru voice said, now suddenly having a face and an identity.

“Kelly?” I said. “What a great surprise! What are you doing here?”

A pristinely primped teenager stood inside the window wearing the drive-thru headset, looking more like a pop star than an hourly wage worker.

“It’s my summer job before college!” Kelly exclaimed. “What are you doing here?” She handed me my order and took the ten-dollar bill from me.

“I thought Will would have told you that I’m back for a visit.”

“He did, but he told me to pretend I didn’t know so he doesn’t seem like an obsessive stalker,” she giggled before pausing and put a finger up. “Hi, I’ll be right with you,” she said to the next customer.

“I’m surprised your folks didn’t stick you in their office for the summer. Doesn’t the Wallace family like new lawyers in the making?” I teased.

“I wanted to be out with the people, you know, doing a normal kid job. My parents are happy enough with Will joining the firm to let me do whatever I want.” Kelly paused to smile at a tall, dark, and handsome boy behind her that looked roughly her age and then turned to grin at me. She leaned out of the window and whispered, “If only my parents were too distracted to notice me dating a black guy.” She said this as she meant it, with a childlike honesty coated in her parents’ reality.

“You’ll be in Atlanta soon enough,” I said.

“Did Will tell you I’m living downtown? Loads of...” she paused and then mouthed, “*black guys*.” Will’s sister proudly beamed, a mini Will bucking the system. That phase could only last so long in the Wallace family, though.

I smiled, “Yes, Atlanta will be amazing.” I could see the cars behind me inching forward as much as possible to encourage me to move up. “Let’s grab Mexican food before we both leave.”

“Okay, bye, Sammy!” she shrieked.

Readjusting her headset, she pushed a button and began taking orders again. I just hoped she wouldn’t take orders the rest of her life in other ways.

~

It was not the first time that I had heard a parent discourage their white child, especially white daughter, not to associate with black kids, let alone in a romantic sense. I didn’t judge Kelly for her inability to put an end to this harmful rhetoric.

I never had to be told not to date one of the few black boys in my school simply because I had other more pressing things going on with my body to notice boys in general. However, my mother had once questioned one friendship of mine... High school had not been an easy time for me, particularly in the last half. I lost many things in the matter of a few months, one thing being my friends. In great times of sadness and frustration, I would skip lunch and hide in the computer lab with my protein shake (an effort to avoid the cafeteria all together) and faux homework that needed to be finished. One day, exhausted from what God had thrown at me and taken away from me, I just rested my head on the desk and closed my eyes, hoping for the day to be over as soon as possible, but then I heard a voice.

“Sam Seymour?” the voice said.

I jumped and sat up to find a girl standing over me holding a basket of fries.

“Hi, Jade. Is it Spanish class already?”

“No, we still have thirty minutes of lunch left.” Jade took the seat next to me and took out a notebook. “I had some homework to finish up, too.” She put the fries in front of me. “I thought you might want some company,” she said, smiling cautiously.

I nodded, accepting the gift. “That homework took me forever.”

“Would you help me with it?” Jade asked.

I laughed. “We both know you’re better at Spanish than I am.”

She shrugged. “Everyone needs help sometimes.” Jade smiled.

She had a beautiful smile. She wasn’t one of the girls who wore a lot of makeup to school. A brush of mascara and her hair pulled back into a tight ponytail was her look everyday, but it suited her clear complexion. We were

about the same height and weight until I went through rounds of chemo and lost body fat and muscle. I imagined when we walked around people thought she looked like the healthier version of me, smiling and happy and nourished. It was contagious, though. Before senior year was over, I, too, smiled more and looked like I had blood running through my veins again.

Jade looked at me in the eyes when she spoke to me. She sat close enough that she would have been able to “catch” whatever everyone in school thought I had, thanks to Mary Elizabeth. And she never once brought up the *C* word, cancer, unless I had come in late from an appointment. How was the doctors, was all she would ask. It was enough.

Our favorite thing to do was go to the Sonic drive-thru and order four different slushies and mix the flavors ourselves. We would sit in her car and listen to whatever new album had just come out on repeat and slurp our sugary drinks and talk about leaving Savannah. I had always thought that if I had been friends with Jade and Will at the same time, the three of us would have done the same kinds of things together.

Once, when I had gotten up for a glass of water in the middle of the night, I heard my mom talking to my dad on the phone.

“Roger,” she had said, “it would be different if she had more friends, but her only friend is the only black girl in the whole damn school.” She paused to listen to him. “I know, I know, but she will be known for that, you can’t help people’s minds. I’m going to have a word with her.”

That was my cue. I raced down the stairs and unplugged the phone from the wall.

“Samantha, what are you doing?”

“What am I doing?” I said. “What are you doing? Plotting to take my only friend away from me?”

“Sweetie, you have to understand. People will look at you differently if that’s the only person you associate with. It’s just other people will see you a different way.”

“A different way? A different way than what? People only know me as the girl with cancer, and I think I’ll take my chances as being the white girl that hangs out with black people than the girl that has cancer!” I said, storming back upstairs.

My mother and I never spoke of that night again. A week later she invited Jade over for dinner and we had spaghetti and meatballs.

~

Outside the hospital, I waited for my appointment time like I was waiting for a curtain call, trying to remember my lines and the points I wanted to make to the audience, while I consumed my daily caloric intake coated in peanut oil. I wasn’t sure if it was seeing Kelly as she reminded me of myself at her age, or if it was sitting outside a place that was unfortunately familiar, but I couldn’t help but think about how my life could have been different without the cancer intruding when it did. I knew I had gotten off easy compared to most, but it wasn’t the actual cancer I lamented. It was how it changed my timeline and path I were to go down.

## Ch. 6 The Waiting Room

Sitting in the waiting room of the gynecologist's office wasn't much better than my car. Visiting the gynecologist's office in your hometown is a rumor waiting to happen. It's like dropping an Alka-Seltzer tablet in water; there's only a certain amount of time until it reaches every single particle in the cup. Not only does the thought of someone seeing you and making the assumption that you're with child produce anxiety, but the thought of waiting rooms in general makes my skin crawl.

All waiting rooms produce the same feelings. It feels like you've been waiting forever no matter the time that's passed. It feels like it will never happen, yet it feels so inevitable. Every time they call someone's name, you lunge at the thought it's your own and your waiting game can gladly come to a halt.

I became way to familiar with this game.

~

As I sat in the waiting room for Dr. Nelson, I couldn't help but remember the first time I had played the game ten years ago. I was never a sick child, always playing basketball or riding my bike. Living by the beach, I spent summers coated in sunscreen and covered with sand, eating boiled peanuts and drinking Crystal Light lemonade. After discovering romance novels and boys, I spent the summers reading, writing, and daydreaming from the safety of my own porch. I started high school and my parents got divorced. It was a complete surprise. I never saw them as two people who couldn't figure something out. They had been dreamers like me. They spoke of love and passion and hope. All of a sudden, all of those illusions were shattered, but I continued writing and started reading Salinger and Hemingway, the realists of romance.

My parents' love had dissolved within a matter of a few signed papers and a move from our house on Tybee Island to a suburb on Wilmington Island. Despite my heart had hardened a little after seeing this, I still believed that I could find a love of my own.

A few months after their divorce, there was yet another surprise. Will, the person who had stuck by my side during my parents drama-less yet pain-filled separation, asked me to dinner. This was no ordinary dinner, no. It wasn't at one of our usual establishments we visited as friends. It wasn't greasy bar food after watching the football games on Friday nights. It was a date at the Sundae Café. The Sundae Café was one of Tybee's finer dinner fares. Despite being located in a strip mall behind a gas station off Highway 80, they had the best crispy scored flounder in Savannah.

"What's the catch?" I had asked him.

"I'm sure they'll tell us what the specials are on Friday," Will joked.

Even at seventeen, Will was smooth.

I glared at him. "I mean, what is the occasion? Won't the guys be expecting you to go out after the game?"

"No, they never expect anything from me," he paused, "so what do you say?"

The dinner had gone better than any date I had read about in my romance novels. The feelings floating around all summer had not been an illusion created by the plots of the characters I daydreamed about. My childhood best friend was sitting in front of me asking me for a chance to leave childhood behind and move hand in hand into adulthood. He would be leaving for college in a year, but that didn't have to change anything either, he insisted.

That autumn we gave into the changing of seasons for a changing of our own. We were seen as an unlikely couple but not a surprise. We continued watching football games on Fridays together in the bleachers. He took me to the parties I never went to and introduced me as his girlfriend. It was a cheesy romance novel.

In the span of two weeks, everything changed. We had been dating for two months and known each other our whole lives before deciding to have sex. The only perks of having divorced parents were the cloudiness of my location and an empty beach house, so at last we completed the novel's rising action by spending a weekend alone. It was a dream. But every good reader and writer should know the rising action comes with peaks and valleys, triumphs and tribulations.

The tribulations began.

Two weeks later I was throwing up, had missed my period, and had abdominal pain. I called Will and he came right over. I remember the panic and exhilaration in his eyes as he came in the door to my room after school that day, CVS bag in hand.

"Did anybody see you?" I had asked, taking the bag. I walked to the bathroom and shut the door. I could hear his footsteps walk right up to the door and stop.

"No one ever goes to that CVS." He sounded out of breath. "Are you sure it's what you think it is?"

I held the pink box in my hands, carefully reading the instructions. "That's the problem with two virgins getting together is no one knows what the hell is going on."

And we didn't. Had there been better sex education in our school, let alone the South, we could have saved ten bucks.

“Your mom’s going to kill me after your dad kills me twice.”

I followed the instructions and then waited. I opened the door.

“What does it say?” Will asked.

I burst into tears and fell into his arms.

“It’s okay, it’ll be fine,” he said, patting my hair. “Let’s just wait and see.”

From an early age, Will had learned to tell women *it’ll be fine, it’ll be okay, let’s just wait and see what happens*, phrases he had learned from his father. I’m not sure it was always fine, though.

“Okay,” I said, going back into the bathroom. I picked the test up. It was negative. “Maybe it’s wrong.”

Will took the stick from me. His face lit up. “Maybe it’s wrong? I don’t want it to be wrong. You’re okay, you’re not pregnant.”

I sighed. “It’s good and all, but I still feel funny.”

“You probably just have the stomach flu. Get some rest and I’ll call you tomorrow,” he said, kissing me on the cheek and walking out quickly.

I could hear him trot down the stairs and the front door open and then shut as he escaped from our covert operation.

I hadn’t gotten better like Will had hoped so I went to my doctor. They had first told my mom that it was the stomach flu, but I still felt strange. In my body, I knew there was something wrong, I never imagined it was cancer. I actually still thought I was pregnant, and when I suggested that to my mom, she said I couldn’t be so not to mention it again. I didn’t know if my mom thought I was inferring I was the Virgin Mary, but I knew I had had sex. I had had sex with Will, my childhood best friend, my first love, my confidant, and my only until Phillip. After having test after test, they decided to do a pelvic ultrasound, which showed I

did not have a human growing inside of me, but I did have a grade 3 tumor growing within me. I had a dysgerminoma tumor. The doctor said this in no way was (or had to be) fatal, but that initial shock of *I have cancer* was enough to do someone in. When a doctor tells you there is cancer inside of your body, there is no other moment in life that compares to it. There is fear, there is this overwhelming pain that hits you that asks what in God's name have I done to deserve something like this. There is a longing to be the most normal, mundane acting, prescriptively boring person that you have ever met, that person who people assumed would amount to nothing but anything is better than being told you have cancer. I never wanted my life to amount to nothing, but it could never amount to something if you weren't alive to make that mistake of nothingness. Nothingness was better than nothing at all, lights out, over.

I screamed, I cried, I flailed my limbs about like a small child having a tantrum because the unknown was terrifyingly bewildering. My mom held me like she had the week prior when I came home crying when I would be allowed to leave the hellhole known as high school in the South with terribly narrow-minded people who were shirts with fish on them on a daily basis. The question that swum around in my mind was would I die in this hellhole? Even though it had been looking up since Will and I began dating and I promised to embrace my new social status, it was not the place I wanted to be.

In and out of the hospital for months, I managed to escape the episode with only my right ovary and fallopian tube being removed and three chemotherapy sessions for good measure. I knew I had been lucky for many reasons, even ones unbeknownst to me at the time. I had to thank God or whoever was listening for my good fortune. Everyone needs a good life or death

experience to have in memories, never to be murmured to anyone but your own mind.

I can remember my first and only visitor after I came home from the hospital after the surgery. I had come out of a deep sleep, either drug induced or a self-preservation technique I had adopted, to find Will standing by my bed. He had always been good about surprising me.

I tried to speak, but he put his fingers up to my mouth and knelt down to my level. His face was calm but his eyes slowly swelled up with tears. It's a strange day when you see a Southern man, raised by a cold, tough father, cry.

“Did the doctor tell you any good jokes?” Will asked, choking back tears.

I shook my head. “I was asleep, you idiot.”

He took my hand. “I know, I know. I just need to hear a good joke.”

“I can tell you a good story?”

For once in a long time, a real smile spread across Will's face. “Shoot.”

“Once upon a time, there was this girl. She was of above average intelligence, brilliant actual—”

“The smartest girl in the world.”

“No interrupting.”

“Sorry, continue.”

“But she was an average girl in the kingdom. Then one day, the kingdom's prince arrived at her doorstep and swept her off her feet. From then on, they were madly in love and happy together. Until one day. All of a sudden, a series of tragic events kept happening to her. Her horse died, her family lost their small fortune, and she even fell sick with a terrible disease. The prince was always there for her through it all. He was loyal, kind, and still the most beautiful prince she had ever seen. But she could see she was hurting him—”

“Sam, stop, don’t—”

“It’s impolite to interrupt, Will,” I said, swallowing the lump in my throat.

“So she gracefully bowed out of the prince’s life. She knew there was no place for tragedy in the prince’s life and she needed to set him free because he would never do it. And so she did and he was happy. The end.”

Will turned away from me for a second to wipe the tears streaming down his face. “What about the girl? Was she happy?”

I stood my ground. “Her story is still continuous, so we will see. But for now, at least the prince can be happy.”

Will shook his head. “You make me happy. You’re my best friend, Sammy. You’re my—”

“I can still be your best friend. I just can’t be anything else...anymore.” I paused. “I can’t...”

The moment he let go of my hand, I knew I wouldn’t get another chance with him. I just didn’t know how right I really was.

With one ovary and one fallopian tube down, the doctors had been insistent upon chemotherapy. Dr. Nelson had been with me through all of it, always double and triple checking any results she could read. My mom and I sat in her office as she looked over the latest scans and test another doctor had sent over.

Dr. Nelson pursed her lips as she read the results. When she had finished, she took her glasses off and pushed the papers aside. “I understand you weren’t happy with the suggestion made.”

My mom let go of my hand and spoke. “We thought she’d be able to avoid chemo. They said it hadn’t spread.”

Dr. Nelson nodded. “This is not a very common case to begin with, but generally the patient can escape with just an ovary being removed. It doesn’t look as if it’s spread, but to make sure, they would like Sam to have chemo. Children are pretty resilient towards chemo, and it will relieve worry of it coming back. This probably raises many concerns for your family, but there are solutions.”

My mom looked at me as I sat there in silence, as there was no reason for me to speak. I hadn’t been in charge of my body in months, or my life for that matter.

“Will she be able to have kids?” my mom whispered, like they had also removed one of my ears and I was hard of hearing.

“Mom.”

“Sweetie, I know you don’t want to talk about this now, but one day you will thank me.”

And one day I almost did.

Chemotherapy was no walk in the park, but when does any book or movie ever portray it as such? If cancer (the first *C* word) didn’t isolate me, then chemo (the second *C* word) certainly did. The second *C* word was different, though. It did change me; it hardened me into a shell of myself, unable to open up or allow anyone in, not even Will. Not that he was around much anyway. We would see each other in the hallways on the weeks I felt well enough to attend school, but we treated each other like ghosts. Our relationship was in the past and couldn’t be gotten back. This especially came true after I saw him leaving school with another girl in the front seat of his car.

A year after finishing chemo, it was as if nothing had ever happened. Almost. I was one ovary down, the other left was questionable, and my eggs were frozen. It was a strange concept at seventeen to think about, the notion of wanting children one day enough to protect my future (or in my case, my mother wanting me to have that chance). On the outside, no one would have been able to guess what I had just been through if they hadn't gone to my school, been a neighbor, a family friend; it felt as if the world did know my hair was shoulder length because I had lost it all months ago and had to wait for it to be even that long to ditch my statement beanie.

But I knew everything had changed.

## Ch. 7 Time's Up

“Samantha Seymour?”

I shook the past out of my head and stood up, following the nurse through the door to the back and into another room where I would do even more waiting. In this room, however, you could breathe easy knowing you were alone without assumptions or eyes on you. I knew the drill, so as soon as the nurse closed the door, I disrobed and changed into the paper gown and waited for Dr. Nelson to come in.

Posters lined the wall, warning those who waited about cysts and explaining the importance of mammograms. I wished an automated speaker sat on the counter in between the cotton swabs and tissue box, audibly announcing the need to take precautions and trust your body's instincts. If there were, more women would survive perilous female-oriented diseases.

“Knock, knock,” Dr. Nelson said, poking her head in the door.

She entered, bringing the comfort of a mother and the knowledge of a doctor disposition she had perfected over the years. We hugged and exchanged pleasantries about my mom and dad's reconciliation (she was also my mom's gynecologist). I wasn't sure if it was customary to hug and gab with your gynecologist, but we had been through a lot together so it was our norm.

Then, as many had done so in first sighting, Dr. Nelson covered her mouth looking at the ring and said, “Samantha, you are engaged!”

I forced a smile. “I am. That's sort of why I'm here.”

“Babies,” Dr. Nelson stated.

“Exploring the possibilities,” I said.

“I had a feeling when I saw they added a last minute appointment to my books. It’s only my—” she paused to think. “It’s only my *special* patients that they do that for.”

“I appreciate it,” I said. “So, what do you think my options are, in terms of...” I felt like my mother ten years ago, asking how we preserved my fertility as a sixteen year old. It was just as weird now and it was then.

“Have you tried to conceive naturally yet?” Dr. Nelson asked.

I shifted around, the paper gown crinkling. “No, but I wanted to collect a little more...data before we began. But the cat’s out of the bag now, so the data is coming a little late.”

“The cat’s out of the bag?” Dr. Nelson asked. “Your fiancé didn’t know about the...cat before?”

After my diagnosis, I didn’t like saying any of the *C* words, so Dr. Nelson came up with *cat* as a replacement word.

“No, I didn’t tell him about the cat until recently,” I said.

Dr. Nelson pursed her lips and nodded. “We can run some preliminary tests to see what levels we are starting with. It’s a simple blood test. We could even do a pelvic ultrasound today because the technician is in. As you know, we have had our concerns about this day because of your irregular cycles, but I’m glad you’re coming to me now. The good news is you are healthy in all other ways and are young. Let’s not jump to any conclusions before we get some information to look at.”

I shivered at the thought of more tests, but what we are willing to do for love...

“What is your guess now, though? Percentage wise, you know? Fifty fifty I could conceive naturally? Twenty eighty?” I said.

Dr. Nelson took my hand. “I want you to succeed as much as you do, so we will do these tests so we can see what needs to be done next and take it from there.”

I clinched my jaw. “Realistically though, what do you think my chances are of avoiding IVF?”

Dr. Nelson smiled. “Honey, we are going to do everything we can to give you what you want. You’ve just got to have some patience with the process.”

“Everything I want meaning?”

“Babies,” she said. She said it like she was saying *it’s your birthday* or *who wants a piece of chocolate cake*. It didn’t evoke the same sentiment as either of those, though.

“Can I ask you something?” I said.

“Certainly.”

I took a deep breath and let my next sentence out with the breath, both being held in for a while. “Do you think most women want kids?”

My doctor paused a few seconds, always careful in her answers. “I think everyone is different. Don’t you want kids?”

“I want to think about having kids. My fiancé wants kids.”

“What do you want?”

“A less complicated decision. He’s Catholic.”

She laughed. “So he wants a big family? Is that a stereotype?”

“I don’t know, but he wants a naturally conceived family. Or thinks he does.”

Dr. Nelson stood up and started looking at my chart on the counter and preparing for my examination. “Sounds like you just need some time to think things through. It’s a lot though. You could write a book about it.”

She casually said this over her shoulder. It was not meant in any serious fashion, but it got me thinking.

“Surely there are loads of books about this.”

“You’d be surprised. Teen cancer, yes. But then dealing with the aftermath and starting a family? I think that’s a new one. Work loves to give me books on anything related to this business.”

“You could start a pretty depressing library.”

Dr. Nelson giggled. “Not all of those stories end badly.” She paused. “And yours doesn’t have to either.”

“How do you know if you want something because you want it or because others want it for you?”

Closing the folder, she took a seat on the rolling stool in front of me. “This might be a bit of a hokey thing to suggest, but maybe writing down your journey would help you see where you’ve been and where you’re going.” She paused. “Are you ready to begin?”

“Yes, I’m ready.”

I knew she was talking about the exam, but it felt bigger than that. It felt bigger than when I said yes to the proposal or to New York University or anything else.

My time was up and I was going to have to start facing the reality of my future, my adulthood, my womanhood. What would define me as a person, a woman, a wife? What would shape my gifted years for the rest of my life?

But who is ever ready to figure out what they really want?

## Ch. 8 Sixteen Year Old Customs

It's difficult to know where to begin if you've not done it before. This might sound like an intuitive statement, and it is, but nevertheless it's true. How can you see the finish line when the starting line is nowhere in sight?

I wondered this as I sat at home with my laptop on the back of the porch looking at the ocean. The water was calm, but every now and then the wind would pick up and blow the tree branches around for an aerobic dance. Two pages were open on my screen: one on fertility options and one on *writing and healing* (a link Dr. Nelson had sent me). How would I write about my life if I couldn't make sense of it myself? Could I have kids? If I could, did I want them? If I couldn't, did I still want them? It felt like one of those cheesy teen magazine quizzes like *choose your destiny* or *my perfect boyfriend*, established by a series of questions. They were all clear questions, but there was so much more to ask.

These questions would have to be answered another time because I heard a car pulling into the driveway. I shut my computer as I heard footsteps coming up the stairs of the porch. The mumbled voices sounded like our neighbors on the corner, the Grahams. They were early retirees who came and went from Tybee as they pleased but they mainly lived in Atlanta. It's a strange sound hearing the doorbell ring when you're not in the house, almost like you're the visitor ringing the bell and waiting. I wanted to hold my breath and not make a sound in hopes they would just leave. I could almost guess how the conversation would go, and it had already been a long morning of tests for that. I didn't hold my breath quietly enough because the steps seemed to be coming around to the back.

“*Saaamaaanthaaa Seeeymooour?*” a female voice sang.

There the Grahams were with some sort of potted plant in hand with a balloon on a stick that said *Congrats*. I stood to greet them.

“Hi, how are y’all?” I said, putting on my most friendly voice, the voice one does for pleasantries in the South.

The Grahams had accentuated smiles on their faces. They answered in unison. “Great, great, great!”

Mrs. Graham reached forward to hand me the plant. “We just wanted to come by and congratulate you on your engagement!”

*Shit...*

I tried to act normal by taking the plant and looking at it like it was my favorite flower and I hadn’t fled New York a week after getting engaged and I may or may not be already not engaged. It was an Academy Award winning moment, but us Southerners are good at these situations so it was in my blood, my blood that was simmering thinking about who else my mother had told.

“Thank you,” I said, “it’s beautiful.”

Mr. Graham just stood there and nodded like a fool. Mrs. Graham peered through the windows of the house like she was looking for someone. “Is the groom-to-be not here with you?”

I smiled and let out a light laugh. “No, he has to continue working, but I’m sure he’ll be around another time.”

I wasn’t sure.

Mrs. Graham just smiled and nodded. “Well, that’s too bad. Let’s see the ring at least. It was a long time coming, Sam.” She continued smiling a knowing smile, but if she only knew.

I held up my finger, still caged by the diamond ring. She grabbed my hand and moved it back and forth like everyone had done.

“It’s beautiful! I’m so glad to see you settled down now. It must be a relief,” she said.

Mrs. Graham had the best intentions, really.

“That’s one way of looking at it,” I said.

Mr. Graham shifted his weight from one leg to the other.

“Okay, well we must be going back to Atlanta for the week, but we will see you soon, honey!” she said, waving and departing with her husband back around the porch.

I followed them to the stairs and waved goodbye as they pulled back out of the driveway. Just as they left, another car pulled into the driveway but a more desired interaction followed. My dad hopped out of the car and came around to the passenger side to assist my mom. She smiled at him like he was her prince, taking her hand and leading her out of the car and up the stairs. That smile should be the goal of every relationship. It was weird to see it exhibited by my parents, though.

“What were the Grahams doing?” my mom asked.

“Oh, just congratulating your aging spinster daughter for finally bagging a man. Mrs. Graham should read more because there are plenty of unmarried heroines living rewarding and amazing lives.”

We all went inside to the living room as my mom went into the kitchen and poured us some iced tea. My dad and I sat at the table and my mom set the tray down and joined us. They were doing that looking back and forth maneuver that they had done in the car ride home from the airport.

My mom lost this round and cleared her throat. “Sam, I may have jumped the gun and sent out engagement announcements last week, which would make sense why some congratulations may begin this week.”

I took the iced tea to my lips and drank it only to think for a few seconds. I set it down and took a deep breath in and out. “You announced to our friends and family that I am engaged without asking me and now I may or may not be getting married.”

“Yes, I did,” she said calmly.

“How many did you send out?”

“One hundred.”

“Okay,” I said.

“And seventy-five.”

“One hundred and seventy-five, Mother?”

“I knew you wouldn’t want to send them out, but it’s the polite thing to do. My friends would think it was bizarre we didn’t announce it,” she said.

“So there are potentially one hundred and seventy-five Edible Arrangements coming to our house this week?”

“We all like fruit, at least,” my dad chimed in.

I wanted to stay calm. It wasn’t my mom’s fault that I didn’t want to be congratulated on something that was put on the backburner on a low simmer. It didn’t even feel like it was simmering anymore since Phillip hadn’t checked in since he landed in Berlin, but I knew he was there because he had posted something about landing back in his homeland online. His fiancé was trying to figure out how to have his children while he was happily eating Currywurst.

I sat a minute more in silence and then spoke. “I love you both.”

“We love you too, honey,” my dad said.

“But I’m going to go see Will and when I get back I don’t want to deal with any of these flower bouquets or fruit displays. I don’t want to be congratulated. I want to embody the motto *ignorance is bliss*.”

They nodded and I grabbed my keys and headed out the door.

I jogged down the stairs, across our yard, and across our neighbor's yard. It was a shortcut Will and I had taken to each other's houses since we were kids. I'm sure the neighbors were excited when we stopped speaking so their grass could rise up and flourish again.

As I was about to step through the shrubbery that had a much smaller gap than I remembered, I heard a female cackle and Will's more forced laugh on the other side of the wall. Suddenly I felt my heart stop and my body drop into push-up position. I peered through the branches to see Will putting a girl's suitcase into the back of his car.

Within a matter of thirty minutes, I unexpectedly felt reduced to the sixteen-year-old Sam Seymour, crouching on the ground, spying on Will's whereabouts. I had yelled at my parents for simplifying my life to a custom and stormed out. Maybe my mom was right to follow customs and rituals set out in our society. At least hers had some grounds for working. None of mine had ever gotten me anywhere.

Yeah, it felt like I was sixteen in Savannah again.

## Ch. 9 The Breakfast Club

“Wait outside,” a woman griped at us behind the counter as we entered the restaurant.

There was no line, but we did as we were told and stood back on the sidewalk where they could have cooked our eggs. It was late for breakfast, so we waited alone on the bench for permission to enter.

“I always forget that they serve you bullshit before the actual meal,” I said, rolling up the sleeves of my t-shirt.

“You don’t like a little bullshit appetizer?” Will said.

I felt like I had been eating a bullshit appetizer the whole morning.

“Not particularly, so can we call it a truce and you tell me why you and Phillip exchanged bloody noses that night?”

Will sighed. “We’re on this again? Why don’t you ask the German himself?”

“Maybe you guys are more alike than you thought.”

There wasn’t much of a view in front of us. The beach was just at the end of the road in all its glory, waiting for people to punch in the four digit number assigned to their space and pay two dollars every two hours to have a day out with their family. Cars lined the street of concrete parking designators. Ugly, silver parking meters had been abandoned for one smart computerized ticket machine. I still found it criminal to charge the extortionate fee that they did for people to go see nature. If you were a local, you received a parking permit that glorified the back windshield of your car. So if you saw someone with the Tybee parking decal, you knew they were a legit local.

“You don’t even know,” Will sighed, running his hands from the front to back of his head. “Just give it a rest, Sammy.”

“Why would he tell me it was unimportant and untrue, and then here you are refusing to answer me?”

A smile emerged from Will’s face. “Ha! That son of a gun.” Will turned to me and put his arm on the bench behind me. It was like grumpy Hyde had left Tybee, and Jekyll was out to play now. “Sam,” Will spoke again, “what are you doing with that—”

Just then, a man with a deep voice ready for radio popped his head out the door and said, “We can seat you now.”

“Good deal,” Will said, standing up.

Walking ahead of me, Will caught the door and held it open for me to enter.

The Breakfast Club was a famous establishment for Tybee Island mainly because they catered JFK Junior’s wedding. The owner is a highly skilled chef, so it’s not incredibly bizarre when you think about it but when you see the inside of this place, it’s pretty damn bizarre. It looks like an old diner. It’s one of those places you question if it’s sanitary enough to eat there and not get food poisoning for three days, but it’s fine. There’s nothing special about it, but they do have the best grits. Will and I sat face to face in a booth staring at the menus despite we had both eaten there a thousand and one times. For ritual sake, we browsed and debated it.

“I think I’ll get the French toast,” I said, closing the menu.

Will squinted. “Where do you see that?”

“Under the sides.”

“Ah, of course, why didn’t I think of that?”

The natural born radio host came back to our table. “What will y’all have?”

Will cleared his throat. “French toast for the lady, and I’ll have two eggs over easy with bacon. And two coffees.”

“You got it.”

That’s a very Southern thing to do. I always thought it was odd growing up when my dad would order for me, but then one day he explained. My father was a Southern gentleman without the bowties and pleated khakis. He believed in etiquette and the man paying. Ordering for a woman, he said, was just another form of etiquette men should adhere to. The woman could tell the man what she wanted and continue thinking and discussing whatever she wanted at the table. It was then the man’s job to remember for her so she could sit back, relax, and enjoy. Then, the man was the one to relay it to the waiter so again the woman could feel leisurely about the whole situation. In theory, I thought this made perfect sense because I did talk the majority of the dinner, but it did feel very old fashioned like they thought women weren’t able to do two things at once. We could do a thousand things at once, but that’s never here nor there. Well, it’s everywhere, but you could discuss feminism and the South all day.

My father always liked Will because he, too, adhered to etiquette. His parents had taught him well, my dad had said on many occasions. And they had. He opened doors, never spoke about private matters in front of women, paid for dates, stood up when a woman left the table and again when they returned. Will Wallace was, for all intents and purposes, a Southern gentleman.

I cleared my throat. “So what did you get up to yesterday?”

Will looked up like he really had to try to remember. “Not much. You?”

Before I could debate that, Will spoke again. “Isn’t that Mr. Maynard at the counter?”

I looked over at the counter in the center of the room that lined where the cooks worked. There was a roughly mid fifties man with salt and pepper hair sitting, reading the paper, and drinking coffee. It was a Mr. Maynard looking far older than the last time I saw him. Mr. Maynard was our history teacher in high school. He belonged in teaching. I’d hoped he was still teaching in the same navy blazer and khakis, pacing from one side to another telling us a frantic story set a century too early to please teenagers, but he never stopped trying to make it delightful.

Sipping the coffee that our waiter had slipped in front of us, I shook my head. “He doesn’t look like he wants to be disturbed.”

“We’re not in the North anymore. Everyone wants to be disturbed down here,” Will said, pausing. He looked back at Mr. Maynard and called out, “Mr. Maynard!”

Looking up from his paper, Mr. Maynard did a double take. “Miss Seymour and Mr. Wallace!” He pushed his chair back and walked around the corner.

“You just summoned Mr. Maynard to come speak to us. Don’t you think that’s a little rude?” I whispered to Will.

“Now you’re thinking like a Southerner,” Will said, quickly putting a smile on as Mr. Maynard approached.

The way to tell if a kid was raised in the South is to see how they act around adults. A true Southerner will have a public and private façade that they can switch between in a blink of an eye. You’ve got to be able to turn the charm

on quickly. Charm and manners is public protocol. Your mom would have verbalized this and your dad would have practiced it. Will had this like no other.

Mr. Maynard did too, but the difference was we were never privy to his private side despite encroaching in his private sphere at this very moment. Usually Mr. Maynard looked like a concoction of a cool cowboy meets nineties Polo ad, but today he was far more casual, beach bum meets dad. More important than his appearance, he was a kind man, the kind of man women wanted to marry but would be suspicious that he wasn't who he said he was despite being alarmingly kind. I will never forget his acts of kindness towards me on days I wanted to never attend school again.

~

Throughout my cancerous months, I experienced the cruelty of high school tenfold. Everything changed after the announcement of my untimely illness was made in that one morning assembly. Illness had struck the school, and I'm not talking about my cancer. There was a pity plague in everyone's eyes I interacted with that I just couldn't take, especially this one day.

I was behind on just about every assignment after being in and out of doctors appointments my junior year. I sat slouched against the lockers of the main hallway, trying my best to cry inaudibly after being kicked out of my sanctuary aka the computer lab, as everyone crowded the dining hall tables, ready to devour their fellow classmates' feelings and the cold chicken fingers being served.

"Ms. Seymour?" I heard a voice cry.

It was Mr. Maynard, poking his head out from his classroom door. I quickly wiped my tears and stood up, smoothing out the wrinkles in my skirt.

“Sorry, am I bothering you? The librarian told me I had abused my computer privileges. Apparently Muscle Milk isn’t allowed near technology,” I said.

I had been drinking Muscle Milk instead of eating lunch for a month to avoid the dining hall prior to befriending Jade, but the librarian didn’t approve of my nutrient choices or their proximity to the computers.

Mr. Maynard didn’t look at me with the same pity everyone else had. It was a type of pity that seemed to actually pity me rather than an obligatory pity that everyone else felt they had to participate in. “No, Ms. Seymour, you’re not bothering me,” he said, glancing around the hall, “but could I have a quick word?”

I nodded and followed him into his classroom. He looked uncomfortable as he paced a bit and then took a seat at his desk as if someone was watching us, waiting for us to do something illicit. I took a seat on the couch next to his desk.

“I wanted to see if you needed any help with the end of the year assignments,” he paused, “because I know this has been a challenging year for you due to...extenuating circumstances.”

No one liked staying the word *cancer* but especially not *ovarian cancer*. Especially not Southern men.

I nodded.

Mr. Maynard continued. “I know you’re a smart young lady and have your hopes on New York University, and I want to see you do your best. Perhaps we could arrange for an extension, say, till after we meet back in the fall?” His face became stoic and he swiveled to face me directly. He lowered his arms to his knees like he wanted to get close to me to tell me a secret. “My wife had breast cancer five years ago.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” I whispered, as to be apart of the secret.

Covering his mouth like he couldn’t let himself speak more, he said, “I’m sorry, too.”

I wasn’t sure if he was speaking about his wife or me, or all the people diagnosed with cancer, but he was the first person at school to acknowledge it to my face. His honesty in the classroom and in that very moment made him my favorite teacher forever. Now, looking back on it, I should have said more to him to thank him for looking at me like I was still his student and not a charity case, for helping me that summer, for letting me sit in his classroom at lunch when I didn’t want to face one hundred pairs of eyes in the dining hall, for making sure I got into New York University with a recommendation letter and get the hell out of Savannah. He saved me in more ways than he knew. Or maybe he did know.

~

“Well look what we have here. Miss Seymour and Mr. Wallace.” Mr. Maynard nodded at me and Will. As he nodded at me, I could see the light catching my ring in his retina and the gears shifting in his head. “Oh, now, what is this?” he asked, motioning at my hand. “I knew this day would come since I had you both in economics. Way to go, Mr. Wallace,” Mr. Maynard said, giving him a little wink and figurative elbow since he was standing.

Will beamed. “Thank you, Mr. Maynard. What do you think of the ring though? A little too cheap? Maybe I’ll have to get her a new one for an anniversary.”

Mr. Maynard went along with it. “Well, it’s special enough for now, son.”

I could tell Will wanted to roll around in the booth and laugh till he was blue and I was laminating his tongue to the menu so he could order and eat his words one day.

I cleared my throat. "I'm actually engaged to someone in New York."

Looking confused, Mr. Maynard quickly tried to recover. "I shouldn't have assumed. My apologies, Miss Seymour. Congratulations on your engagement."

"Thank you, Mr. Maynard," I paused, "but would you not mention this to anyone at the school?"

"Of course, Miss Seymour. It's yours for the telling."

"How's your wife?" I asked.

Mr. Maynard grinned. "She's very well, thank you for asking."

"I'm glad to hear it."

Will looked back and forth at us like he was left out of a secret.

"I'll just get back to my paper, but nice seeing y'all," Mr. Maynard said, and gave a wave as he resumed his post at the counter.

Once Mr. Maynard was back at the counter, I shook my head at Will.

He shrugged his shoulders. "It's not my fault Germans are cheap."

"You can't say things like that!"

"I'm no diamond expert, but—"

"No, the part about the Germans."

"Why?"

"It's racist and prejudiced and all of those things."

"Ah, I'm only kidding, Sam. I lived in Chicago for five years."

"Those last four years in Athens must have been it, then."

"I'm just saying that—"

"Chicago a hall pass for discrimination?"

"No, but I was only joking."

“You can be so mature sometimes, and other times you’re just a butthead.”

“You do realize you’re the only person that still says butthead over the age of thirteen, right?”

The waiter interrupted by sliding our plates onto the table, and so the process began. Will and I worked like clockwork adjusting our plates to our liking, a skill that had been attained after many years of eating together. I peeled my bacon off the top of the French toast and plopped it onto his plate. He gave me his bowl of grits. I took one of his toast triangles and he cut off a piece of my French toast and poured all of my syrup on his four bites.

“I don’t get how you like grits, though. Do you just really relate to them?” Will laughed at his own joke.

“Ha-ha, you’re so funny, William. *Girl Raised In The South*. Hilarious and original.”

“Enjoy your meal and entertainment today because we’ve got a lot of ground to cover tomorrow,” he said, shoving a clump of bacon oozing with grease into his mouth.

“What do you mean?” I asked, regretting giving him all of my bacon.

“I’ve got a proposition for you.”

“Continue,” I said.

“Hypothetically speaking you could stay in Savannah,” he stated.

“Yes, hypothetically. Except for—”

“But hypothetically?” He raised one eyebrow.

“Where are you going with this?”

He put one finger up to shush me. “Give me one month to show you why you belong here in the South, to really show you why you once loved it and why

you could love it again. And if by the end of this month you hate it even more than you already do, then I will let you leave and go back to New York.

“But why? You know I have my life back in New York.”

“What life, though? Your fiancé who’s off roaming around Europe? Your friends who don’t know you like I do?” He smiled like he was suggesting all the ways he knew me.

I shot him a look.

“Too soon?” he said.

“Too soon.” I paused and looked around like I was expecting to see someone I knew.

You never know in this town.

I spoke again. “How are you not running a million miles a minute in the opposite direction of Savannah, and your parents’ law firm, and your past?”

Will shrugged. “Is that what you did? Ran from your past?”

I thought about it for a moment. Was that what I did? I don’t know, maybe.

“Maybe,” I said, “maybe I just left it behind.”

He spoke again. “And this place would be much better with my Sammy around. Just like old times.”

“Just like old times,” I murmured.

“So what do you say? Let me convince you to stay?”

“What’s there to lose?”

“That’s the spirit! It’s settled then. Tomorrow is day one in *showing Sam the New South*. The South that has caught up to your fancy New York,” he said.

I hated when people talked about *The New South*, like something had happened to *The Old South*. You can't erase the history of a place to create a new one. Or can you?

## Ch. 10 Savannah Is the New Brooklyn, Said No One

It was six in the morning and a new kind of day in the South, the sun already beating through the eastern side of the beach house. Six in the morning was not my usual call time, but Will had full reins on the day's schedule. I was clad in athletic leggings and a t-shirt, again, per Will's instructions. As I tiptoed down the creaking stairs (cons of this house), I heard a flickering of pages from the living room. I peaked behind the wall, just as it ended halfway down the staircase, to find my dad sitting with the *Savannah Morning News* already and a cup of coffee.

"I didn't know you were an early riser," I said, trotting down the rest of the stairs a little less carefully.

"I was about to say the same." He rubbed his moustache like people would rub the sleep out of their eyes. "It's been a while since we've all lived together."

"Are you happy we're together again?"

Just then, there was a knock at the door. It wasn't really a knock: more like a light tapping like an animal trying to get in the back door. Not many wild animals existed on Tybee, except for that one time we had a wild boar epidemic when they swam from Little Tybee all the way to the mainland.

"Ready to roll?" Will said, as soon as I opened the door. Will often said sayings that only men with children would dream of saying, especially Southern men with children. He looked a bit like a dad today too, wearing baggy gym shorts, an old t-shirt, and the same tennis shoe brand he's worn since high school. Southerners did that, Southern men in particular. They wore the same brands, the same style of clothing basically from the time they hit puberty till the time they died. I reckon there's merit in brand loyalty, but it seemed a bit boring to me.

“Yes, sir,” I said, shoving my feet into my tennis shoes. I’ve never been sure why Southerners say ‘tennis shoes’ for any athletic looking shoe, more often than not, not built for the game of tennis, but nevertheless we do.

“Good morning, Mr. Seymour,” Will said with a polite wave.

My dad gave a wave back and picked up his paper again. “You kids have fun, Lord knows whatever you’re doing this early.”

“Yoga,” Will said, wiggling his eyebrows like it was really exciting and would entice my father into joining, but that’s why I kept Will around, for his idealist outlook on life. I can never imagine my father doing yoga nor do I want to. Very serious looking men don’t do yoga in my experience.

My dad just nodded.

I had almost closed the front door when my dad said, “Sam?”

“Yeah, Dad?” I said, opening it enough to stick my head in the crack.

“I’ve never been happier,” he smiled.

I smiled. “Save some of that happiness for me for when I’m back.”

“You’ve got your own happiness with you today,” he said, pausing. All of a sudden, my dad stood up and frantically looked around like he had misplaced something. “If I can find it, do you want to bring pepper spray with you downtown? It’s pretty early still.”

I sighed. “Okay, I’m going now. Bye, Dad.”

~

My father is a true Savannahian. I am a true Savannahian as well, and so is Will. Not many people have the ‘privilege’, as my dad describes it, of calling themselves true Savannahians. Many people come here from other places for warmer weather or for college and stay, but they will never be true Savannahians, he says.

An aspect of being a true Savannahian is knowing the history, who Savannah once was, and who Savannah is becoming. You have to know all the layers of the city, the social codes, and where to be. Downtown is a complicated place, in my dad's eyes. He loves to tell stories of downtown thirty-something years ago and how different it looked. City Market, a two-block section now with restaurants, bars, and tourist shops, used to be different. Broughton Street, my beloved Broughton Street, was thriving. These places, I would say, are still thriving now, especially Broughton Street with newly renovated shops bought out by a mega construction company who develops a lot of shopping areas in the South. However, the state of downtown swings like a pendulum reliant on tourism, local support, and crime rates. In the last eight years I've been away, more and more homicides and crimes have been reported on and people began to fear going downtown. I think this is why there was the acceptance of the mega construction company coming and remodeling Broughton Street's storefronts with every major brand you could think of. I was not one of those people that accepted it. Like I said before, I thought it was a disgrace that they let McDonalds on Broughton Street. The city is slowly losing its charm by allowing big business in everywhere you look that used to be historic.

Despite my dad being an advocate for small businesses (yes, he is a Republican), he still sees the merit in these brands coming in to help with gentrification, which he thinks will reduce crime rates. The word gentrification makes me feel weird and gross and sad all at the same time, but what else do you call it? Can crime be reduced, less people be in danger, and all communities get to stay how they are? For these reasons, my dad became obsessive about self-defense, buying me pepper spray to keep in my car, guns for himself, and a home

security system. Pepper spray made me nervous, not for the so-called criminals that were going to attack me on the way to yoga just after sunrise, but for myself.

~

“*Dancing Dogs Yoga Studio?*” I said, reading the sign on the sidewalk. “You thought yoga is what I’d miss about New York?”

We stood in the middle of Broughton Street after pushing the buzzer waiting to be let into the studio. The streets and squares downtown were basically empty, only the occasional runner or person on the verge of a psychotic breakdown about to do yoga at six in the morning.

“Don’t you fancy New Yorkers like yoga and kombucha and all that stuff?” Will said, putting on a forced country accent.

“Boxing is the new thing,” I said, pausing. “I think we’re about to dance like dogs.”

A petite woman jogged down the stairs, visible in the window, and then swung the door open with a big shove. She wore rainbow yoga pants and a matching sports bra, baring her slender physique. Holding the door open for us to walk in, she exclaimed, “Good morning, gang! How are y’all this morning? Ready to get your yoga on? I’m Bridgette!”

Will and I looked at each other and just smiled. Following Bridgette up the stairs, I turned around to Will and whispered, “There better be coffee after this.”

“With oat milk?” he grinned.

“There’s oat milk in this uncivilized world?”

Nodding like it was the best news he’d be delivering all day, he said, “You bet your ass I’ve found the only coffee shop with oat milk in this city.”

The yoga studio was in fact similar to ones I had been dragged to by various female friends in New York. They all have this bright, airy quality to them with white walls, some sort of neon trim, and hardwood floors. Mirrors lined the walls so you could watch yourself; why someone would want to watch as they twisted their body into unflattering lines, I do not know, but nevertheless mirrors were a staple. A handful of people were already positioned on their mats, quietly chatting as they waited for the session to begin. We weren't as early as we thought. As soon as Will and I took our places on the remaining pair of mats, Bridgette began.

"This is child's pose," she said, lying on top of her already bent knees, "and it will be your sanctuary if you are lost at any time."

Will and I mimicked Bridgette. I blamed boxing for making me more uptight than I naturally was, making *child's pose* even harder to do. Will was one of those annoying people who were good at every sport under the sun. He could avoid physical activity for a year and then go run a marathon.

"You should be good at child's pose," I whispered to Will.

"You reckon so?" he said, his body melting into the next pose Bridgette was doing with ease.

I tried extending one of my legs in front of me like Bridgette was doing, but I couldn't straighten my knee so it just bobbed up and down.

"You're the child not telling me about what you said to Phillip," I cooed.

We all stood up to a more neutral position of balancing with one leg in front of the other. "Now, remember to find your center. Stare at the same place on the wall and capture it with your mind," Bridgette said, breathing in and out in a controlled way I would never accomplish.

“We’re back on this again?” Will switched legs, probably because he had always had issues with his right knee from playing club soccer for many years.

“Can we drop this?”

Bridgette cleared her throat. “Now, please release your tension by ignoring *everyone* and *everything* around you and focus on the moment. Next position...”

Everyone switched to the next movement in unison as Bridgette had instructed and I tried choosing a point on the wall to focus on. There were grey mountains drawn on the wall with bright orange trimming. I chose a mountain peak hoping that it would be uplifting as well as the more than subliminal messages to *reach for the stars* and *go above and beyond who you can be* written up and down its peaks and valleys. When that didn’t work, I began to steal glimpses of the others in the class. You do have to wonder who takes a yoga class in Savannah, Georgia, let alone that early? It looked like SCAD students or that crowd of adults that live downtown because they think they’re hip and cool living in the ‘city’. Perhaps some are from real cities like New York and have relocated for better weather. Some are strangely Savannahians, desperately wanting to be in the *New South* crowd that goes to cocktail parties hosted by the two magazines that promotes this *newness* to our region. I wondered if I ever moved back home if I too would join this elitist group of city wannabes, waiting for one trendy restaurant to close and another to immediately fill its place.

One woman in the front looked like one of these *New South* people, in her overly expensive gym clothes from the chains that had just opened up on Broughton. That was not the first thing I noted about her, though. She was pregnant. For some reason it was shocking to see a pregnant person doing yoga. Not that I thought they had to be segregated from all of the normal yogis, but there were yoga classes offered specifically for pregnant women as well, notably

at normal hours of the day. The woman sat there and breathed in and out as Bridgette led us through some controlled breathing exercises. The limited times I had allowed myself to daydream about being pregnant, I had always imagined being uncomfortable; however, this woman looked more at ease with herself than I felt in my own body.

“Everyone,” Bridgette spoke, “please take a bow and thank yourself, your body, and everyone for today’s session. I hope to see you again soon. Namaste.”

Everyone said *Namaste* in unison and took a bow.

As we made our way outside again, it was beginning to look more like a typical summer day downtown. The heat hit our faces as we opened the door onto the sidewalk. At this time it was seven o’clock, so people were on their way to work, cafes were opening, and the sun was warming everything including the metal door handle.

Will held the door open for me, flinching at the feeling of the roasting metal. “Next stop is two doors down and across the street.”

I looked at the renovated building front. “The Coffee Stop? How creative of them.”

“Sorry it’s not your beloved Stumptown Coffee, but have a little faith in me, Sammy. And a little positivity,” he added.

“I’m positive,” I protested, standing at the crosswalk.

“You’re positive you hate Savannah.”

The man turned white and we walked across, heading for The Coffee Stop. Will grabbed the door and held it for me. The roasting beans aroma hit me in the face making me feel a little more positive that this could be a decent cup of coffee.

“Thank you,” I nodded at him. “I don’t hate Savannah, I’m just not sure I could live here again.”

“It’s really changed since we left, Sammy. There was an article just the other month saying Savannah was the new Brooklyn, so you better buy into downtown now while you still have the chance.” Will paused and looked up at the menu. “What are you having?”

“I’ll give you one guess.”

The man behind the counter nodded. He looked roughly our age. His body was coated in tattoos and he had gauges in his ears. It was a common habit of Savannahians to see someone with his details and say *probably a SCAD student*. Anyone that didn’t fit Southerners’ expectations of how a Southerner should look was ostracized to being a SCAD student. I often had people ask me if I was a SCAD student when I came home.

Many years ago after discussing this phenomenon amongst Southerners, Will and I created a game where one of us had to ask where the accused was from and if I won, Will bought me coffee (or a drink or whatever they were serving), and if he won, I treated him.

Will cleared his throat. “So she would like an oat milk latte with an extra shot and one sugar. And I’ll just have a regular latte with three sugars, please.”

“Is that it for you today?” the baristo asked.

“Yep, that’s all.” Will paused. “Hey, Buddy, where are you from?”

“Philly,” the baristo said, “and that will be six sixty for the coffees.”

My eyes rolled to the back of my head as I got my wallet out from my bag. “I’ve got this one, *buddy*.”

“Ah, that’s awful kind, I’ll get us a table,” Will said, brushing his hair back off his still slightly sweaty face.

Thanking the baristo from Philly for the drinks, I met Will at our table.

“Thank you, ma’am,” Will said, taking his coffee.

I nodded. “Is Philly meant to be nice?”

“Shhh,” Will mimed, “Phil from Philly might hear you.” He paused and took a sip. “I think it’s a shithole if I’m being honest.”

“And I think Savannah’s a shithole, so what does Phil from Philly see in this place?”

“The grass is always greener on the—”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah, I know, Dad, but what specifically do you think Phil likes about Savannah?”

Will leaned out of his chair to catch another glimpse of Phil from Philly. “He can wear shorts year around?”

~

The act of analyzing the North and the South had become me and Will’s favorite conversation over the years. It really was fascinating. As two Southerners that had chosen to be Northerners (or some hodgepodge), it had created a different identity for us all together. We called ourselves Northern Southerners. Our opinions belonged in the North despite our bodies were born and raised in the South. How we ended up with our feelings, we’ll never know, but nevertheless there we were. Sitting in downtown Savannah trying to convince ourselves that it was a cosmopolitan, art mecca that we would be fine, just fine, living in for the rest of our lives. I’m not sure who was trying to convince who of this more. To be honest, I was worried about Will. I was worried if he was making the right decision to allow his parents to start the grooming process for him to take over their law firm one day. He loved Chicago from the moment he moved there; the moment he moved there, I never thought he’d return to the South. I thought he’d

go on being a Northern Southerner the rest of his life, never claiming that identity, of course. He was almost rid of his Southern accent, so all there was left to do was get rid of the dreadful Southern slang he chose to hold onto after all those years away.

After many years of hate speech about the South, Will seemed to have liked the last three years at the University of Georgia and seemed to be adjusting rather well on his return to Savannah because of it. It hadn't been but a month, but already he was getting his Savannah drawl back and embracing his old but new life in Savannah, again.

~

"Shorts, huh? What's so magical about shorts?" I asked Will.

Shaking his head in disbelief, Will said, "I guess y'all wear shorts up there, but only for a couple of months."

"*Y'all?*" I asked. "It's not the word so much that bothers me, but now I'm one of them and you're one of," I paused to motion towards the rest of the people in the shop, "*them.*" The ironic thing was most of those people probably weren't true Savannahians, but it was for dramatic effect. "Are you sure you don't want to come back with me to New York, William?"

Will hesitated. "What about Phillip?"

"What about Phillip?"

"What are you doing about the situation?" Will said, pointing to the ring still on my finger.

"That's not what we're talking about. You belong in a city. How do you feel when you think of being in Savannah the rest of your life?" I asked.

"Sam, it's hard to not talk about that when it's all connected. And I mean, how do you feel when you think of New York? At least in the South, we've got

our family and traditions to fall back on. Look where you came when shit hit the fan.” Will paused and looked at the table. “I’m sorry, I just—”

“Will?” a shrill voice said from behind me.

Will slumped in the chair. He whispered, “Don’t turn around and whatever you do hide your ring.”

I turned the diamond around to face my palm.

A flutter of voices spoke again in unison. “Will Wallace?”

Pulling himself up out of the chair, Will pushed his chair out in preparation to stand up and be a gentleman, despite his efforts would be lost on the subjects. These were no ordinary subjects. They were quite possibly the pinnacles of my slow and painful demise called high school. This was one reason I couldn’t bear to think about moving back to the South because high school would inevitably follow me everywhere. It would find me no matter where I hid and tried to reinvent myself. There were no safe grounds in Savannah.

Mary Elizabeth, who swore she would at least leave Savannah, and Rachel, who swore she wouldn’t leave Mary Elizabeth’s side (except for during college when they had a brief separation at different state schools), were frantically waving at Will from the other side of the coffee shop. Phil from Philly looked confused, perhaps thinking Will Wallace was the name of a celebrity and he had just served a friendly, yet nosey public figure.

“God, will people ever keep their word and stay the hell out of Savannah?” I pretended to bang my head against the marble tabletop.

“Behave, will you, Sammy?” Will said. Quickly switching from his private to public self, he plastered a big, yet relaxed smile on his face and stood up.

Mary Elizabeth and Rachel both had their best faces on, if you could call them that, and pretended to be elated to see Will. We all knew what had happened.

~

After the beans were spilled in assembly about my time in the hospital, rumors began to circulate, as they do in any good high school gossip mill. I hated gossip to begin with, but especially when it was about me. Up until that point of my junior year of high school, I was normal, average, nondescript. No, that's not fair to myself. I was averagely known, and known for being *artsy* and *different* and *disputing the Southern Belle image* (I participated in Cotillion, so what else did these people want from me?). My point is I hadn't been entirely worth gossiping about. Sure, there was the odd whisper in the hall about Will and I being friends, but that wasn't exactly news either. We had always been friends and he wasn't ashamed for anyone to know it. I say *he* wasn't, because I had no social standing to ruin. I was neutral like Switzerland in my standing; I got along with everyone well enough. Will was loved by everyone. He had the look nailed to a T that everyone desired in that high school. He wore the right clothes. Drove the right truck. He was bullshitting them with their own bullshit. He knew how the system worked, he mastered it, and high school was then a breeze for him. I knew how it worked, too, I just refused to master it for my own benefit. And I had Will.

I remember sitting in his truck in my driveway after we went on our first real date that year. We were playing David Bowie and imagining what it would be like if we went to the same college. Will was a year older than me, and we laughed that it was all down to me to decide on our fate if we were to be together.

Mary Elizabeth somehow caught wind of Will and I sleeping together, and the rumor then began that I had gotten some sort of terrible sexual disease and

Will was responsible. It ruined me, but it did not ruin Will. There wasn't a corner I could turn without my sexual misadventures being debated. Kids were stupid. A cancer related to reproductive health was somehow deemed as a sinful thing caused by sinful things. Mary Elizabeth was the stupidest they came, misconstruing the details for the pleasures of storytelling.

~

Mary Elizabeth stood in scrubs and Rachel had a pantsuit on. Mary Elizabeth was working as a dental hygienist. She always had the most amazing teeth. Rachel was working in real estate (surprised she wasn't a dental hygienist as well).

"And what's new with you, Sam?" Mary Elizabeth asked, like she wanted to hear nothing was new with me.

"Just working."

Mary Elizabeth paused like she wanted me to say more.

"What's new with you, guys?"

"Well," Mary Elizabeth said, patting her stomach, "Johnny and I are pregnant." She pretended to blush and cover her mouth like it was the first time she had heard, said, or thought about it, almost like she was going to cry.

Will looked at me and spoke for us. "That's great, congratulations."

I just nodded.

"I know. But what's new? I can't go on Facebook without seeing another post about someone being pregnant from high school," Mary Elizabeth cooed. "I think some congratulations are in order for you, too, though?" She was looking directly at me.

How did this lunatic of a woman imagine I was pregnant?

I just smiled and waited for the punch line.

“You’re getting married, silly!” she shouted, loud enough for Phil from Philly to hear.

“I’m getting married?” I asked, like I didn’t know.

“Yeah, girl, I saw, now who was it,” she paused, taking out her phone to scroll through the feed. She squinted at the screen. “Penelope Bernard posted this lovely picture of y’all at your engagement party.” She turned her phone to me.

I literally wanted to hit my head on the marble tabletop and then hit Penelope’s head a few times, too. Penelope. There was only one thing to do.

I looked at Will and smiled. “Of course, I’m getting married...”

Mary Elizabeth grinned and repeatedly nodded as if the nod would confirm so much more. “I’m so happy for you, Sam.”

“You are?”

“Yeah, I mean, look at the two of you,” Mary Elizabeth nodded at me and Will, “well, it would be a surprise if either of you finally settled down.”

“I guess I am the lucky one,” I said, looking back at Will.

He finally got the message and cleared his throat. “Ladies, this reunion has been fun, but Sam and I have some important—”

“Wedding business?” Mary Elizabeth interrupted.

“Right,” Will paused, “wedding business.”

“Right after I drown myself in her perfume,” I mumbled.

“What was that, Sam?”

“I would like to purchase your perfume. But we really must be going,” I said, standing up and dragging Will by the arm out the door.

As we left the coffee shop, I wondered what had really made Phil from Philly leave Philly. Did he have people he was running from, too? Don’t we all?

## Ch. 11 Salt Water Heals Everything

“Remind me why I’m letting you drive us home in my car?” Will asked as he tightened his seatbelt and clutched on to the handle of the car door.

I continued speeding down the road back to Tybee. “You know driving calms my nerves.”

Will resumed a normal seated position and took my hand from my lap. “The big, bad world of social media knows you’re engaged. So what? Now you’re going to go through with it just because it was put on the Internet?”

I yanked my hand back and put it on the steering wheel. “It’s more complicated than that, Will. I was already confused and now it feels more official and less deniable than ever.”

“Which is why you need to have a talk with—”

“Phillip?”

“Well, I was going to say yourself, but you should probably talk to your fiancé about this, too.”

“You’re right,” I said.

“I’m always right.”

“Except that one time.”

“But we can’t even remember what it was about so it’s spilt milk.”

I laughed. It was the first time in a while I had laughed so effortlessly. Maybe it was something about the familiarity of home and these roads lined by the waterways that felt freeing as if nothing could keep me from who I wanted to be, or maybe it was being with Will, someone that despite all we had been through and all he knew I had gone through, we were good. I didn’t have to

explain anything to him. When there was nothing left to explain, then you could just be.

Will cleared his throat. “Would it be so weird for one of us to get married?”

I rolled my eyes. “Mary Elizabeth doesn’t know shit, and the shit she does know is pointless and about oral hygiene so I wouldn’t give it a second thought.”

“Then why are you still thinking about the picture on Facebook?”

He got me.

I sighed. “It’s not the fact that Mary Elizabeth *thinks* she knows something, it’s the improper passing of knowledge that bothers me. I long for the days a woman could say yes to an engagement offer and then change her mind right up to the date of the wedding without it being plastered all over the Internet. News traveled quickly in high school but not this quick.”

“We’re talking about Savannah for God’s sake. News has always traveled fast because people don’t have enough entertainment down here,” Will said.

“Then why have you decided to move back?”

He sighed. “You can’t just walk away from responsibilities, Sam. I have a responsibility to my family, or at least one day I will.” Will ran his hand through his hair and gazed out the window towards the marsh. “The tide is really high.”

“Sure is,” I mumbled.

If I applied Will’s logic to my own life, that would mean I had a responsibility to Phillip and our engagement. Or was it a responsibility to myself?

I spoke again. “Should I—”

My phone rang.

“Will you get that?” I asked Will.

He picked my phone up from the center console. I could feel a change in the air as soon as he said...

“Hello?”

I couldn't hear who was on the other line, but I suspected it was someone Will wanted to speak to.

“That's no way to greet someone now, Phillip, buddy. Maybe Sam does need a Southern gentleman,” Will said, chuckling to himself.

“Phillip?” I sped up over the bridge. “Give me the phone, now, Will.”

“Well, it was nice catching up, but our Sammy wants a word now,” Will said, handing me the phone.

“Hold on,” I said. I pulled off the side of the road beside a small marina.

Taking the phone, I waved Will out of the car. I straightened up and smoothed my ponytail down as if Phillip could see me through the phone. “Hey,” I said.

“Why didn't you tell me Will is visiting again?” Phillip said. He sounded out of breath like he, too, had pulled off a road in a rush.

“He's not...” I closed my eyes and prematurely cringed before telling him the truth. “I'm in Savannah.”

“You went to Savannah to visit him?”

I looked out the window to play *Where's Will Wallace*. He had made his way out to the dock and was standing there with his hands on his hips looking out at the water.

“I went to Savannah, and he happens to live in Savannah,” I said. “Either way, it doesn't make a difference. He's my friend.”

“You're not as clever as I thought you were, Sam.”

I could imagine Phillip standing outside a hip bar in Berlin. Graffiti soaked walls, smoke filled rooms, and trendy women to match it. Maybe he was intoxicated and decided to call me. Maybe he was feeling guilty.

“Why are you calling, Phillip?”

“I was actually calling to apologize for being too busy to call,” he huffed into the phone.

The awkward afternoon sun shone in my eyes as it was slowly making its decent for the day. I pulled the sun visor down. “You said that we needed a break to figure out the details.”

“Some very big details, I would say.”

“Phillip,” I sighed, “if I could go back in time and tell you from the beginning I would. How was I supposed to know we’d be—”

“Getting married?”

I paused.

Phillip spoke again. “Did you not see a marriage for us? Did you not see us settling down and having kids? Was it just silly of me to think we were for the long term?”

“No, it wasn’t. I just didn’t realize it would be this complicated, you being so traditional—”

“And you not being able to have a natural birth?” he interrupted.

“Look, maybe if all we did wasn’t going to parties and bars with the same overly cultured, snobbishly interesting people and spent more time talking then we would know all of this stuff by now. Ever think of that? You clearly have some views leftover from childhood, too, you haven’t sorted through.”

I heard him push what sounded like a chair out from under him and stand up. Maybe he was at home in his Berlin apartment at a rigid yet functional desk.

Phillip spoke. "Maybe if you confided in me, it would be different and we would have had time to prepare for these difficult answers."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

Phillip paused. "You're a clever girl. I need to leave for a work party, but I guess we will speak again soon."

Before I could say anything, the line went dead.

Where did that leave things? Was I supposed to try making amends with someone who I felt needed to apologize as well? Would that do me any good if my supposed fiancé didn't believe in the possible answer to us having children? Would it do him any good to disobey what he thought God and tradition were telling him not to do? That's if I even wanted to go through with trying. I didn't know, but I needed to get out of the car and breathe.

Slamming the door behind me, I made my way to the dock where Will was standing, looking at something in the distance. Once I got closer to him, he turned around.

"How did things go with *whatshisname*?" Will asked.

I stood next to Will looking out into the waterway that fed into the ocean. "I think he's conflicted while simultaneously hating me."

"What's there to be conflicted about? He wants to marry you, doesn't he? He's got to take the good and the bad if he wants you."

"Is it that bad I never told him?" I asked.

"I was talking about your terrible driving," he said.

"What were you looking at before?"

He drew his hand perpendicular to his body and pointed straight ahead. "Do you see that egret in the distance?" He took my hand and held it up with his to show me.

“Yeah, I see him.”

“Do you see the pile of rack he’s standing on?”

“Yeah, I see it.”

“He’s been drifting alone with the current on it for the last ten minutes, just moving along without a care in the world on his own little boat.”

I smiled. “I wish I was that bird.”

“You can be. A little salt water heals everything. Cuts, bumps, Catholic Nazis.”

“William,” I said, nudging him with my elbow. “You and my dad. I can’t take you anywhere.”

He laughed like he was a kid telling a bad joke. A really bad joke. “I didn’t say us Southern men were all good. Just that you needed one.” He smirked.

I never knew what to say after Will said things like that. Ever since we were kids. So I just stood there and continued to watch the egret float down the waterway breathing in some of that magical salt air.

## Ch. 12 GRITS (Girls Raised In The South)

“Really, Sammy?” my mom muttered with her lips clenched half an inch apart as I entered her bathroom. She was hunched in front of the mirror painting on her red, semi-permanent lipstick that no cleaning solution could remove off her skin or the bathroom sink.

“What?” I said, standing up straight and pulling my shoulders back like she had always preached.

My mom turned to face me, looking me up and down. “Can you not put on a summery dress for my garden club meeting? You look so cute in color.”

I looked down at what I was wearing. Navy trousers, a white blouse tucked in, and nude pumps. “What’s wrong with what I’m wearing?”

“You look like you’re taking over a GQ business meeting, sweetie. The garden club ladies won’t want to see your cleavage.”

“One more button, but any more and I’ll look like a sweaty nun,” I said, turning around.”

“Sammy?” my mom called again.

I turned back around. Her eyes drifted immediately to my hand.

“Maybe it’s better to take that off for the meeting?” she said, staring at the diamond in the rough.

“What happened to being supportive and agreeing with we *needed a break?*”

“You do,” she paused, “so take one.”

Returning to my bedroom, I stood in front of the dresser, not only facing the truth that my mom had so clearly laid out in front of me but also my face and the look

it was wearing. I looked tired. I looked worn. I looked down at my hand, the hand with all the secrets yet the one that would reveal them all. Grasping the ring at the base of my fourth finger, I gently pulled it off and placed it on the dresser. The symbol I had been wearing for the last three weeks now seemed to hold another meaning.

“Sam?” my mother called again. “You almost ready?”

“Yeah,” I sighed, “I’m ready.”

Savannah is a funny place of isolated, primarily white subdivisions on islands and cityscapes with little focus from the city council. After living on one secluded island, we moved to another once my parents’ divorce was finalized. Tybee Island to Wilmington Island might not have seemed colossal on paper, but it really was. Fifteen minutes away and better connected to civilization and big grocery stores, Wilmington had a feeling of awareness. On Tybee, your neighbors either didn’t care what you did or weren’t around long enough to notice. Wilmington was more settled, had more families, and more constant versions of life. With more normalcies came reputations and with reputations came keeping up. My mom and I kept a balance with spending the school days on Wilmington and weekends on Tybee.

My family was a different breed of Southerners to begin with. They cared about etiquette and tradition when it mattered, but behind closed doors they couldn’t care less and often resented those around. It was this contradictory behavior that my mom and I often quarreled about the older I got.

The Wilmington Island Club was a fond yet complicated place of my childhood. But what part of my childhood wasn’t met with complicated fondness? I spent summers enrolled in the Club’s tennis camps. My mom and I spent many

nights eating in the club's restaurant after my parents' divorce; she worked every day, so the last thing she wanted to do was cook a meal for two. Lastly I wouldn't like to forget the mother daughter golf lessons she signed us up for in order to *mix and mingle* as she called it. My mom was a natural-born business woman, but there was nothing natural about her golf game.

Despite the Club doing many great things for us, it still seemed like a bizarre world of phony acquaintances and *keeping up with the Jones* vibes. Garden Club may or may not have expanded my views on this for the worst. Never touching a plant in her life, my mom joined the Garden Club a few years ago to again *mix and mingle* for business. Beginning as the youngest member of the Garden Club (most discussed their grandchildren's affairs, not their children's), she somehow became the president. It was something my dad and I liked to mock her for, but I could tell she got a lot of enjoyment out of organizing a group and doing a damn good job at it. It came natural to her since she did own an events company.

As I pulled off the winding Wilmington Island Road into the Club's entrance, I thought about what Phillip would think of this. Compared to the overpopulated sidewalks in Berlin, this would have felt like a deserted desert to him. The pristinely trimmed hedges and manicured lawns were nothing like the post-war buildings with street art. I swerved around the road that cut through the middle of the golf course and parked right next to the clubhouse.

"Sam Seymour?" I heard a voice say as I smoothed my dress pants after climbing out of my dad's truck. He had taken the Friday off to work on carving a new table in the garage.

I took a slow breath, recognizing that voice too well. The prom king of high school, Mary Elizabeth's ex boyfriend and ex accomplice, and last but not least Will's ex best friend.

I smiled the sort of smile that you hope will slowly kill someone. "Brett Barnes."

Sauntering off the course down the hill, he reached parking lot level. Brett and Will had many similarities. Both were pretty boys with the Southern style of colored khaki shorts and a polo shirt, except Will had a conscience.

Brett was the one that gave Mary Elizabeth the ammunition to launch the *Sam Seymour's a Slut* campaign after Will and I slept together many moons ago. To be fair to Mary Elizabeth, it was one of her better campaigns because it was actually based on a sliver of truth. It also managed to break up her and Brett's relationship after breaking up Will and Brett's friendship.

Looking me up and down much like my mother had done that morning, Brett leered at me. He seemed to have the same conclusion as her because he kept grinning his creepy Brett Barnes's smile.

"Well you sure look different!" he said. Brett had always thought he was more charming than he actually was.

"Apparently not that different if you recognized me," I shot back. "How are your parents?"

Brett shifted his weight from one hip to another, golf iron still in hand. "Just bought a house up the road, so I'd say pretty good. How are yours?"

"All is well."

"Seeing anyone while you're home? Our poor working Will or who was that black girl you used to hang out with?" Brett said.

“I can see therapy after your dad’s rehab stint didn’t help with your casual racist issues?”

“I can tell you’ve not changed at all, Sam,” Brett smirked. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I’ve gotta finish this round before the beer in the clubhouse gets too cold.”

No matter how rich these kids were, they were still rednecks.

As soon as I swung open the door of the ballroom, all hell broke loose and my mother may as well have been the Devil.

“Sam, there you are!” she said.

“Sorry, I got—”

She stood in front of me panting like she had ran a marathon. “I need you to rearrange the plants to the correct table for the raffles and then disperse the seating to form another table. It turns out Miranda and Bobby Anne are both coming and they hate each other now so we need to manufacture one more table and divide their friends evenly. Then I need you to sit at my table and be sweet and look beautiful.”

“What’s wrong with Miranda and Bobby Sue?” I asked.

“Bobby Anne, and they had a rumble over the bow committee.”

“The bow committee, Mom? Really?”

“It’s the biggest committee that preps for Christmas time!”

“You need a full time job. Oh, wait, you have one. So why are you worrying about Miranda and Bobby Anne?”

My mom groaned and walked off to the buffet that was being assembled. “Just handle the plants and tables, sweetie,” she said over her shoulder.

The ballroom was often used for wedding receptions and lunches like this one. The room's architecture was traditional just like its guests with their pillars of society and high brow arches. Each table assumed the three-course meal setting that I learned in Cotillion in that very room. Before etiquette lessons, Will and I would rearrange the silverware and wait for the polite frustrations to surface on our teachers' well-bred faces. I would not do that to my mother today, as I had learned and was older now, so the only rearranging I did was of the plants and chairs just as she had asked.

A big lesson that we learned in Cotillion was how to carry on polite, pointless conversation with people we had no desire to speak to without looking like we wanted to stab our eyeballs with the tiny dessert forks. This was a skill that had paid off in meetings and networking in my short adulthood, and it was one I intended to use at this lunch.

As the room filled with the garden ladies, the waiters began to take drink orders. The numbers reached the level that I could no longer stand by the bar and *look busy*. I had to integrate and begin to socialize, so I scanned the crowd. I generally went for the older ones because they seemed to lack agenda. They had watched their children and their grandchildren grow up and were past the point of bragging about Gigi's fourth birthday or Andrew's first communion.

"Hi Ms..." I squinted at her name sticker, "Butler, looking forward to the orchid demonstration today?"

Ms. Butler was a short and stout woman who probably never went a day without lipstick or getting her hair done. She held what looked like a gin martini with an olive in her hand and a raffle entry in the other. She, too, was squinting but at the raffle sheet.

“A young person that knows her flowers? How refreshing!” Ms. Butler said.

There was a poster at the front of the room that read *Orchid Demonstration*.

“I’d prefer to receive flowers than plant them, but I’m helping my mom out.”

“Who is your mother, dear?”

“The president.”

“So you are the daughter in New York?” Ms. Butler asked, still half gazing at the raffle ticket.

“Yes, ma’am, sorry, where are my manners? I’m Sam,” I said, extending a hand. “Can I help you with that?” I motioned to the paper in her hand.

Instead of shaking my hand, she put the pen and paper in it. “Yes, dear, they make the print so small despite knowing we’re just a bunch of old ladies! Except your mother. Oh, how she has brought some excitement to the club! She really mixes things up.”

I let out a little laugh. “I know she enjoys it. What’s your first name?”

“Barbara, dear.” She paused. “Are you moving back to the South? Your mother is always telling us about your adventures in the City. I once lived in New York...”

I handed her back the pen and filled out paper. I took a deep breath and smiled, just as they had instructed us to do so in Cotillion if we needed a second longer to collect ourselves and plan our well thought out response. In that breath, I realized I wasn’t annoyed at the question. The difference between Ms. Butler asking me if I was moving back to the South versus the neighbors, Mary Elizabeth, and Brett Barnes was I didn’t feel like I had to convince her of

anything. I didn't have to convince her that I had made it in New York after years of complaining about the South. I didn't have to convince her that my doomed relationship was still in full bloom. She was just an older lady wanting to talk, perhaps even wanting to talk to someone she had once been.

For the first time in weeks, I unveiled the reason I came home: "Honestly, I don't know what I'm doing with my life."

"Of course you don't, dear." She said this earnestly, without a trace of pity.

Were my problems as simple as admitting that I didn't have a clue how to solve them?

I looked around. "I've not told anyone this, but I think I want to write a book," I blurted out.

"How fantastic, dear. The South has a rich literary history. Us girls raised in the South like Miss Flannery O'Connor know how to tell a story."

I smiled. "Whenever I've thought about telling this to anyone, I imagine a choir of laughter following."

"Why would I laugh, dear?"

"It's not a practical idea, is it?"

Just like all of the others, Ms. Butler looked at my hand. "You're twenty something? And you aren't married?" she asked, reminding me that I was not wearing the ring to tell the world my status.

"No," I said, "but I am..."

"Then what do you have to worry about, dear? Having no commitments is the most wonderful thing about being young. Take a chance."

*I have no commitments.* It was a provocative statement for me. *I have no commitments.* I have no *commitments*. I have *no commitments*?

Looking around the room at the increasing number of guests per square foot, I remembered my responsibilities, my commitments, to my mom.

“Ms. Butler, it was nice speaking with you, but I should probably go and help my mom rearrange—”

“Samantha Seymour?” a familiar voice said.

Will and I often spoke about the *mandatory full name syndrome*. It was more of an identity crisis waiting to happen than a syndrome. Some of us have the types of names that oblige others to say our full name no matter what. I blame it on the same consonant first and last names. It was a phenomenon that haunted me from elementary school to adulthood. I would always hear people say—

“Samantha Seymour?” the voice called again.

“Mrs. Wallace.” I turned and smiled at Will’s mother as she approached.

Ms. Butler’s eyes were wide as she grinned deeply at us, magnifying her marionette lines.

“I’m sorry, Mrs. Wallace, have you met Ms. Butler?”

The ladies exchanged smiles and *how-do-you-do*’s.

Ms. Butler nodded in my direction. “Sam is writing a book.” She smiled like I had won a Pulitzer already and I had just autographed her copy that she would sell to one lonely reader on eBay.

“Isn’t that a nice hobby,” Mrs. Wallace said.

Mrs. Wallace had this way of making even the nicest sentences seem condescending.

Ms. Butler shook her head. “Dear, Sam *is* a writer.”

A face like stone and a mind like Hitler, Mrs. Wallace cracked the slightest of smiles, “I *know* Sam is a writer of some sorts. My son William signed

us up for a monthly subscription of this quaint arts magazine from Brooklyn she writes for. *Grater?*”

“*Grated,*” I said.

Ms. Butler shook her head again. “And she’s going to write a book!”

“That’s absurd,” Mrs. Wallace said, “what would she even have to write about? She’s barely seen anything.”

Ms. Butler waved her finger in the air. “No, Sam has thought long and hard about this, dear, and—”

“Ms. Butler,” I said, putting a light hand on her shoulder.

She nodded.

“I experienced some things,” I shrugged.

Mrs. Wallace just looked at me.

Ms. Butler’s eyes darted back and forth from our faces, frozen in another time many years ago.

Mrs. Wallace cleared her throat. “The past is the past for a reason, Samantha. Now when are you going back to New York?”

“Eventually.” I smiled my best *Southern woman on the battlefield* smile.

“Well that’s good. William will be quite busy so he needs no distraction. But you know that.” Mrs. Wallace shot back a similar smile, but hers was accented with an *eat shit and die* note.

Knowing when to put down your sword and surrender was part of being a polite young Southern woman. You were never to ruffle feathers in public.

“Oh, no, don’t worry, Mrs. Wallace. I won’t be distracting Will this summer. You might want to ask Will if he has any other distractions, though, because I think I saw him fucking someone in your beach house.”

Mrs. Wallace’s jaw dropped.

I never said that *I* was a polite young Southern woman, though.

I turned to Ms. Butler who was just trying to figure out who to comfort. “It was lovely chatting with you, but I should go find my mom and offer a hand.”

~

One autumn day after school and right before my first surgery, my mom drove us out to Tybee to enjoy one last meal at North Beach Grill before they closed for the winter. It’s not that Tybee ever became deadly bitter in the winter, but the island just became dead. The tourists no longer flooded the island. Kids were back in school and adults didn’t have any more vacation time. The non-native Tybee residents had locked up and drove back up to North Carolina or Virginia. Locals kept to themselves.

There was no need for restaurants to stay open in the coldest, deadest months, so some simply shut. North Beach Grill was one of them. It was our comfort food right down the road from my childhood home. My mom knew it would feed my soul for the long winter ahead of me, and when she suggested the outing, I agreed.

We sat at a table on the screened-in porch. I did my homework and my mom sent some work emails. We ordered our usual: an order of wings, a crab cake sandwich, a fish sandwich, and a side of red beans and rice. We ate and spoke of silly topics like the new headmaster’s toupee and our neighbor’s dog escaping and sabotaging a yard sale.

Then my mom grew serious and cleared her throat. “Are you seeing Will before your appointment next week?”

“Of course,” I said, inhaling half of the crab cake sandwich.

“Good, good,” she nodded.

“Yep.”

“Maybe you guys should take a little break while you recover?” She put the other half on my plate as if it were commission for being an agreeable daughter.

“Won’t I be fine in a week, though?” I asked.

“Of course, you will, sweetie. I just thought between the surgery and chemo, you should focus on yourself and Will should focus on his college applications and this and that.”

I put the sandwich down. “So are you worried about me or Will?”

My mom looked exasperated but I hadn’t thought I had done anything irritating.

She rubbed the back of her neck and rolled it back and forth. “I’m not worried about either of you, sweetie.” She paused and took a deep breath. “Mrs. Wallace is a little worried about Will’s focus lately and just wants him to buckle down during application season is all.”

I shrugged. “Will did them all this summer, I think he’ll be fine.”

My mom looked as tired as I felt. She may have even looked more tired.

“Sam, sweetie, I need to ask you to not see Will anymore.”

“Not see him anymore, like ever?” My eyes started to swell. “Why would you need to ask me to do that? Are you trying to kill me if this doesn’t?”

“This is difficult for me to ask you to do, believe me, but Mrs. Wallace doesn’t want Will getting caught up in things and thinks it would be best if the two of you leave it for now.”

“Leave what?” I said, tears pillowing down my cheeks.

“Your relationship.”

### Ch. 13 God's Plan

“Why did God give the South sun?” I said, wiping the morning’s run off my forehead as my mom and I reached our driveway.

It was Sunday. We took a seat on the porch steps and inspected our shoes for sandspurs (the price you pay for a beautiful, beach run).

“I don’t think it worked like that, sweetie,” my mom said, “and it doesn’t help wearing all black.”

We hadn’t been to church since I was thirteen, but it wasn’t a topic taken off the table completely. Church and Religion were some things we probably should have gravitated towards because of the grace I had been shown not so long ago. God and Faith, however, were the favored ones. We made a distinction. You could have Faith in God without going to Church or worshipping Religion. So we did just that. The South seemed to select the other two uppercase words for their Sundays. We had Conversation and a Run.

After we hosed off our sandy tennis shoes in the yard, we left them for the sun to take care of while we just sat and enjoyed the quietness of the morning on the steps. Despite my complaints, it was that time in the morning when the humidity was turned up high and the heat was on low. When the sun only warms you and the moisture in the air almost cools you down. It felt pretty holy to me.

“I’m sorry about yesterday,” I said.

“Don’t be sorry, kid. It all started with me, so you don’t have to be sorry.” She paused and smiled. “We both know your colorful language was the only interesting thing that came out of that luncheon.”

“Why do you do them then?”

She sighed. “The Garden Club was a good thing for me when I didn’t have your father. Some days I felt like if I had any more free time to myself, I would scream, so it was a nice distraction organizing even one more event after hours. But now...”

“You have Dad, again.”

She smiled. “That’s right, I have Dad, again,” she said. “And you have Phillip.”

I nodded.

My mom spoke again. “You meeting Will later?” Her blonde hair was tied in a low ponytail on her neck. It didn’t look as sweaty as mine felt.

“You know the Wallaces, Sunday is off limits. We’re having lunch tomorrow,” I said, looking down at my grumbling stomach.

“God, I’m sorry, but that kid is nearly thirty and they want to make the whole damn family go to Church.”

“Shhh,” I said, putting a finger up to my lips, “they might hear you.” I pointed to the trees across the street that shaded their back yard.

“Oh, I’ve already told Trish that she should let go of the reins. It’s bad enough they’ve forced Will to be groomed for their law firm. He has to pretend he wants to go to Church, too?”

I nodded. “Groomed like a show pony, that boy is.”

A breeze caught our attention and gently took hold of our minds for a moment. I liked these quiet moments with my mom, those moments when she wasn’t worried about her company and I wasn’t worried about my rent. We weren’t talking about the complexities that went hand in hand with her and my father coming together again. We weren’t talking about whether I wanted to have kids or not. Last but certainly not least, we weren’t talking about my

complications with Phillip. Life felt easy and predictable in those moments. All that mattered was I had family that let me live out my dreams, making my future unpredictable yet freeing.

“Do you feel like I’ve done that to you?” my mom asked, breaking the silence.

“You don’t make me go to Church or develop a weird obsession with gardening.”

“No, I mean pushing you in the direction I want you to go in,” she said.

“You mean *up*?”

“Did I make you hate the South?” she asked bluntly.

I had to pause and think. Did I hate the South? Hate is a strong word. Did I hate high school? Yes. Did I want to get the hell out of Dodge as soon as it finished? Yes. But did I hate the South?

“I don’t hate the South,” I said.

“You don’t love it,” she said.

“I don’t love it, no.”

“And you don’t want to move back.”

I took a deep breath. “The jury’s still out on that one.”

That made her head turn. My mom had been staring straight ahead at the empty lot next to our house. The owners of the land were unknown. Occasionally a grass mower came by to level off the patchy field, but no one came to do anything else. When it was just my mom and I, we would fantasize about the possibility of me buying the lot one day and building my dream house next store to the family house. We would be neighbors and she would look after my kids when I went to work, and they would grow up knowing their grandmother. A lot of things have changed, but I wondered if my mom ever revisited that fantasy.

My mom put her arm around me. “Maybe you could become a teacher,” she said in jest.

“A teacher?” I asked.

“You’d have the summers off and you could come down here like this every year.”

“I see your logic,” I said, standing up and brushing the sand off my thighs. I lifted up the bottoms of my feet to check for sandspurs before I headed up the stairs. “Split my time between the city and the South. Have a side hustle like selling boiled peanuts on the side of the road to tourists. Sounds like a good plan, Mom.”

Following me up the front steps, she said, “There you go. You’d be surprised what tourists will spend if they think something is *authentically Southern*.”

I turned around and stopped. “What do I do about Phillip?”

“Well if you’re dividing your time between places and jobs, you could have a summer husband here, too.”

I rolled my eyes. “Do you have someone in mind, Mother?”

She shrugged. “Will doesn’t seem like a person who would let the shackles of marriage discourage him. With a written, legal document, of course.”

I shot her a look. “I was being serious about Phillip.”

“You’ve always been so serious, Sam.”

“I’ve always had to be.” I paused.

The air conditioning inside was a relief. New York didn’t have as much relief as the South. I was finally starting to feel the relief the South could provide for me.

## Ch. 14 Deep Fried Conversation

Like most of Savannah, downtown was a polarizing place. You walked by one person that has nothing, and the next person was the owner of a million dollar townhouse on Jones Street. I loved downtown, it was my safe haven, my pretend city life I desperately wanted before moving to New York City. But in the same sentence, I hated downtown.

I parked on the edge of Oglethorpe Square and walked across the historic grass of the beloved general to the Wallace's law office. The only thing good about going to the office was its location around the corner from Zunzi's, this glorious South African restaurant sent from God himself so we could at least die and go to heaven as peacefully as possible after dropping dead from the heart attack their sloppy sauce covered sandwiches would give us one day.

Today was the day Will's conversion therapy sessions to keep me in Savannah would take a Southern turn. I held down the doorbell for a second, and the building let out a five second *ding-dong ding-dong*. The office door swung open. I wasn't expecting who was on the other side of the door.

"Molly?"

"Sam!" Molly cooed, embracing me while I kept my arms straight by my side.

Molly was a girl with a million dollar smile and had just as big of a secret as I did in high school, but the difference was hers never got out. She went to another private school in the area but somehow everyone at my school knew her name. She was one of those girls every girl wanted to hate but couldn't because she was actually a nice person.

~

I remember the first time I saw the infamous Molly. It was the seventh grade Halloween dance, and Will had taken her as his date. Seventh grade was the year Will went from being a kid to going to parties and filling me in when he got back late at night. The school dance was in the cafeteria, masked with orange and black streamers and punch bowls that wouldn't be spiked for another two years. For now they were just innocent bowls of fruit juice, and Will and Molly were innocent dates that kissed goodnight at the entrance as her dad waited in the carpool line. I stood ten feet away watching and waiting for him to finish, only to have to endure a car ride for fifteen minutes with a lovesick thirteen year old.

I also remember the last time I saw Molly. Waiting rooms hold a lot of secrets. It was a familiar state for my body ten years ago, but I was sick. Everyone around me was sick, so the day you see someone you think is perfectly healthy, it launches a weird revelation of wondering what happened behind the doctor's door. Out walked Molly sobbing with her mother trailing behind her. Molly took a seat on the couch while her mother settled the bill, and as she sunk into the cushion she realized she was not alone. She stopped sniffing long enough to turn to me. Even in pain she was still elegant, her long, blonde hair, Keratin smoothed and her wet lashes fluttering around like sad butterflies.

"You're Will Wallace's friend, right?" Molly asked, dabbing the tears into her foundation.

I nodded.

"Are you better?"

Molly was a Savannahian known for her undeniable, gravitational pull that made everyone know and love her. After years of wanting to be known, I finally was, but I was known for cancer.

I nodded. "I'm in partial remission."

She gave a small smile. “Will’s happy to know that, I’m sure. He loves you.”

“We’ve not spoken in a long time.”

“Why?”

“We have our reasons,” I said.

“He loves you,” she said again.

“What makes you say that?”

“I was Matthew Henry’s prom date last year and I saw the way Will looked at you.” She paused, wiping her face. “Matthew Henry never looked at me like that after a year together and he got me pregnant.”

I instinctually covered my mouth as if she didn’t know it was shocking. “You’re pregnant?” I asked, probably only reconfirming what in her and her family’s eyes was a tragedy.

“Was.”

This time her whole body started to shake from her inherent sadness. I didn’t know what to do, so I just put my hand on her shoulder as she cried. The waiting room was empty and her mother didn’t turn around once as she continued to chat to the receptionist. She was either used to the weeping or too selfishly ashamed to acknowledge what she had been a part of that day. It was an eerie moment for the two of us, feeling alone yet more closely linked than ever.

Molly’s mother finally wrapped up her conversation about Paula Dean’s racial faux pas and turned around to face her hysterical daughter. Not acknowledging my presence, she motioned to Molly that it was time to go.

Before Molly stood up, she leaned in like she was going to tell me another secret. “Do you think Will would be here if you were me?”

I just shrugged. “Maybe I’ll see you around?”

She took a deep breath, forcing a smile, and nodded. Standing up, she walked towards the door lighter. Not like something had been lifted from her shoulders, but like something had been removed. After she and her mother left the hospital, I thought about what she had asked as I waited for my checkup.

I wanted to say I knew he would have been. If I had let him.

~

Will cleared his throat as Molly ended our embrace. “I didn’t know you two were such good friends?”

Molly and I stood there staring at each other, confirming that neither of us had ever spoken of that day in the waiting room. Her pursed lips began to open as if she were going to speak the truth after all these years.

I spoke instead. “Molly was a volunteer at the children’s hospital when I was having treatment and she would catch me up on all the gossip going on in high school to pass the time.”

Will looked at Molly and smiled. “So you were the snitch who told Sammy that I took Sarah Beth to my last homecoming.”

“Or maybe it was that website that we don’t speak of anymore and Sarah Beth’s affinity for photo albums,” I said.

He put his arm around me and narrowed his eyes at Molly. “No, I think we’ve finally caught the culprit red handed and she’s standing right in front of us.”

Molly was looking at us all doe eyed. “You guys,” she said.

“What?” we said in unison.

I rolled my eyes. “Molly, would you like to join us for lunch? Will never mentioned you worked here or I would have invited you in the first place.”

“I’m just filling in for the office manager on maternity leave.” She paused and sheepishly smiled. “I’m actually at Armstrong part-time training to be an ultrasound technician.”

My eyes could have welled up. “That’s great to hear.”

“Well,” Will said, breaking the silence, “we’re not going to make the twelve o’clock reservation if we stand here much longer.” Walking back into his office, he grabbed an umbrella.

“Zunzi’s doesn’t take reservations,” I said, “it’s literally a window and some plastic tables.”

Molly looked up from her filing and giggled.

Next to my side again, Will opened the door with an *after you* motion and nodded at Molly. “See you later.”

And we were off.

Summer in Savannah was a sweaty season filled with tourists from Wisconsin and Wyoming who had no real connection to the Civil War or Great Britain. They wandered around downtown with their mouths wide open absorbing the townhouses designed by our British ancestors, except these buildings were tarnished with a different history. They were turned into museums ran by high school students spouting facts they hardly understood about the two sides which would never be reunited despite unity being the outcome.

Will and I stood in front of a building that captured the old and new South all in one meal. The Handsome House was one of those buildings tourists flocked to when they came to Savannah to eat their famous fried chicken on a crisp, white tablecloth with fine dining service.

Will said, "I thought I'd take you to a real Southern restaurant on our Southern day out. I can't have my Southern Belle eating out of a window on a picnic table in her best summer dress."

I looked down at my low-slung jeans and white t-shirt. "I'm no Southern Belle."

"I know, but pretend for today, will ya?" He gave me a light nudge as we got to the hostess stand. "Hi, Wanda, how are you today?"

The woman gave us a smile. "I'm fine, thank you, how are you, Mr. Wallace?"

"Good, good," Will replied, "we have lunch reservations on the balcony."

"Of course, Mr. Wallace, right this way."

I walked ahead of Will, following Wanda upstairs and through to the outside cast-iron balcony. Usually there were a few tables set to accommodate others, but today one lonely table was set just for us. Wanda pulled out my chair, allowing me to sit before placing my cloth napkin in my lap. Will joined me in the opposite seat.

"Thank you, Wanda," Will said.

No sooner had Wanda excused herself a waitress popped up bringing us some iced tea and buttery, cornbread muffins.

I leaned across the table and whispered, "Is this going to be your life from now on? Going to the office in a full suit. Hiring old friends to work for you. Being known as Mr. Wallace."

"What's wrong with that?" Will took a sip of the iced tea and widened his eyes. "Now that's some sweet tea."

"It's not you for starters."

"Maybe it *is* me."

I looked at the person sitting across the table from me stuffed in a suit and choked with a tie. He sat straighter than ever yet managed to appear oppressed at the same time. Family and responsibilities would do that to someone.

I sighed. "Get over here."

"That's not very Southern Belle of you, Ms. Seymour?" He grinned. Nevertheless he stood up and moved his chair next to me. "Better?"

I freed him from his tie and undid the top two buttons of his shirt. Lastly, I fluffed up his hair that he had smothered with hair gel. "Better," I said.

Will ran his hand through his hair to finalize it himself before putting his arm on the back of my chair and stretched out. "Isn't this nice?" he said.

The balcony looked onto the cobbled side street of another beautiful building cloaked with architecture from colonial times. In the distance, you could see Christ Church, the location where our high school's commencement ceremony took place every year. Savannahians sat below us dining alfresco despite it was that time of the summer most surrendered to the heat unless they were promised a breeze. Today there was movement in the air, or maybe it was being higher up and slightly covered by the foliage provided by the old, mossy oak trees.

"It is nice," I finally said.

A knock came from the sliding door. Another woman, not Wanda, stood in the frame. Will and I both jumped like we had been doing something illicit. He removed his arm from my chair and once again sat up straight as a soldier.

"Are you ready for the main course, Mr. Wallace?" she asked.

"We haven't even ordered," I whispered to Will.

“That’ll be fine, thank you,” Will said to the woman. He removed the menu resting in front of me. “There’s only one thing to order on our Southern day out.”

The woman came back with two plates, overflowing with fat and carbs galore.

“Fried chicken and macaroni and cheese?” I looked at Will whose eyes had gone wide again at the mouthwatering spread.

“And buttermilk biscuits.”

“Anything else I can get you, honey?” the woman asked Will.

“No, that’ll be all, thank you.”

“Enjoy, *suga*,” she said, closing the door behind her again.

It seemed to be the quick but pleasant proceedings before a heart attack.

“Slipping up once in a while isn’t going to kill you,” Will said, digging into the macaroni and cheese. “Remember what my grandfather used to say?”

I began to tackle the cumbersome feat of cutting the chicken off the bone. “Don’t trust a colored person or your accountant?”

Will shook his head. “He used to tell Kelly that you’ll know when you’ve eaten too many biscuits when your boyfriend starts calling you biscuit.” He chuckled not dissimilarly to how his grandfather used to laugh at the joke.

“Thank God your sister didn’t develop an eating disorder.”

“That wasn’t God’s doing,” he said, “Kelly looked up to you.”

“She also looked up to Britney, but luckily that was a fleeting moment as well.”

“Be serious for a moment,” he said, “you were good with her when she was a kid. You understood how to motivate her, how to get her head out of her ass and make a change.”

“I was just a kid myself, Will.”

“You did better than my parents ever did with her.” He paused and put down his fork and knife and cleared his throat. “You’ll be a good mom one day.”

“How do you know that?”

“Just a hunch.”

“*If* I become a mom,” I added.

Will smiled. “Well *if* you become a mom, you’ll be the best mom around.”

I took a deep breath and took a sip of sweet tea. “I paid a visit to the doctor the other day.”

Will took my hand and whispered. “Is something wrong?”

“No, God, no,” I said, squeezing his hand back.

“You can’t set up a sentence that contains the word *doctor* in such a scary way,” he said, breathing like someone had jumped out from around the corner and yelled *boo*.

“Sorry,” I said. “I went to the doctor to discuss the subject we are discussing.”

“You’re worried it’s going to come back?” he whispered.

“No,” I said, looking around to make sure no one could hear us speaking. We were on a private balcony, though. “Kids. Me having one.”

Will nodded thoughtfully. “You want to try?”

“I want to think about trying.”

He nodded and smiled. “You would be a good mom.”

“But would Phillip be a good dad?”

Will’s face tightened and he removed his hand from mine. “We’re back on this guy, again?”

“I thought you were being supportive the other day?” I asked.

“Sam, look, there should be no doubt in this guy’s mind he wants to be with you. Whether you kept some pretty crucial information from him or not, I mean it was pretty crucial, but he should know, yes, I want to spend the rest of my life with this girl whatever that entails. He should just know.”

“Is that something you would know so quickly?”

“We’re not talking about me, we’re talking about the German.”

I looked down. “Did you know?” I said softly.

“I don’t know,” he said.

“Will.”

He sighed. “I might have known if you had given me the chance.”

The glass door slid open and the waitress came with a pitcher of iced tea.

“Is everything good, babies?” she said, pouring some more in each glass.

“Yes ma’am,” Will replied, “it couldn’t get much better than this.”

Or could it.

Could this be my lunch everyday if I moved home? Could I leave my job in New York and work for one of the two magazines in Savannah and write cultural pieces about the city? Leave my office and walk through the historic squares alongside tourists stopping for photo ops. Ring the doorbell like I had earlier and out would pop Will and his umbrella, ready for anything. Rain or shine, Will would be there, ready to have lunch and hear about my daily struggles. We would admire the cobbled view beneath us, feeling content that it would not crumble.

Could I have a life like this with Phillip? Honest and kind, understanding and forgiving. We would have to work on that. I shared as much as he did which together wasn’t a lot. Could we get passed our secret worlds and form one world

that we understood together? How could you fill someone in on so much of the past?

I looked at Will.

Could it get much better than this?

## Ch. 15 A Duel of Duels

After lunch, Will insisted on walking me to my car. It was something my dad did as well, especially if we were leaving downtown separately.

“Get ready for a night out on the town, Ms. Seymour,” Will said, opening my car door.

I curtsied in his general direction. “Man, this really is a day in the South. Car service and everything.”

“Don’t get too used to it. They don’t do this in Germany,” he said with a wink.

“So where are we going tonight?” I asked, ignoring his comment.

“Don’t you worry that pretty little head of yours. I’ve got it all planned out. Just ask your mom for the bag,” he said, closing my door.

I rolled the window down. “The bag? This is sounding more ominous than I was expecting.”

“The garment bag.”

“Oh, God.”

“What?” he said, cracking up with laughter. “I knew you wouldn’t have the right dress in your closet, so I took the liberty of selecting something from a local boutique that would be fitting for tonight’s occasion.”

“You’ll be lucky if I speak to you after tonight,” I said.

“Just go get beautiful and I’ll pick you up at eight o’clock.”

“You sure you have to go back to work?” I asked.

“I really should take care of a few more things before I clock off,” he said.

“You act like there is a clock to clock off.”

“There is. It’s about my height and coloring and has a mustache and angry look in his eyes,” he paused, looking over his shoulder at the sound of the office door, “and speaking of that clock. Dad.” Will leaned into my car window.

“Maybe you should leave,” he whispered.

“William, I thought that was you,” Mr. Wallace said.

Will stepped away from my car. That put me in the direct line of vision for Mr. Wallace.

“Samantha,” Mr. Wallace nodded.

“Mr. Wallace, how are you?”

“I’m fine, Samantha. Trish told me she saw you the other day.”

“She did.”

“Congratulations on your engagement.”

That’s not all she told him. “Thank you, sir.”

“I’m sure Trish will be sending you an engagement gift from our family shortly.”

“Dad,” Will interjected.

“That’s really not necessary, sir,” I said.

“Well, safe travels,” Mr. Wallace said. “Are you coming back in, William?”

“I’ll be in in a minute.” Will didn’t move.

“You should go. I’ll see you tonight,” I said.

He ran his hands through his hair. “Jesus, it’s like when we were in high school and my parents would peer out the back windows when I’d drop you off. Aren’t the girl’s parents supposed to be the insane ones?”

“Traditionally, but I don’t like traditions.”

“Okay,” he grinned. He tapped my car door twice. “I’ll see you tonight then.”

“What was he thinking? I can’t wear this,” I said, standing in the living room while my parents watched the news. They always watched the news. I was wearing the dress Will had chosen for our night out. That dress was something to be reported on.

“It’s nice, sweetie,” my mom said.

“It’s white,” my dad declared.

“Exactly. It’s nice and white. I look like I’m going on my bachelorette party.”

“Maybe that’s what Will’s secretly planning,” my mom said.

There was a knock at the door.

“Probably my party planner,” I said, sauntering to the door.

Will stood on the other side of the door with a bouquet of peonies.

“I wouldn’t wear this for just anyone, but since it is still the day of the South, it’s on,” I said, sniffing my favorite flowers.

“And you know I wouldn’t buy flowers for just anyone. Or anyone actually.”

Will stepped into the living room to greet my parents, and then we were off to our mystery location. I could never get Phillip to go anywhere new unless it was *Phillip approved*, let alone surprise me with a secret location. That wasn’t in Phillip’s nature and it was something that I had accepted a long time ago. It was in Will’s nature, though.

Even on a weeknight in the summertime, downtown Savannah was crawling with tourists, locals, and everything in between. As we made our way through the City Market crowds, the sun was beginning to fade. Eyes grew heavier with the feelings of summer nights, lustful moments, and ignorance of tomorrow's duties.

I tugged on the back of Will's white oxford shirt. "Are we going where I think we're going?"

He turned towards Bay Street, confirming my suspicions. "We're going out with a bang, Sammy. No complaining, okay?"

"Roger."

"I don't see your dad," he grinned. "Come on, we're almost there."

Taking my hand, Will led me down a little cobbled street off Bay Street. As we got closer to the venue, there was a small line of people waiting outside the door, smoking and hollering. Cliff's Dueling Piano Bar was a local spot, filled with Southern gents and rednecks, all wanting to hear classic hits and swing the night away. Will and I had gone a few times throughout the years. We both had a secret passion for dance despite we had both been forced to attend Cotillion and partake in ballroom dancing. Will steered us towards the front of the line and shook hands with the wannabe bouncer, like a pseudo club in Savannah really needed a bouncer like in New York, and he waved us on through. The inside looked like an old, refurbished barn where this sort of swing dancing hootenanny belonged.

"I knew it," I said, clutching the crook of Will's arm as he led us to the bar, "I knew it when I saw the dress."

"You gotta have something to twirl in," he smirked. "Margarita?"

"Tequila makes me crazy."

“We like crazy.” He waved at the bartender. “Two tequila shots and two margaritas, please, sir.”

“Will.”

“What, Sammy? It’ll be fine. Relax.”

I looked at Will’s face. It was relaxed and he seemed happy. Then I looked around the room. Everyone’s faces seemed to mirror his or visa versa. There was an atmosphere of paused time. No one was in a hurry. Everyone was where they needed to be. Maybe I was, too.

“You smile more in the South,” Will grinned, as if he could read my mind.

“How would you know?”

“I do. You’re effortless. You aren’t trying to convince anyone that you belong.”

“I don’t *really* belong here.”

“Ten years ago I would have believed that.” He looked over at the pianos. They were playing ‘Ramblin’ Man’ by The Allman Brothers. His head went back with the tequila in one motion and then he tapped it on the table like it had been a challenge.

“Let’s dance,” Will said.

I shook my head. “It’s not busy enough. Let’s wait.”

“Will you forget about what everyone thinks and just exist for a moment?”

“I don’t care what people think,” I said.

“And I’m looking forward to the next twenty years of my life working as a lawyer under my father.”

“Ah ha!” I exclaimed with a wagging finger. “I knew this wasn’t what you wanted! Finally you admit it!”

“Work isn’t everything,” he said.

“What else is there?”

“Let’s dance,” he repeated. “Because what day is it?”

“It’s I love the South day.”

“Exactly.” Will put out his hand. “May I have this dance?”

I picked the shot up and copied him, taking it down quickly and tapping the table. “You may.”

The old couples around us giggled as Will threw me around the dance floor. My white, eyelet dress bloomed with every spin, and I couldn’t help my smile from developing, either. With every push and pull across the dance floor to the Southern classics, our bodies would come together again to regroup before another movement formed. In that moment of reprieve, our eyes would link and smile at each other like old friends and old lovers because that’s what we were. Our past was linked to our future, and it felt as though it was a link we couldn’t completely erase even if we tried. Just like dancing, we would push each other away and pull each other back in. It felt natural and inevitable, yet it felt like a risk. Will would throw me out then pull me back in, and I was always ready to be pulled back in. Except for the last year when I wasn’t supposed to be pulled back in. I was supposed to resist. I was supposed to want to resist.

Will extended his arm and out I flew to his fingertips. This time he pulled me closer and held me against his body as the song changed to a slow one that would require less movement.

He looked at me like he wanted to say something, but he didn’t.

“Yes?” I asked.

He smiled and shook his head. “Nothing, this is just nice is all.”

“It is nice,” I said.

For a moment, and just a moment, we gazed too long and I could feel us drifting closer together, a pull much like gravity that was hard to fight. It would be the duel of duels to resist that feeling, a duel we had had for years. Never wanting to give into it and having this feeling that it couldn't be. But in that one moment, the battle was bigger than both of us and our bodies melded into one, our lips meeting just for a second...

"I'm sorry," Will said, immediately pulling away from me. He shook his head like he was shaking the idea of us from his thoughts.

"It's okay," I said.

That night I had Will right in front of me with nowhere to go, no one to see us, I just wanted to exist with him like we used to, the days when Will hadn't slept with half of Chicago and I had no commitments. In that moment, I just wanted to accept the embrace and rest my head against his shoulder and keep moving. As long as we kept moving we would be fine.

"Do you hear that?" Will asked.

I lifted my head off his chest. The song had changed and the mood had shifted. "*Wagon Wheel* is playing for the second time this evening?"

"It's a sign," he said, taking my hand and leading us off the dance floor to the bar.

"We've overstayed our welcome."

"Exactly. Time to relocate."

Will settled our bill with the bartender, and we waved at each other like we were old friends, old friends that make each other the best Margaritas around. Then we waved goodbye to the bouncer and the smokers' section like they were our usual crowd, inhaling carcinogens instead of exchanging blood to be closer.

The smell of the smoke strangely reminded me of Phillip, a smell of secrecy and rebellion, and it gave me an idea.

I looked up at Will. “What time does *Mark’s Convenience* close?”

He turned his wrist. “Eleven o’clock?”

“What time is it now?”

“Five till.”

“Do you think we can make it?” I asked.

“Maybe if we ran.”

I grabbed Will’s hand. “We’ve gotta hurry then!”

And so we began to run down the street hand in hand, letting out a strange mixture of laughing and panting along the way, only stopping to catch our breath or look at one another like it was our last night on Earth because the world was going to explode or one of us had cancer. If only it was the first time we had exchanged that look.

Our running came to a halt when we had reached City Market, out of breath and delirious in laughter.

“When was the last time you smoked?” I asked, pointing to *Mark’s Convenience* on the left.

He pushed his slightly sweaty hair back out of his face. “*Pshhh*, the last time your fiancé and I hung out.” He chuckled every time he mentioned that episode like there was something funny about it I didn’t know about. I *knew* there was something I didn’t know about.

“Shall we?” I said.

He paused. “When was the last time *you* smoked?”

“Oh, not you too,” I said. “Phillip hates it when I smoke, but he’s allowed to. All of you men are hypocrites. Girls just want to have fun every now and then.

Throw caution to the wind. Not give a damn. I guess we can only do that with other women.”

“Come on, no, that’s not fair. I’m not like all other men.”

“If you take away my freedom to smoke, you are.”

“What happened to the girl who used to lecture me on smoking, huh? The one who also lectured me on not wearing sunscreen? They all lead to—”

“Can we just be reckless tonight? Is that too much to ask? I just want to forget about the past for a moment.”

Will sighed and slung his arm around my neck. “Let’s go, my Southern belle.”

“Where are we going?”

“We’re getting you some cigarettes. I can’t risk being lumped in with the German.”

I grinned and we entered the shop. *Mark’s* were all around the city. They had the basic convenience store stuff of course, but anyone from Savannah knew they had the best bagels.

“A pack of American Spirits, sir,” Will said to the man behind the counter.

“And one of the disposable e-cigarettes in the cherry flavor, please,” I added.

“What do you think this is, a candy store? Cherry flavored?” Will teased.

The man looked at us like it had been a long day. “Is that everything?”

Will took out his wallet and looked at me. “Any lollipops or gummy bears for the road?”

“That will be all, thank you,” I said to the man.

“I don’t need the change, thanks,” Will said to the man.

He nodded. “Have a good night, sir.”

Outside the shop in Ellis Square, groups of people stood with their privileged open container law beers, trying to be heard through a constant fog of sound. No one seemed to notice or complain about the humid air because it felt good to be outside after working inside all day. There were tattoo covered twenty-something's and office suited men, ladies dressed in summer dresses with zoo animals traced in neon pink and scantily clothed cut off denim wearers within a few feet of each other.

Neither of us had to ask where we were going. We strolled through the square until we reached *McGill's* on Congress Street. McGill's was a narrow building with the typical offerings of any Savannah bar, except it had a courtyard with a side of sentimental value. I took a seat outside on a wooden barstool and table that resembled a giant thread spool as I watched Will make friends with the first person he saw smoking in the area to borrow a lighter. The way Will effortlessly spoke to people was something that had ran deep in his veins and been with him since childhood. Some people just had it, and when you had it, you had to use it. I never questioned Will wanting to be a lawyer; I knew he would charm the lies out of plaintiffs. I questioned why he wanted to come home to do that under his parents' wings.

Will meandered his way around a game of corn hole to rejoin me.

"Are you going to smoke that thing or just stare at it all night?" Will teased.

I was still holding the packaged e-cigarette that I had worked so hard for. "I'm going to smoke it, I was just waiting for you."

"Here." Will took the box from me and broke the seal so I could get into it.

“Thanks.” I took the black e-cigarette out and twirled it around in my fingers for a second like a baton until I brought it to my lips.

Inhale.

“Does it taste like cherry pie?” Will smirked, taking another drag of his real cigarette. His eyes were relaxed, almost sleepy looking but very content.

Exhale.

I opened and closed my mouth like I was deciphering notes of a fine wine. “More like cherry-flavored Smarties.” I held it out for him to try it.

He shook his head. “I don’t want to waste your puffs.”

“How else will you know what it tastes like?” I asked.

A cheeky grin spread across his face. “You should hear the lines I’ve used in another life.”

I rolled my eyes. “So you’re done with that life?”

He cleared his throat. “Yeah, I think it’s time to grow up. It’s fun for a while, but—”

“It leaves you feeling empty inside?” I finished for him.

“No. I was going to say I’m running out of material to use.” He laughed a deep laugh from his stomach.

I tried looking at us from the position of an outsider looking in. We were two young people sitting close, knees intertwined either because we were close or the barstools left little space for two people to sit close otherwise. We were smoking and drinking and laughing and staring. Were we wanting more or just something else?

Taking another puff of the cherry flavor, I looked at Will. “If I wasn’t me, what line would you have used?”

Will stopped laughing and ran his hand through his hair. “But it is you.”

“But if I was just some girl you were out with,” I pushed.

“But you aren’t just some girl, Sammy,” Will said, patting me on the knee.

I took a drag and looked towards the group playing corn hole. “Wanna play?” I asked him.

“Did I just say the wrong thing?”

“You’re doing it again,” I said.

“I am,” he sighed, pushing a piece of hair out of his eyes. “I’m sorry.”

“You can’t have it both ways, you know? You’re either my friend or—”

“Not your friend?”

“You know what I mean, Will.”

“I know.”

Will took the e-cigarette from me, grazing my fingertips, and put it to his mouth. He inhaled and handed it right back. He did the same taste test and nodded. “I’ve tasted that before.”

“Right?”

He squinted for a moment like if he squinted hard enough he could summon the flavors better. He took it back and inhaled one more time. Waiting for a moment, he said, “Your mom’s cherry trifle! It tastes like your mom’s cherry trifle!”

I took it back from him and inhaled. “That’s exactly it.” I exhaled and looked up at Will. “That could never have happened with him.”

Will put out his cigarette and rested his arms on his knees, leaning into me to listen.

“You know my family and all our quirks, the way my mom overfeeds anyone that walks into our house. The way my dad’s silences don’t mean he hates you but that he’s thinking and listening. The way—”

“The way you’re loyal to old friends.”

“Yeah,” I said.

“Sam, let me ask you one thing,” he paused, “why do you love the German?”

I sighed. “I love him for the era that’s just ended.”

“You love him for the part of you he didn’t know? That makes no sense.”

“I loved him because he saw me for who I am, not for what happened.”

“*Loved* as in past tense?” Will took out another cigarette from the pack resting on the table.

“I don’t know right now,” I said, “and I’m sick of talking about this. Another round of drinks and a game of corn hole?”

“You used to think corn hole was for stupid rednecks with nothing to do,” Will said.

“I used to think a lot of things. And nothing feels stupid after a tequila shot.”

Will stood up and smiled. “And there’s my cue to go to the bar.”

“I’ll secure the corn hole,” I said.

The same guys with the light were still playing corn hole underneath the pineapple shaped garden lights in the courtyard. There was nothing distinguishable about their appearances. All sported a similar waterproof fishing shirt in case they were to take on water at any point, paired with khaki shorts and boating shoes.

I cleared my throat. “Are you guys almost done playing?” I said in their direction.

“You’re not from around these parts, are you?” one of them said in a thick Southern accent.

“The scary thing is I am,” I said, walking over to them.

“Savannahian born and raised?” another said.

“Born and raised, and then she sprinted away,” Will’s voice said behind me.

I turned around to see Will holding a tray of tequila shots and water. He set it down on the table and picked up two shot glasses from it and walked over.

“You hate like the South or something?” one of the guys asked.

“No,” I shook my head, “why does everyone keep asking me that?”

“You don’t run from something you love,” he said.

“Cheers,” Will said, handing me a shot and raising his own.

“Cheers,” we all said in unison, clinking new and existing glasses.

I examined the guys standing in front of me. I very much subscribed to the notion that all rednecks looked the same, but one of them looked familiar. He looked like a good ole Southern boy. His face was thin, but not drawn, and a bit scruffy. What stood out to me were his thick curls that sat on top of his head and bounced when he spoke. They looked almost bleached, the tops were so blond. His skin was burnt like he had been out in a boat all day with a mild sunglass tan. He wasn’t someone I went to high school with, but I couldn’t pin how I would know him otherwise.

“Do I know you from somewhere?” I finally asked him.

He looked at Will before he spoke, as if he needed permission to speak to me. He cleared his throat. “I don’t think so. I grew up in Statesboro.”

Statesboro was one place I was blessed not to be from over Savannah. It had really become a college town with Georgia Southern University being based there, but it lost its college town charm when the rednecks came out to play in their monster trucks covered in mud from a weekend of hunting.

“Have you spent any time in Savannah, though? Maybe for sports?”

He looked as though he wanted to retreat from the conversation, like he had grown shy all of a sudden.

I spoke again. “Sorry, you just look really familiar like I knew you in a past life or something.”

He shook his head. “No, it’s okay. Just the last time I spent much time in Savannah was when my little brother had cancer.”

And there it was, how I knew him. I could picture his brother across the room from me in the children’s wing of the hospital, receiving chemo round after round. A year or two younger than me but even more frail at the time from being sick so long. His family would come visit every day, bringing him fries and a shake, or a new comic book, or whatever he wanted, hoping it would make him better.

“Ralph?” I managed to say.

He furrowed his brow. “How did you know Ralph?”

“I didn’t,” I lied. “My friend was in the hospital and I would visit her.” I paused. “You look similar is all. I’m sorry about him. He seemed like a nice kid.”

He smiled and nodded. “Thanks. Yeah, he was.”

Everyone surrounding us carried on their side conversations during our private moment, like his friends knew to give him that space if he was wanting to talk about it, much how Will had done with me.

The guy spoke again. “Was your friend fine?”

“Yeah, she was.”

## Ch. 16 The Day After Most Evenings Spent with Tequila

“Morning, Sammy,” I heard Will’s voice say to close to my ear.

A feeling I hadn’t experienced in a long time flooded my body, the feeling that something exciting had just begun and it was the day after the first night of many nights with someone new. Only this person wasn’t new. I opened my eyes to see Will next to me with a cup of coffee and two painkillers. Then reality quickly dawned on me as I pushed away the cloud-like duvet from my face and sat up in bed. I looked down at my body, no longer clothed with the dress from the night before, wearing one of Will’s t-shirts that read *Chicago Club Soccer* and a pair of athletic shorts to match it.

“God, why do I feel like you ran me over in my dad’s truck?”

Will laughed. “I think you did that to yourself. I feel pretty good actually.”

“I don’t remember anything past corn hole, so you’re going to have to fill me in.”

“Well, after we beat those rednecks in corn hole, you suggested we go to another bar for a nightcap, but I suggested we go back to my new place for the last one.”

“And then?”

“Then you were mumbling about lying about knowing some kid named Ralph and you were the lucky one?”

“Yeah, I knew that kid’s brother last night and lied. I lied to his face about his dead brother.”

“Why do you think you lied?”

“Because I didn’t want to also be the kid with cancer.”

We both fell silent.

I took the coffee and pills from him. “I can’t remember the last time someone brought me coffee in bed.”

“I can. About a week ago?” He paused. “But I’ll do you one better. Want some breakfast, too?” He got up and headed to the kitchen.

I was scared to see what I looked like neck up, fearing the mascara traveling and hair nesting probably in progress.

“Well I can’t remember the time before that someone brought me breakfast in bed.”

Will scavenged through the fridge for what looked like ingredients to breakfast: eggs, milk, blueberries, butter. He looked over his shoulder. “Maybe you’re with the wrong someone,” he grinned.

I shook my head. “No,” I said, “that’s not fair, you can’t play this game with me.”

“Don’t hate the player, you’re the one in my bed.”

Just then my phone began to ring from inside my purse. I fumbled through the collection of lipsticks, dollar bills, and my new e-cigarette and squinted at the screen. It was Phillip and he had already called twice. I put my purse back down, keeping my phone and e-cigarette, and threw on Will’s fleece jacket sitting on an armchair and headed for the door.

“Where are you going?” Will called after me. “We’re in the middle of a conversation.”

“Excuse me, but I’ve got to take this.”

“Hello?” I said, closing the door behind me.

The sun was much brighter than how I felt about this conversation going. Will’s new apartment was in the basement. It had a small but well-done patio,

bricked in with tasteful potted topiaries and a bistro table. I pulled out a chair and sat. I took a long drag of the e-cigarette.

“Rough night?” Phillip asked.

My heart skipped down the street back to my truck I had lost track of last night. “No, not really,” I replied, “how about you?”

“I’ve already been to work,” he said.

“Right, right, the time difference. Silly me.”

I must have inhaled and exhaled a little too loudly.

“Are you breathing really heavily into the phone?” Phillip asked.

“Can’t a girl smoke her morning e-cigarette in peace?”

It really would have been a nice way to wake up every morning. Opening your eyes in a beautiful, old building with fresh, new linens. Taking the paper outside to the patio with your morning coffee and cigarette. Eating lox and bagels while a hummingbird fluttered by seeking the red flowering plant in the corner. Phillip wouldn’t have liked the concept of breakfast eating alfresco before work. He would have said it’s too *stressful* on a normal day, so then he would have sat there sulking in silence, avoiding what we were avoiding talking about anyways.

“Sam?” Phillip said, like he had said it before.

“Sorry,” I paused, “what were you saying?”

He sighed into the phone. “I said, how can you smoke at a time like this?”

“At a time like what?”

“You’ve just told me you had cancer.” The way he said cancer was like he had never personally known anyone with cancer.

“Phillip,” I said, “I had cancer ten years ago. One cigarette isn’t going to make it seek revenge on me tomorrow.”

The phone went silent.

I wasn't sure what the purpose of the phone call was. Usually when someone calls you, they have something to say. I think he wanted me to have something to say, though. I just wasn't sure what he wanted me to tell him.

"Phillip?" I asked.

"Yes, yes, sorry. I've been thinking a lot about what you told me. I'm just struggling with this whole thing. I always imaged being able to teach my son how to kick a ball or—"

"Drink a beer?"

"Sam, will you be serious?"

"I am," I said, taking another drag of the e-cigarette, "I just think we're jumping the gun, here. We've just started discussing this whole kid thing, and now you're rushing to all these conclusions. I went to my doctor last week to have some tests done, so once I get those results back, then I can—"

"Tests? And you're just telling me of these now? We've just started the conversation because you've left me out of it. You're leaving me out of everything, Sam. Do you hear the way you sound? *III* is all you just said. You've gone through your adult life with this secret for only you to know about yourself. Did you ever think what it would have been like if you would have just let people in? I didn't know I wouldn't be able to have kids with my fiancée until last week, and we are together."

"We're not sure I can't have kids," I said.

"But we're not sure you can."

"That's not fair," I said.

"You know what's not fair is you keeping this from me our entire relationship and then me having to sort out how I feel after I already love you."

"Would you just stop loving me if I can't have kids?" I asked.

“I’m not sure,” he said.

“Wrong answer,” I said. “By the way, I spent the night at Will’s last night.” I hung up so hard, I hoped that he felt the vibrations from my fingertip. I hung up so hard, it knocked the tears out of my eyes into two quiet streams down my half made-up face.

I heard the door open behind me.

It’s Will. It had to be unless a kidnapper has broken in the backdoor, tied him up in a chair, and decided to dine alfresco afterwards. I didn’t move. I just stayed still, looking down into my lap at the terminated phone call that may have terminated my engagement for good. I felt arms wrap around my softly, shaking shoulders and a cheek press against my wet cheek. It’s either Will or kidnappers have become a lot nicer these days.

“Come inside, Sammy, and I’ll make you pancakes,” he whispered in my ear.

He released me and I stood up, following him inside leaving my e-cigarette behind to dine alfresco without me.

~

It was that kind of effort that I once forgot about the past and followed Will into another kitchen and ate the only meal he had perfected in his decade of bachelorhood. I couldn’t think about Will making varieties of other women varieties of other pancakes too hard or the pancakes would come up. Did he make them with bananas and chocolate chips like he did for me when I was upset or hungry? I didn’t know, but some things are better left unknown.

The first time I had his specialty was when we reunited and agreed to forgive and forget. Arriving unannounced in his usual fashion, Will somehow managed to find out my class schedule at New York University and found me in

the midst of my freshman English major load. I was sitting at the front of the giant lecture room. The class ended, the students flooded out of the double doors, and there stood Will Wallace in the flesh, holding a small gym bag in one hand and a bouquet of flowers in the other. We hadn't seen each other in a year since he graduated and I still had cancer and one more year left of high school to make it through without a best friend.

He didn't have to say anything. I could see it on his face that he was sorry for his family's behavior and letting it happen in the first place. He just didn't know how to say it.

"It's okay," I said.

He nodded. "Do you have a date for tonight?"

"I'm looking at him."

Will smiled. "You wanna just skip the whole dinner thing and take me home?" Even then with only two years of screwing random girls under his belt, he was cheeky.

"We do have a lot of lost time to catch up on and I'm guessing you need a place to stay," I said.

And with those few lines exchanged, we forgot about the years apart and the lost time and we returned to being best friends and nothing more nothing less.

~

"Are you sure you don't want help finding the truck?" Will asked, standing in the doorway.

I was still wearing his pseudo athletic clothes for the walk of pseudo shame to my truck that could have been anywhere from Jones to Bay Street. Would I run into anyone that I knew? That was the charm of small town life. It was always a gamble but sometimes you just had to take the risk.

“I’m fairly certain I parked in Chippewa Square. I’ll be fine,” I said.

“I’m not worried about your truck.”

“Like I said, I’ll be fine,” I paused, “and in my new outfit, no one will recognize me.” I punctuated the end of my sentence by taking the ball cap off his head that read *HHI* for Hilton Head Island.

“Okay, slugger,” Will said, combing a hand through his exposed hat hair.

“Wrong sport,” I said, looking down at the soccer t-shirt.

Will just smiled. “I’ll call you later.”

“You don’t have to, Will, really I’m fine.”

“Maybe I want to call you later,” he said, taking a step forward.

I clung onto last night’s dress like I wanted to cling onto the night in general, but I wasn’t sure if that was practical. I took a step back and squinted, pretending the sun was in my eyes to mask my hesitations. I gave him a small wave from the distance I had created. It was a mix between one the Queen would give her subjects and one you give a small child on the first day of school to promote them walking away without crying. Only I wasn’t worried about Will crying.

“We’ll speak soon,” I eventually said, turning to jog up the brick steps. At sidewalk level, I turned around to admire the townhouse and the street Will’s apartment was on. “Jones Street,” I sighed, “you’re moving up in the world, Mr. Wallace.”

Will stood in a wide stance with his arms crossed and laughed. “Mr. Wallace is my father.”

As I walked down Jones Street taking in its charming detailed homes and uneven sidewalks, cracking from oak tree roots emerging from their burial

grounds, I thought to myself how peculiar life was at the moment, but when was life ever not peculiar?

Finally in the comfort of my dad's truck, which was in fact found in Chippewa Square, I cranked the air conditioning up to full blast, turned the radio on, and pulled out of my parking spot to head home. I was never a fan of the top charted music, so I switched it over to the CDs, hoping my dad had left something good for me.

What came on next was to my surprise: *How to work on a relationship you believe to be the one. First, we look at how to consolidate your thoughts on that person.*

I paused the track. It turned out my dad did believe in true love and had been, do I dare say, pining for my mom and so they got back together as a result of said pining? If my dad believed in true love, why couldn't I? It felt as if there was a fork in the road and neither fork felt like my only destiny but just a very different one. Neither felt right. In fact, they both felt right sometimes, and then they both felt very wrong sometimes, too.

This decision would have to wait for a number of reasons, the most pressing being I needed to get in the left-hand turn lane on President's Street to get gas at *Mark's* on the other side of the road despite there was one on my right side, my convenient side. The one on the left side was deemed "the good one" or "the only one you could go to" based on what was around its periphery. Why I still followed this rule after moving to New York and coming back, it being ten years later from when that rule was enforced, and it being broad daylight and people around, I didn't know. Muscle memory still had me turning across traffic to go to "the good one" though so I didn't run out of gas driving back to Tybee.

I hopped out of my dad's truck and fiddled with the gas cap for a few seconds before hearing a man clear his throat to get my attention. I turned around and there was the second to last person I wanted to see at the moment, Mr. Wallace (the last being Mrs. Wallace). He was also filling up his shiny, new SUV dressed in full suit on the way to his office downtown. I looked down at my body cloaked in his son's clothes and then looked back up at him.

"Good morning, Mr. Wallace. How are you?" I said in my politest fashion. Despite being caught leaving the crime scene of a crime I did not commit, this was no time to abandon politeness. In fact, I imagined my Cotillion instructor saying that this was the time when manners mattered the most. When you were ankle deep in horseshit and no horse to be seen, the show must go on.

Mr. Wallace cleared his throat again before he spoke. "I'm fine, Samantha. Running a little late for work this morning but aren't we all."

So Mr. Wallace had identified that I was wearing his son's apparel. I wasn't sure how to respond. Some men come across more serious, scary, and stark than they actually are. Some are the kind after fearing spending time with them, an hour in you realize they are a teddy bear on the inside and they were born with an unfortunately serious face. Mr. Wallace was not that kind of man. Mr. Wallace was the kind of man who looked as serious as he was.

The gas pump clicked, unlocking the latch and indicating that the tank was full.

"I should be going, but it was nice to see you Mr. Wallace."

"Nice to see you, too, Samantha."

And with that, we walked to our respective vehicles and drove off, never to speak about this incident again. That is, until he got to the office and told Will's mother.

Once again, I pulled out across the flow of traffic and resumed the right side of the road headed to Tybee. The drive to Tybee Island usually felt overcrowded. The never-ending roadwork, tourists from Oklahoma who drove slow to admire the view, and the occasional turtle crossing. The day after tequila was the day that road had never felt so serene. Like the calm before a storm, you know it won't last forever.

## Ch. 17 Another Announcement

“I’m—” I stopped halfway through the beach house door at the sight of my parents perched on the edge of the living room couch staring at me.

My mom stood up and my dad followed suit, both clinching their jaws in a half smile half look of uncertainty.

“What’s going on?” I asked, setting last night’s clothing on the steps. I looked quickly down at my newly acquired outfit for the second time this morning realizing it was sending a pretty distinct message. Only I don’t think my parents were nearly as disturbed as Mr. Wallace.

“We thought you’d be home earlier,” my mom said, glazing over the whole evening behind me.

“I had to get gas,” I said. I tried omitting details from my life that made my dad feel uncomfortable, even at twenty-seven. “Will made pancakes,” I added.

My mom’s eyes widened. Apparently pancakes were a detail that should have stayed omitted. Her eyes stayed widened until it hit me what that face was for.

“Molly and I just figured his were as good as The Diner’s pancakes and free,” I shrugged.

“Will does make surprisingly good pancakes,” my mom chimed in.

Only my mom and I were forgetting the shirt on my back and my dad wasn’t a moron, just naïve. He seemed content going with that story, so he gave a little nod of approval about the pancake decision, too.

No longer distracted by conversation, the tone shifted back to its original serious state and everyone resumed positions on the couch.

“Sam,” my mom continued, “we have something to discuss with you.”

I had just sat down when she finished her sentence and immediately shot back up. “Wait, this is a very familiar conversation. You can’t get divorced, again. That’s a double negative. It’s like double jeopardy. You can’t tell me you’re splitting up, again. I can’t take any more change.” I started pacing back and forth in front of the couch, my arms flinging around my body like a windmill.

“Sweetie,” my mom pleaded, grabbing one of my blades, “we want to get remarried.”

“Remarried, as in married, again?” I sat down with the same happy yet confused look they both had on their faces.

My dad spoke up. “We just feel like this is the right thing to do and the right time to do it. You know when something just feels right?”

I wish I knew. That would solve all of my problems just like that. They were both so happy, though, and so I too felt happy for them. But was it sad to admit that I was envious of them? They had found their soul mates years ago, and maybe there was a slight detour, but they were back on track to live and die together. I had someone to live and die with, or so the engagement ring upstairs said, but maybe I had always had someone right in front of me that was up for it too. Relationship or no relationship, Will had always been up for living and dying together, even the possibility of the most untimely deaths.

I took a deep breath. “I’m happy for you guys. Have you set a date?”

My mom and dad looked back and forth at each other.

“That’s what we wanted to talk to you about,” my mom said. “We were thinking this weekend.”

“This weekend?” I repeated.

“There’s no point in hyping up a remarriage with the invitations and big plans and set date. You’re here and we’re here. We thought, let’s just do it,” my mom said.

My parents got married, divorced, and remarried and I can’t even make one marriage happen.

I shrugged. “How can I help?”

They looked at each other.

My mom hesitated. “Well, most of it your father can do. We’re just having it down on the beach, but...” she paused, “you could convince your aunt to come.” She spat the last part out so fast as if she didn’t, it would never have come out.

“Aunt Lucinda? You don’t think she’d really—”

“She’s always had a soft spot for you, Sam,” my dad interjected.

“Look, I’m as much for reconciliation as the next person, but do you really think that *this* is the day to have it? I mean, considering—”

“I would really like her to be there,” my mom said. “I’ve called and left messages, but she’s not picking up so...”

“You want me to drive to Macon, the armpit of the South, and convince her?”

My mom and dad were holding hands and sitting side by side again like the last decade of separation hadn’t meant anything. Who knows? Maybe I wasn’t the only one in the family good at keeping secrets. Maybe they had been seeing each other for a long time and kept it from me. Maybe it had been complicated. I never did ask. One secret keeper can’t judge another, and the outcome pleased me.

“I’ll drive up tomorrow,” I said.

After having a perplexing last twenty-four hours, I decided to allow myself the night off. Before tackling my mom's demons tomorrow, I could focus on unpacking my own. I knew the one person that would understand the situation and I had once understood her situation in the past.

"Do you want him?" Molly asked, cutting straight to the point. She was sitting on the couch with her legs underneath her body drinking a coffee.

We were in her townhouse on the edge of downtown before Oglethorpe meets East Broad. She had gained herself a piece of real estate when her parents divided their own real estate in a nasty divorce a few years ago. I was always grateful my parents had kept their divorce to a minimum volume.

I sat across from Molly in her Juicy Couture sweatpants; I hadn't seen anyone wear them so well since high school (that someone actually being Molly, the original trend setter in private high schools across Savannah), but she said they were making a comeback. If Molly had been seen wearing something, then everyone would start wearing it. She had an older sister in college, so she saw what was coming before everyone else did. She didn't demand her subjects to wear what she wore, though, and she didn't demand to have subjects. Like I said, she just had this natural inner pull that drew people to her like a low-key bar in Brooklyn or Leopold's ice cream parlor in the summer.

"Do I want him?" I asked.

Molly nodded. "When you see Will, do you want to hang out with him like he's your brother, or do you see him and want to be with him?"

"Well, I do like being with him."

“No, Sam, do you want to *be* with him?” She punctuated her sentence with a wink. “Last night, did you want him to try anything and were you disappointed he didn’t?”

“Will would never try anything with me,” I said.

“Exactly!” Molly shouted, sitting up as if to be heard more clearly. “You know that and I know that. If it were any other girl, you would have been half naked walking in the door and in the shower in half an hour. But you’re *Sam Seymour*.” She said my name like it was an honorable award.

“Exactly,” I echoed, “I’m Sam Seymour, and so he doesn’t want to pursue me.”

Molly squinted like she was trying to read the fine print on a legal contract. “I wouldn’t say *doesn’t*. More like *won’t*.”

“I’m not sure this is helping, Molly.”

“No!” she waved her arms. “Will *wants* to, I know it. I could see it in the office, how much he planned your afternoon, how happy he is that you’re back. And when he came back from seeing you in New York....” She trailed off, staring into her coffee like it was a black hole that had sucked up secrets and information that people never dared to share. Suddenly, she stood up with the cup and walked towards the kitchen. “Want another cup?”

I peered down at my empty cup, but it wasn’t telling me anything so maybe Molly would. “What did he say when he got back from New York?”

Armed with a pot of coffee, Molly dismissed the question. Topping me up with the steaming, dark liquid, she looked up and smiled, “Just that it was good to see you.”

I rolled my eyes. “Not you, too?”

She placed the French press on the table. “He told me about the fight.”

“Did he say how it started?”

“No, but he did say that he came to a big realization, though.”

I pressed on. “And that was?”

“He didn’t say,” she paused, “but I imagined that you had said something that put a light back in him and gave him hope.”

“Hope in what?” I asked.

Molly gave her coffee a long sip like its vortex would tell her something she didn’t already know. “Hope that you would come home. Sooner or later,” she added, “and here you are! Back in Savannah, Georgia.”

Was I back? I sipped my coffee again, but its vortex wasn’t telling me anything.

Molly went on. “Sam, I always thought we could be friends. That day in the doctor’s office.” She paused and looked down almost like she was going to cry, but then with the flash of a memory she looked happy again. “I haven’t told anyone yet, but I think it will feel ceremonial telling you,” she said, pausing, “I’m pregnant! Again!”

They say brides blush and Molly was not married but yet she blushed just the same. The rebirth of something revisited her eyes, impregnating something beautiful in a beautiful woman.

“That’s amazing news, Molly!” I said, taking her hand that lacked the coffee vessel and shaking it in the air.

Molly beamed, probably proud that her body could conceive again and happy to have ousted the secret she had carried around for weeks. “The doctors like you to wait for a while to make sure it sticks, but it felt right telling you.”

“I’m happy you told me,” I said. “Do I know the father? Do *you* know the father?” I added.

“Ha! Yes, I do! You’re a riot!” Molly said, still holding onto my hand.  
“Will actually set me up with him last year. Andrew Long?”  
“I can’t believe I’m asking this, but is he a Savannahian?”  
Molly shook her head frantically like she couldn’t get the image out of her head fast enough.

Same, Molly, same.

“No!” she continued, “he’s actually from Chicago! He’s one of Will’s fraternity brothers who moved down here to teach liberal arts classes at SCAD. Me marrying a teacher, can you image my parents’ reaction? Anyways, he’s so sweet, a lot like Will. He went with me to the first ultrasound and held my hand. He’s just thrilled and we—”

“You haven’t told your parents yet?” I asked.

“Oh, God, no! Can you image? Hey y’all, I’m having a baby out of wedlock with a teacher. And bonus round, he’s Asian! I mean, Asian American, of course, but Asian nonetheless. They would both have separate cardiac arrests!”

I smiled. “He sounds like a great guy and you seem very happy.”

“I am happy,” she sighed, “and I’ve also got a new girlfriend!”

“Who?” I asked.

“You,” she laughed. “And maybe even another normal couple to double date with and possibly babysit for us?”

Molly made those words sound so normal and plausible. I admired how open and direct she had been with me and with herself, two things I wasn’t being at the moment. I looked around like someone would overhear us in her living room and leaned into Molly. “I’ve gotta tell you something. We kissed last night,” I whispered.

“I knew it!” she shrieked. “So something did happen?”

“Well that’s just the thing. We got caught up in dancing and the romance and the tequila and we kissed once. But it’s like we forgot it happened instantaneously after our lips pulled apart.”

“Maybe he felt bad,” Molly suggested.

I let my head fall on the back of the sofa and closed my eyes. “What am I going to do? I’m technically engaged.” I couldn’t see Molly, but I could feel her mind turning.

“That’s just it. You’re the one that’s engaged. How is he supposed to make any moves confidently if you’re committed to another man?”

“That man is making me feel like I’m going to need to be committed. He’s making me feel crazy like I’ve done something really wrong.”

“What did you do?”

I took a deep breath. “I didn’t tell him my history.”

Molly looked relieved to know I hadn’t killed a man. “He’ll get over that.”

“Can I ask you something?”

“Shoot.”

“Did you tell Andrew that you had an abortion in high school?”

Molly nodded. “I didn’t tell him till after we were pregnant, though.”

“How did he take it?”

“He looked sad at first, but then he thought it was so special we were having a baby together so he couldn’t feel sad forever,” she said.

“I’m not sure Phillip will get that chance to change his mind.”

“What’s Phillip like?”

What is Phillip like?

“Phillip is sturdy,” I said, pausing, “but temperamental. Kind of like a gingerbread house. It looks really hard and sweet from the outside, but once you try to eat it, it’s fragile and has sour candy glued onto the shingles.”

“A little unseasonal for a cool girl,” Molly said with a head tilt.

“Ha, you think I’m cool?” Someone who asked that was probably not cool, but I said it anyway. It felt like I had been accepted into the cool kids in high school about ten years too late. Better late than never.

Molly smiled and nodded. “Now how would you describe Will Wallace?”

“Will Wallace.” I said his name like a familiar song lyric. “Will is like a good hamburger?”

“I’m curious to see where this is going. Continue,” Molly said, her hands under her chin.

I began again. “He’s classic. He’s good at any occasion, any time of the day, any season.” I began to swell up like I was telling a sad story. I continued on. “He has a reputation for being at parties, but he’s good in a family home.” Saying the word family got me thinking about Will, thinking about Phillip, and whether or not I could have a family of my own. What does family even mean? I could feel my face getting warmer and slowly the tears came. “He’s just good.” I ended my sentence with full tears emerging down my cheeks.

Molly was crying, too, for some reason. She pulled out a few tissues for each of us from the box on the coffee table. We both blotted our faces.

“Look at us,” Molly laughed.

I had to laugh, too, because I couldn’t continue to cry. I was a cool girl now.

The sun was setting through the big, white shutters in front of the courtyard. Her townhouse faced the east, so it got the evening sun. Molly yawned

much like the sun was yawning now, feeling the length of the day and ready for the next. She stood up and stretched, looking ready to bust out a few yoga moves on her shag rug. Instead, she twirled around in one fluid, ballerina-like motion and punched her arms into the air.

“Here’s what we’re going to do,” she stated. “We’re going to walk across the street and get a greasy, cheesy, oozy slice of pizza. Then we’re going to blot the grease from your pores. And then you’re going to go tell Will how you feel.”

“I agreed with everything up until the part about Will.”

“Do you want the burger or the flimsy ass ginger bread house?”

“I thought we were getting pizza?”

I hated to disappoint her, but I wasn’t sure if I was ready for all of this. I didn’t want her to take my new status back, though.

Molly sat back down. “You’re afraid, I get that.” She said it like she could see through my soul. “But you’ve seen much worse. And this time you have a choice. Don’t let your fear keep you from happiness. If I did, I’d be married to a boy from high school I went to prom with and he didn’t want me.”

It sounded so sad what Molly was saying, but she somehow made it sound happy and positive. I wondered if she really felt what she said. Molly could have married anyone and gone off to a big city and still been a star, but she was living in the same town acting like nothing else could have existed for her.

“Are you glad you stayed in Savannah?” I said, breaking the silence.

Molly blushed. “I’m glad I met Andrew.” She took a pause. “And now, time for pizza!”

My cool, new friend jumped up off the couch and started closing the shutters and putting dishes away so we could scoot off to the restaurant without leaving a mess behind. Is it always possible to not leave a mess behind?

## Ch. 18 Real Ole Times

I drove down I-16 towards Macon, Georgia in my mom's white Volvo, excited to be driving something that couldn't haul furniture or cattle. It was the least my mom could have done considering I was going to Macon to sweet talk her recently estranged older sister into going to her second wedding to my dad. I could have just stopped at Macon.

To say Macon was an unexciting place would be an understatement. I always dreaded the fact that I was from Savannah, but Macon made Savannah look like a modern, chic city in comparison. My dad used to say the only thing to do in Macon was to go to church and go to someone's house after church. When kids from my high school decided to go to Mercer University in Macon, I laughed when they were worried about the academics being difficult. That was only half the battle, and the other more difficult half was finding something to do in their free time.

I'm allowed to say all of these things because my dad is from Macon.

There were hopefully two positive outcomes to come out of this trip, though. Number one was obviously to stop the ridiculously long tension that had been going on between my mom and her sister Lucinda (we usually called her Aunt Lucie). Number two was I planned on meeting her at her work and then hopefully going to eat at S&S Cafeteria, a childhood favorite of mine. S&S Cafeteria was one of the few relics of true Southern culture still standing. Not only was the food some of the only real traces of Southern cuisine, food that you would have found in my father's mother's kitchen or at the neighbor's house after church, the ambiance also had traces of the past. The sad thing was the location in

Savannah closed shortly after my childhood had ended and the closest one was in Macon, and I've already explained why it's disheartening to go to Macon.

When I reached the city center (I use that term very loosely), I attempted to park near Aunt Lucie's office. Aunt Lucie was an acupuncturist, a profession she had often tried to push onto her family members, also known as her supposed to be willing participants in her early stages of practice. Aunt Lucie had gone through many men throughout her life. Many she had loved, but none did she ever deem worthy of marriage. She never had children, but she had two ginormous, orange cats named Dalí and Picasso that were very much her family.

At times, it had been hard to tell who was the black sheep of the family. My mom and Aunt Lucie had been raised Irish Catholic, with ideals of promised marriages and happy children. Aunt Lucie had lived a free life as a self-proclaimed new age, hippy, believing in all things herbal and spiritual except God. My mom believed in God but "in a relaxed way", she would call it, joining the Lutheran Church when I was born and going when she felt like it. I thought my mom was "in a relaxed way" about many things in life lately, letting society flow around her but not in her.

The street names in downtown Macon were so charming that I almost forgot I was in Macon. *Walnut Street, Mulberry Street, Plum, Pine, Oak.*

The speakers in the car started jingling and my aunt's name popped up on the dashboard. I didn't even know my mom's car did that.

"Hello?" I said into the space around me.

"Sweetie, my last patient had to leave early, so I just pulled up to S&S," my Aunt Lucie said, her voice vibrating through the sound system. It had always

sounded eerily like my mom's voice if my mom had smoked a joint. Maybe Lucie had.

“Okaaay,” I said, struggling to redirect myself and communicate at the same time.

“I won't get in line yet,” she reassured me.

“Great,” I said, pulling a U-turn to get back on the highway.

The parking lot outside S&S Cafeteria was full of beige, four doors and handicap passes, all fighting for the closest parking spaces to the liver and onions, sweet potato casserole, and pecan pie. I parked at the way back of the lot hoping my favorites would be worth the wait.

As I walked up to the front, Aunt Lucie popped out of the double doors of the establishment, and I wasn't sure who surprised who more. Sadly, it had been a few years since I had last seen her, with my so-called busy life in New York and her tiff with my mother. I had thinned out even more since college and dyed my hair a shade darker out of desperation to cover up the inherited, greying widow's peak. Aunt Lucie had also lost a little weight, but that wasn't what startled me; she had had what in my opinion was a premature facelift. Despite the women on my mother's side having untimely grey widow's peaks, we were blessed with smooth, non-wrinkled skin. So why did my aunt want her skin to be piercingly smooth? I didn't know, but a true Southern woman never comments on another woman's beauty decisions; they just think and talk about it in the privacy of their own home or brunch table.

“Hi, sweetie,” my aunt cooed in my ear, squeezing me like she was wringing out a wet dishrag. She was always a warm person with the best

intentions. The problem was she thought her intentions were in fact the best, but my mom hasn't always appreciated them. "You hungry?"

"Starving," I said, entering the line.

I grabbed a cafeteria tray and a set of silverware and began.

*No salad, thanks. Egg custard, please.*

*The country styled steak, please. No thank you, no rice. Thank you.*

*Macaroni and cheese. Fried okra. Yes, I'll have a white, fluffy roll, please.*

*Hi, yes, sweet tea, please. Thank you. You too.*

How many calories were consumed in one setting at S&S Cafeteria, I will never know, but it's not something one considers in that line. It was one part of my Southern roots I was comfortable embracing. When in Rome, right? It did feel like Rome in some ways. It was a mild but seductive time warp, with no thrills or frills except good recipes. Aunt Lucie wasn't the one that should have had a facelift. The restaurant was due for one anytime, but unlike Aunt Lucie, it was chomping at the bit for that day to come.

"These rolls," I said through a muffled bite. "S&S would make a killing if they opened in New York. *Authenticity*, it's a trend, you know?"

My aunt nodded with a full mouth of shredded carrot salad. The charm of Southern carbs had worn off, the more attainable, the less desired. "How's it been living with your father, again?"

"It's been surprisingly normal? It feels like life pre-cancer," I said, pausing. "I guess everything does." I cut into the country styled steak and covered a bite with onion and gravy.

And it did. The more I thought about it, it felt like I was getting a do-over as to what my life would have looked like without cancer. What would it have looked like? Would I still be with Will? Would I have become friends with Molly

eventually? Would I still be in Savannah? Would I have been so desperate to move away?

“Are you home for good?” my aunt asked.

I chased the last fried okra around the bowl until I was able to finally stab it with my fork. “What is up with everyone wanting to know that? Am I never allowed to return home unless it’s for good?”

Aunt Lucie gave me a side eye. “It’s not as though you come home often, so when you do, is it bad to assume it’s for a reason?”

“For more reasons than I know.” I sighed.

I thought about Phillip, Will, my body, my parents, my career.

“Hit me.”

“Are you busy this weekend?” I quickly asked, immediately stuffing my face with egg custard to ease my clinched jaw.

My aunt stopped mid-bite into her baked chicken and removed the fork. “Listen, sweetie, I got your mom’s message,” she paused, “messages, and I don’t have anything to say to her. I wish her well. You can tell her I said that, too.” She re-launched the chicken into her mouth.

The tables around us ranged in age from forties to eighties, some on lunch break from the local bank, some out to lunch as they did everyday as retired citizens. For all, this was probably a normal Wednesday. Or maybe it wasn’t. Maybe there were other life challenges happening all around us, but you’d never know without the privilege of knowing them. I had always lived by that motto, but as I had recently done with Molly, I was learning to surrender some of what I interpreted as power but was really my greatest weakness.

“I thought you’d be happy for her,” I said.

“Samantha, I am, but your mother expects people to jump on board with her when you never saw her swimming to shore in the first place. Years and years ago, she didn’t tell me about the divorce for months, and then she didn’t tell me she and your father were back together for months. Finding out that she’s getting married to a man we avoided discussing for years through message is something to be mad about.”

“Maybe she was afraid of this, afraid of your opinion.”

My aunt began stacking her empty plates onto one another (a habit my mom hated and the Cotillion instructors hated even more), obviously done with the meal and maybe even the short-lived conversation. “You have to open up to the people who love you, Sam, or their love is a waste. Do you understand what I mean?”

I nodded. I may have even understood too well.

She continued. “Your mother thinks she knows best, you know. When she got married, the first time, and they had you, she began to criticize me. *Me*,” she said. “We had always made fun of girls who did the whole kid-husband shebang, and there I was, left all alone as the outsider. But then they got divorced and it was like I had my old Cher back. Is it back to judging my unconventional life again?”

“I don’t think she will,” I said.

“You see the best in her because she’s your mother,” she smiled, sighing a sigh that craves. “You know, I don’t regret not having kids,” she paused, “but when I see you two together. I didn’t need a man and she doesn’t either.”

“Maybe she wants one,” I said.

Aunt Lucie shrugged and just sat there a moment like she was taking in what I had just said. Standing up from the table, she said, “I’ve got the check, sweetie.”

“Thank you very much, it was delicious,” I said. I didn’t argue because I knew she wouldn’t let me pay. She had never all my life.

We walked to the parking lot, bidding each other farewell like we were school friends that hadn’t seen each other in years, limbs wrapped around each other in a dramatic hug.

“When will I see you again?” my aunt asked, finally letting go. “You can come up again for a free treatment! I’m finally certified to practice Reiki and I can sense you need balancing,” Lucie said, extending her arms out in front of her almost touching me but not quite, like she was trying to break a force field encasing me to her dismay.

I grabbed both of her hands and held them like we were about to begin ballroom dancing. “Maybe you can perform your Reiki at the wedding this weekend?”

Aunt Lucie let go of my hands and shook her head. “You’re just like your mother. Strong willed and a non believer.”

“We believe in God. Our old pastor is marrying them.”

Opening her car door and getting in, Aunt Lucie said, “A believer in the universe, sweetie. If you believe in the universe, everything will align like the plates in Earth’s crust.”

I just nodded and waved to her through her already shut door. As she pulled out, I thought about what she had said. If I believed in the universe, though, what would it tell me?

It was still light but approaching sunset as I arrived back in downtown Savannah. Summer nights in the South had this particular feeling about them. The humid, hot air with a haunting breeze that danced across the skin at unassuming moments somehow cleansed the body from the day's dilemmas and made you feel new again; however, some things you were always unable to rinse off.

A lot like my mom, I had never felt like I needed a man to make me feel whole. In fact, I had never needed one. I shrugged off the help of Will during my treatment, I never reciprocated feelings for anyone throughout college, and even when I had with Phillip, I still didn't really need him to form my future for me. In my circumstance, just as I had needed doctors to help me get better, I might have needed doctors to help me conceive if I ever wanted a child. A man could certainly not help me with that.

Did I want what Molly and Andrew would soon have? Their own little family to obsess over and love. Did I want the relationship that my aunt witnessed between me and my own mother?

The more I thought about it though, was it I didn't need help or didn't want help from a man? Maybe years of watching my mom do it on her own made me resistant to help. Maybe I was a product of my binge of feminist books. I needed to figure out what I wanted from someone whether that was Will or Phillip. Could they both give me the same things? Maybe it wasn't help I even wanted, but maybe like my mom, I now wanted to decide to accept comfort and love.

Maybe I could start by taking Will up on the night in. I took a right onto Jones Street, pulling into the first on street parking spot I saw, not being in the mood to drive around in circles. I fiddled with gum, lipstick, and other

miscellaneous objects in my bag and checked my rearview mirror for ongoing traffic before opening my car door.

And there it was as clear as day in my mirror, the answer to the question Molly had asked me and what others had wondered. Two figures emerged out of Will's apartment, one being his and one being Catherine, the girl who Will said wasn't his girlfriend, but there they were presumably going to spend an evening together. For the second time in a week. Would Will deny it this time?

Catherine's perfect sand colored lob grazed her shoulders as she shook her head at something funny Will had said. Their children, that she could probably have with great ease and no help required, would have perfect sand colored hair that always fell into place like Will's. Catherine and Will would look at their first sonogram with only pure bliss, not knowing the pain others felt while looking at one, hoping the baby would stick because it was their third round of IVF. They would all sit together in the hospital room after the birth with his parents (who would like Catherine), like a nativity scene, peaceful and natural like their savior had just been born, but they wouldn't know what it was like to really anticipate a miracle.

Yes, my question had been answered. Will was not mine, not anymore.

Will was Catherine's.

### Afterword

*Saving Sam Seymour* is a novel set in the present day South. Not only is it a commentary on the South, but it is also an acknowledgement that people are more alike than we think no matter who they are or where they come from.

This dissertation only contains the first forty-five thousand words, and I anticipate there will be an additional thirty thousands more to come before the novel is concluded. To give one a sense of how the novel will continue, I will briefly detail what is to come in this afterword.

After having a nice yet complicated twenty-four hours with Will Wallace, Sam Seymour discovers she may not be the only one he is potentially pining after. This causes Sam to retract once again from her friendship from Will, and she contacts Phillip her fiancé to apologize for their last phone call. The phone call gives both Sam and Phillip more confidence in their relationship, so much so that he books a plane ticket to visit her in Savannah in a week.

The next day, Sam receives a call from her doctor's office asking her to come in for an appointment. Dr. Nelson reveals that the labs were slightly abnormal, but before jumping to conclusions she would like Sam to try to natural conceive if she would like a child. This information leaves Sam wondering if she would even like to be a mother now or ever. It also makes her doubt her relationship with Phillip again because she realizes no matter how trapped she feels in an engagement, having a child with him is a commitment she cannot reverse.

During Mr. and Mrs. Seymour's wedding, the truth is unveiled about their divorce, leading to some short-lived commotion that is resolved right before the vows. Will is an undesired guest of the wedding, thanks to Mrs. Seymour's love

of invitations. He also settles any confusion that Sam has had about him and Catherine, which puts Sam in a greater predicament again between her feelings for Will and her commitment to Phillip. She sees how nice it is that Will gets along with her family and makes it a special day. She's not sure if she will have this with Phillip.

As a last attempt to prove to Sam that she should remain in the South and that possibly he could be apart of her life, Will invites her to a weekend with his fraternity brothers at his parents' beach house. This is almost enough to little to late when Phillip arrives the next morning fresh off the plane from Berlin and ready to make things work with Sam.

Only things are not that simple. When Sam gives Phillip a tour of her hometown, she realizes the love she does have for the South when he is not that impressed. To make matters worse, Will decides to tag along and put a wrench in Phillip's plans. The source of the mysterious fight between Phillip and Will in New York City is revealed, and Sam doesn't know how to feel when both Phillip and Will's true motives have been revealed. Has it just been a game to both of them, or do they really love her?

Sam decides to take a break from both of her suitors and Savannah. She interviews for an editor position at a magazine in Atlanta, and she is hired for the job. Despite never wanting to return to the South, she acknowledges the parts she loves about it, that including the culture, the food, and her family. New York is too far to be from her family especially if she intends on starting her own family one day. Once Sam is settled in Atlanta, she gives Will a call to make amends and ask him to visit. The last thing Sam says to Will on the phone is that she is pregnant.

The reader isn't told if it is Will or Phillip's child, but they are safe to assume it is Will's after the phone call. This will hopefully leave room for a sequel as an option.